

## Series Title / Holy Discontent: Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah

The courage to change what needs to change when God says it's time to change

May 6<sup>th</sup> // The Great Omission // Ezra chapters 7-8

**Starting Point:** Where the story of Israel left off...

The temple is completed—**and for 56 years the people engage in their festivals**—frankly they have begun to fall back into old patterns and to lapse into spiritual lethargy. A challenge Ezra will directly take on once he arrives and gets situated.

But the trip from Persia to Jerusalem is fraught with difficulty—it's a long trip and they are carrying lots of gold and Ezra is bringing back with him some of the best priests and leaders he can round up. **If the resources are stolen by marauders, if the influential leaders in tow are scattered or worse, killed by brigands along the way—then it will do Israel no good to have a beautiful church.** Because they'll have no leaders and no assets—lacking the means for spiritual renewal.

Let's pick up the text in **Chapter 7:5-10**.

The son of Aaron the chief priest—<sup>6</sup> this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, **for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.** <sup>7</sup> And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. <sup>8</sup> And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. <sup>9</sup> For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, **for the good hand of his God was on him.** <sup>10</sup> ***For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.***

**The Main Idea:** Ezra begins to build the people spiritually and under his leadership the people will once again experience a revival of devotion to the one true God.

**Background:** Ezra

- **The priest: the successor of Aaron and Zadok (genealogy):** Ezra's name is the shortened form of "Azariah" meaning, "Yahweh is my help." Ezra is a direct descendent from Aaron and the famed prophet Zadok—from whom the Sadducees in Jesus' day would take their name. The word "Sadducee" in Hebrew is Zadokoi—the followers of Zadok. And Ezra embodies the priestly and scribal office of Israel.
- **The scribal exemplar (Ezra 7:6; Neh. 8:1, 4):** Without a doubt-- The profound impact of Ezra's ministry as a Priest and Scribe in Israel can hardly be overstated. Ezra's example as a knowledgeable, wise, and scholarly revivalist will dominate the religious landscape in Israel for Millennia. The age of the prophet officially takes a backseat to the role of the professional scholar who now takes on the monumental task of educating the people in the Torah. By Jesus' day, this entrenched scribal class will actively oppose His prophetic ministry, challenging His authority as God's anointed prophet and king.
- **The reformer (7:10, 28; Neh. 2:8, 18):** Ezra returns to Israel to discover that the superstructure has been built, the buildings are beautiful and construction is sound, the city, **the homes and all surrounding structures but something was missing—they had omitted a passionate devotion.** And the people have prospered but they are beginning to blend into the surrounding nations, they are ignorant of their sacred texts and ways, and the threat of reverting back to old patterns and idolatry looms large. **Ezra doesn't come to town to build with bricks, he comes to build the people so that the people who inhabit these homes and towns and temple will once again flourish spiritually, will once again experience a revival of devotion to the one true God.** They fail to realize that **Consecration and biblical literacy are necessary foundations for mission. God's purpose is to strengthen our foundations so that we may proclaim his Good News to a dying world. Israel forgot that. And Jesus will eventually remind them of that lost vocation.**

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### Principles for Today:

Today we're going to look at the character of a reformer. In some important ways, Ezra came to embody those quality in a spiritual reformer that God uses to bring a passion for God's Word and God's presence. Both of which are so necessary for spiritual renewal.

### The Text reveals that Ezra was:

#### 1. A gifted and skilled leader

- Ezra 7:6, 9; Ezra went up from Babylonia. *He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given*, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him... 9... for the good hand of his God was on him.”
- 1 Cor. 3:10 “For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. <sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God given to me, **like a skilled master builder** I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.”
- Rom. 12:5-6ff “so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. <sup>6</sup> Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”

It takes a natural gifting and a heart to hone those gifts and talents for God's Kingdom.

