

New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

Week 3 – Ezra 7-10

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 at chapters 7-10 of Ezra, where things get messier still.

We pick up the narrative now that construction on the temple has resumed. You might recall that there had been some delays: the "peoples of the land" – that is, the descendants of those who *hadn't* been taken into exile – objected to the Israelites moving back in and reestablishing things. They were happy with their control of the land, their worship practices, their everything. They tried to get involved in the building process, but the Jewish leaders gave them a firm "no" – they wanted to maintain a "pure" remnant in charge. The people then protested directly to Persia, the new empire in charge. After some back-and-forth and some checking of records, the building project was delayed for a time, but by the end of chapter 6 was back in business with the full backing of Persia.

Read Ezra 7:1-6, 10. Ezra officially arrives on the scene in chapter 7. We get to hear his lineage, traced back to Aaron, the first high priest, as well as his credentials: a scholar and scribe, skilled in the law of Moses. Just as Aaron spoke on Moses' behalf to the people, Ezra is ready to speak on behalf of the law of Moses to the people as they reestablish Israel and rededicate themselves to God. Ezra had been in Babylon, and he brings with him a second wave of returning exiles. Verse 6 says that "the hand of the LORD his God was upon him."

- In what ways have you felt God's hand on you, and on our congregation, both during the last year and a half and now?
- In verse 10 we hear that "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinance in Israel." Ezra's "verbs" are study, do, and teach; what are the main verbs we are prioritizing right now in our time and place, as we return to the building and rededicate our own selves to God?

Read 7:11-20. This is an official document in Aramaic. King Artaxerxes of Persia authorizes Ezra to carry out the rebuilding project, to bring more exiles back to Jerusalem, and to re-establish Torah law and practices there. The main focus is on worship practices. In verses 21-24 we see that Persia is requiring Babylon and the province of "Beyond the River" to supply sacrificial animals and funds for Israel, and to protect the work they are doing.

- Do you see any parallels to the stories of Joseph in Egypt, or Daniel, or Esther, of how God uses even "enemy" territory and rulers to help Israel prosper? How has God helped us to prosper during our pandemic times? Are there unexpected sources of support?

Read 7:25-26. Here Ezra is given mandates of his own to follow from the Persian rulers. He is to set up magistrates and judges to enforce, oversee, and guide the re-adoption of the Law. But, pay close attention to verse 26: “All who will not obey the law of your God *and the law of the king*, let judgment be strictly executed on them...” Explicit in all of the blessings and allowances that Persia is granting to the Hebrew people is the indisputable fact that they are not, after all, completely free. They are still ruled, and there are consequences for disobedience to Persia alongside all the religious freedoms and funding they are receiving. And yet, in verses 27-28, we switch to a first-person testimonial from Ezra, giving thanks that God put such a thing into the heart of the king, and that the hand of God was still upon Ezra.

- God always works within our contexts, whether they are times of peace or war, smooth sailing or hardship, exile, or homecoming. The supreme example of this is the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, who lived as a human among humans. God worked through the kings of Persia. God worked through Ezra and the other leaders in Jerusalem. Humanity and sin will always mar what God is trying to do, but God is tireless in God’s mercy nonetheless. Our own current context is not like Ezra’s; we are not trying to reestablish a nation-state. But right now, as we return to normal worship patterns, we do have an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to God and God’s mission in the world. What are the mandates from God that are guiding us? What human mandates do we have to navigate right now? Are there any restrictions on our faith and its practice?

Ezra 8:1-20 is a census of the second wave of returning exiles. Verses 15-20 in particular are about making sure that there is a contingent of Levites making the trip – again, the focus for Ezra is on religious practices (we’ll see later that Nehemiah focuses more on “state” matters). Verses 24-30 are about preparing the gifts for the temple treasury, and verses 31-34 are about distributing those gifts.

