

New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

Week 2 – Ezra 1-6

As we return to sanctuaries and church activities after such a long time being apart from one another and having our routines and practices disrupted, we know that things won't just "go back to normal" overnight. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the unique history of Israel's return to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns following around seventy years of exile in Babylon. The returning and rebuilding processes were messy, to say the least.

We'll spend the next several weeks looking at these two books together, and seeing what the living Word has to teach us from their experiences for our situation today. Today we'll look through the first six chapters of Ezra.

These first six chapters recount the events of how the Persian leaders, fresh off their conquering of Babylon, give the Hebrews permission and funding to return to Judah and reestablish not just the city of Jerusalem, but also the rebuilding of the temple and the full return of religious practices. We also hear about some of the early challenges the returning remnant face a variety of fronts: their northern Samaritan neighbors; the Jews who hadn't been exiled, but who remained in the land and intermarried with the non-Jewish "-ites" in the surrounding areas; and the Persians who, though granting the Judeans permission to return, were still their overlords.

For some context, remember that Israel, the northern kingdom, had been conquered by Assyria, with many people being sent into exile. Israel, and its capital Samaria, never completely recovered, and the Samaritans became perennial rivals (maybe "frenemies"?) of the Jewish people. Babylon came next, conquering Judah, destroying the temple, and sending off the Jewish leaders and elites into exile for around 70 years. By then, Persia conquered Babylon. Persia's philosophy was not to impose one religion or religious laws on its conquered lands and peoples. Rather, they would support the local priests and religions, cultivating – and expecting in exchange – loyalty. Throughout all these wars and conquerings, Judah and Israel are geographically at a crossroads of conflict, with good land, sea access, and strategic positioning between Rome and Greece on one side and Egypt and other African kingdoms on the other.

Read Ezra 1:1-8. Please note: the priests carried out the religious duties in the temple, while the Levites were the tribe of Israel who were spread throughout the other twelve tribes to handle the local religious customs and tend to the day-to-day matters. It was important for the re-establishment of Jewish life and worship that the full complement of priests, Levites, and other temple workers, along with the holy temple objects, were part of the return plans.

- What is essential for us to "bring back" to church as we return from pandemic protocols? What do we need to fully worship God?
- Conversations and debates about church and state aren't new in our country; but we aren't in a "Persia is our overlord" situation. As you read about the political background of the book of Ezra, any thoughts or comparisons with regard to political-religious dynamics in our country today? Remember – keep it civil!

Check out chapter 2 on your own time. It's an extensive census of the returnees. But take some time to consider the names, pronunciation challenges aside. It's a way to honor our ancestors in the faith.

- The returning exiles are the descendants of refugees, returning home after a long time away. They were political prisoners. As you read through Ezra and Nehemiah, consider more recent examples of refugees returning home, like Rwandans coming back from Tanzania and other places. There are other refugee situations going on right now, including the Uighurs, the Rohingya people, Syrians, Yemenis, Central Americans, and too many more. As we will see in Ezra and Nehemiah, both the exile and the return involve religious, ethnic, and national identities. Our return to worshiping in the building isn't on the same level as these; but we can still ponder: how did our absence from the building and the changes to our church life and participation affect your identity? Or did it?

Read Ezra 3:1-7. Ezra and the other leaders made sure that worship practices started, even before the building was ready.

- What are/were your priorities as we approach "normal"? What rituals are the most important? What are your fears about coming back?
- One commentator remarked: "Continuity of tradition is deemed important for the legitimacy of worship." What makes our worship legitimate?

Read Ezra 3:10-13. This passage really captures all the simultaneous emotions God's people are feeling.

- Where is your joy as we come back together? Where is your sorrow?
- Pan out from our focus on the pandemic for a moment. The world has changed so much over the last few decades. Church has not always kept pace, and we can see the difference as we look at the pews. Who is here? Who isn't? As we return to the building, what is it that we are rebuilding for our "temple" to God? What do we want to rebuild? What should we be rebuilding?
- How do we make sure joy is part of our foundation?

Remember the context regarding Assyria and Samaria above. Read Ezra 4:1-5. Ezra turns down the offer from the "people of the land" to help rebuild. The next passages are the letter that the people of the land send to the Persian king in response, and the king's reply. The rebuilding efforts are halted, for now.

- As we return and rebuild – both post-pandemic and in this climate of dwindling church membership, who is "at the table" for our rebuilding? Only the people coming back to the building? What about the people who like the parking lot? The people who prefer the virtual? What if people wanted to keep worshiping in their pjs? What if they don't want to come back? What does that mean for an incarnational faith? And what about the folks who stopped coming long before the pandemic? What would a rebuild look like and mean to them?
- What is at stake for the adversaries/people of the land? Is it just land and property and power, or is there more to it? Can any of us today relate to them?
- Who are the stewards of record-keeping and history-keeping in our congregation?

Chapters 5-6 of Ezra continue the story. After a while, the rebuilding work resumes. The Samaritans and other people of the land basically say, "Hey! You can't do that! Can you?" And they send a letter to Persia saying so. Persia replies: "So, we checked our records, and it turns out they can. You guys get to help them now. That's an order. Or else." (See 6:11 – yikes!)

Read 5:13-15.

- As we rebuild, on all levels, what will help us prosper?
- Who are our present-day Haggai and Zechariah, our guiding prophets?

Read 6:17, 19-20.

- In what ways are our worship practices on behalf of others who aren't there?
- What is the "big thing" we're building towards, now that we're back?

Closing Questions:

- What's messy about the Church right now?
- What's normal about the Church right now?
- What's new about the Church right now?

For next week, please read Ezra 7-10.

Sources

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