**Illus.** Years ago I worked as a worship pastor at a church that was growing rapidly. It was fun, God was constantly bringing us new people and new team members. If I'm being quite honest with you, I wasn't too impressed with the speaking ability of the Senior Pastor whom I worked under.

- He lacked a dynamic presence.
- He often just stood in the middle of the stage and read from his manuscript.
- Sometimes his attempts at story telling didn't quite hit the mark. His stories were less like illustrations and more like illustrations.

But behind the scenes I saw a guy working hard every single day. In fact I would say I've never worked with anyone who had a better work ethic than my old senior pastor. I knew he was getting after it and honing his skills as a pastor, a leader and a speaker.

Today, if you watched his sermons online, you might wonder how the description I just gave you squares with what you're seeing. That's because for the last 17 years he's been working diligently to become a skilled teacher and leader. And he is a great leader.

**So what if you're not God's gift to ministry, or the workforce.** So what if you're not oozing with Charisma and you lack that super-snappy-pro style? Who cares? Just do your best with what you've been given. And that. That is the definition of excellence.

Like Paul we build with excellence—as a skilled builder.

**Notice that Ezra** was vocationally a scribe—but called “a skilled scribe” in the law. The text says that “the hand of the Lord his God was on him...for the good hand of his God was on him” but I want to suggest to you that Ezra's diligence and excellence played a key role in that. It's easy to respect someone who is faithful and works hard at honing their gifts.

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**Ezra was also...**

### 2. A biblical and worshipful leader

- Ezra 7:10 “For Ezra had set his heart *to study the Law* of the Lord, and *to do it* and *to teach* his statutes and rules in Israel.”
- 1 Cor. 15:3, 4 “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*,<sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in *accordance with the Scriptures*,<sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”
- Neh. 8:6 “And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and **worshipped** the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

**Ezra determined or set his heart: We must be careful on what we set our hearts.**

- Men who set their hearts on fire with lust are usually driven in that direction—to great harm and the detriment of their families. I recently heard that allegations against a famous pastor of one of the largest churches in America have surfaced, coming from some very high profile and credible individuals. These women were coworkers of that pastor and allege that he occasionally “hit” on them and was just generally creepy in the workplace. That situation is a manifestation of a fantasy life that is out of control. *What we set our hearts toward is the direction our lives will move.*

**Ezra was determined to study the Law of Moses and to Keep—and to teach others to do the same.**

**Illus.** It is said that when the British and French were fighting in Canada in the 1750s, **Admiral Phipps**, commander of the British fleet, was told to anchor outside Quebec. He was given orders to wait for the British land forces to arrive, then support them when they attacked the city. Phipps' navy arrived early. As the admiral waited, he became annoyed by the statues of the saints that adorned the towers of a nearby cathedral, *so he commanded his men to shoot at them with the ships' cannons.* No one knows how many rounds were fired or how many statues were knocked out, but when the land forces arrived and the signal was given to attack, the admiral was of no help.

*He had used up all his ammunition shooting at the “saints.”*

**Over the years** I have found two extremes that Christians tend toward. Being a knowledgeable Christian, or being a passionate Christian at the expense of being grounded in the faith. And these two camps often do face off and point their brothers weaknesses. It's the John MacArthur—cessationist camp vs. the Michael Brown continuationist—or charismatic camp. I think the debate between these two camps is getting nasty and out of hand.

*When you combine a right knowledge with zeal of heart to worship and serve the Lord—it creates something of a controlled explosion. Increasing in our knowledge and love is the accelerant for spiritual growth.*

Application: We are called to be people of the Word and that should always lead us to a greater reverence, awe, appreciation, and love and devotion to our God.

If our Bible studies are just producing smart Christians then we have missed the mark. If our worship services are just producing enthusiastic gyrations without sound doctrine—we've again missed the mark.

**Devotion to the Word should produce in us three things:**

**1) An abhorrence for our sin.** In the light of his holiness, we should be aghast at just how much we've loved the darkness. A healthy conviction over sin is the byproduct of consuming God's Word in study.