Read Ezra 8:21-23. Ezra is about to transport a very large sum of money and goods on a four-month journey. He wants to show the Persians that God will protect them on their journey, without any extra military help. So, Ezra proclaims a fast. According to one commentator, “Fasting seems to have been a symbolic entering of a near-death state so as to represent oneself as an endangered person who is in need of divine care.”

- Have we used the quarantine time as a time of fasting?
- Most Americans lead pretty comfortable and wealthy lives, especially compared to many other people and places in the world. In what ways do we signify to God, one another, and ourselves, that we are indeed vulnerable and in need of God’s care? Is that just a Lenten thing?

Scholars and interpreters agree that chapters 9-10 of Ezra present some ethical difficulties for us modern readers today. As we highlighted in 8:26 above, Ezra and the other leaders were trying to maintain the balance between independence for Judah and loyalty to Persia. In these final two chapters, Ezra establishes a hardline interpretation of the Law to consolidate and centralize priestly authority and religious unity and find some shelter between rocks and hard places. Ezra is seen by later generations as a hero who preserves Judah; but the way in which he gets there is tragic, to say the least.

Read chapter 9. Ezra references passages from Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and 2 Kings, but interprets them much more strictly than they had originally been applied. For instance, the “people of the lands” that have intermarried with the Jewish leaders are listed as the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Amorites; however, those peoples didn’t exist anymore in Ezra’s time. According to the notes in the study Bible: “The names come from an old stereotyped list of foreign nations with whom intermarriage was forbidden...and they are mentioned here to invoke the ancient law as relevant to the current situation.”

- What’s the farthest you’ve ever “bent” an interpretation of scripture?

- In what ways is the church faithful? In what ways is it not? Since we are the people of the gospel (not the people of the Law) how do we preach the good news that we have been brought back by God's grace from the exile of sin?

Read 10:1-5; 6-8 with its "or-else," and keeping in mind that this was in the wet and rainy December, two thousand feet above sea level; and 9-15.

Why is this problematic? First of all, it's just simply cruel. Next, even though there are laws prohibiting intermarrying, there are also stories of "outsiders" joining Israel through circumcision; there is the story of Ruth and Naomi; there are many other stories of God's blessings extending to or coming from "foreigners." There is also the fact that the people exiling these wives and children had just returned from a long and painful exile themselves. They are also creating a whole slew – 113 "offenders" worth – of widows and orphans. There were a ton of laws and statues specifically about protecting and caring for widows and orphans; not creating them! Lastly, the law that is cited to allow this is from Deuteronomy 24:-14, which allows for a divorce on the grounds that the wife is "unclean" according to the purity laws in the Torah; in this case, just being of foreign birth is enough to be deemed unclean and to allow the divorce. There was no rule about what happened after the divorce; the expulsion is something new.

From verse 18 on, we get the list of those who send away their wives and children; the deed is done.

- In general, how do we handle "hard" passages like this? It's definitely not a lesson that comes up in the three-year lectionary cycle in worship! Martin Luther talked about the "canon within the canon," how we use some passages that most clearly communicate Christ and the gospel to interpret other passages that don't.
- Note that this decision is made by an assembly who was not very much affected by the decision personally. They had nothing to lose in this. This was not something that we hear God asking for directly in Ezra. Think of the story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 and the way Dinah's brothers trick their enemies into getting circumcised only to murder them – God didn't command them to do that, either. Are there other stories, in the Bible or in your lives, of people who do something on God's behalf that isn't really on God's behalf?
- We can perhaps understand how Ezra arrived at this decision; and even though it's scripture, we don't have to approve of what happened in these two chapters. But we can learn from it. We can learn how sin ricochets and multiplies and rebounds on the innocent and is presented under the heading of "good intentions." In what ways has the church inadvertently self-destructed its members or its mission field? Been hypocritical? Hurt others?

That's probably enough to chew on for now. As this study is titled, new normal are messy. As we gather together again, and as we plan for the future, let us pray that God blesses our ministry and protects us, when necessary, from ourselves.

For next week, please read Nehemiah 8-9.

Sources

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