**2) New life in the Son.** Diligent study of the Word produces new life—and that life causes us to rejoice, to celebrate the presence of God in our lives.

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**3) A burden for lost people.** If your Bible study is a closed group due to space constraints, that's one thing. But your Bible study is closed because you are uncomfortable with outsiders in your group—that's not the heart of Jesus. **And that's not the heart that good Bible study should produce.**

**I love the picture in Ezra 7-8 (and Neh. 8),** where the people are encountering God's truth in the Word—devoting themselves to learning it, obeying it, and passing it on. And it produces in them a conviction over sin, a zeal for God's house and his presence.

**But again we see that Ezra was...**

### **3. A careful and faithful leader**

- Ezra 8:1-20: "And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen,<sup>19</sup> also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons;<sup>20</sup> besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name." Ezra carefully assembles and counts the people who are returning with him. **But he can't find a Levite or priest among them who can actually perform the ceremonies in God's holy temple. So he carefully and painstakingly makes a search and finds the temple servants.** This shows that he has taken great care to put the right people in the right places, and to be faithful to the statutes of the Torah in order to carry out God's mission for him. And Paul did the same.
- 1 Cor. 3:10c "According to the grace of God given me I laid a foundation...let each one *take care how he builds upon it.*"

Neither Paul nor Ezra were perfect leaders. Both of these men made mistakes in their ministries. **But they both had this unswerving commitment to being careful, thoughtful builders, and faithful to their heavenly calling.**

#### **Application:**

- **If the house you're building is just going-through-the-motions religion,** then that's what you'll be left with. Just an empty, dispassionate and frankly disappointing religious experience. But they'll be no life in that.
- **If the house you build is one of selfish ambition and vain conceit—**just living for yourself with little thought for other people—your spouse, your children, your church or your friends—then the house you'll live in is one of loneliness. Because eventually, everyone who cares for you will retreat and recoil from you. Live for others.
- **If the house you build is one of lust and jealous desire.** You look and leer at beautiful women that you can never have—instead of celebrating and enjoying what God has provided for you. Then your house will be flimsy and rickety and it will lack the strength it needs to withstand life's storms.

Ezra was careful to assemble the right team with the right gifts for this spiritual renewal movement he was leading.

Paul was careful and thoughtful about building a church on the right foundation, with right materials, and in the right spirit.

**We also find that Ezra was...**

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### 4. A prayerful and humble leader

- **Ezra 8:21-23** “Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, *that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves*, our children, and all our goods. <sup>22</sup> For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” <sup>23</sup> *So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.*”
- **Rom. 12:12** “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”

#### Here's why prayer is so important in the life of a leader...

- **Prayer is a posture of helplessness.** God has ordained prayer in the church because it's one of the only ways he can remind us that we are not gods, we are not little deities running around here “ruling” anything. We have no power in of ourselves, we need his power and provision. And prayer is a posture of helplessness and vulnerability.
- **Prayer is a lifeline to God's resources.** So, because we lack what we need to do what God has called us to do—in our families, in our jobs, as parents, teachers, scientists, engineers managers or employees—we need God's help. And prayer is the way in which God has ordained us to access heavenly resources for building the Kingdom of God.
  - **Illus.** Our current staffers—we searched many resumes, exhausting search for the right people. We were careful and faithful in the interview process—and also prayerful. Acknowledging God's wisdom and plan, and God's resources. Sometimes I watch these guys working their hearts out, I think of all that is on their plates and pray, “God thank you for bringing us these young men who have wisdom beyond their years and a heart for service.”
- **Prayer is the antidote to pride.** Because of all this—it naturally inoculates us from being prideful.

Don't you love how in the story, Ezra and the leaders and Israel *humble themselves by seeking God*? The difficulty of the journey must be met with sober thinking, and met with sound judgment. God's hand of blessing is upon those who seek him, his wrath and judgment upon those who forsake and oppose him.