

5th July – Ezra 1:1-11 ‘God at work in all circumstances’

Introduction to the book of Ezra

So today we start a series looking at the Old Testament book of Ezra. ‘Who? When? Why?’ I can almost hear you asking from your sofas. And these would be very good questions: not many Christians have ever read the book of Ezra, let alone anyone else. It’s tucked away in the middle of the Old Testament, between the big history books (like Kings and Chronicles) and the big wisdom books (like Psalms and Proverbs). In fact, in all my years as part of church communities around the country, *I have never once heard a single sermon preached on the Book of Ezra*, let alone a whole series. So it’s about time we set the record straight!

Before we listen to the first chapter, here’s a brief introduction to the book of Ezra. It’s just 10 chapters long (or 12 pages on my standard print bible) and you’ll find it sandwiched between 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah. It’s all about the Jewish people’s return from exile in Babylon to their homeland and to Jerusalem. This return began about 537 BC when they were given permission by the Babylonian Emperor King Cyrus, who is mentioned by the great prophet Isaiah as the special pagan leader who would show kindness to God’s people. Over the next 30-40 years, approximately 50,000 Jews returned to Israel – a fraction of the number who were forced to leave 2 generations previously – some of whom set to work on rebuilding the temple and renewing Israel’s worshipping life. This forms a major theme of the book.

It’s worth saying though, that Ezra is really two books. Ironically the bit we’re looking at this July – chapters 1-6 – doesn’t include the actual leader called Ezra at all. He only appears in chapter 7 spearheading a second, much smaller, return from exile, begun 40 years after the events of chapter 6. So he won’t play much part in what we’re looking at this month.

The reason I wanted us to look at this important but neglected little book is that it’s all about coping with change, about returning from one place and re-imagining life in a new context. What makes it especially relevant to our situation is that even though God’s people return to the historic sites and patterns of worship, the new reality is very different to the old. *It isn’t like it was before:* and God’s people are called to embrace that, and adapt accordingly.

We’re opening the church building this weekend for the first time in nearly 4 months, but the new pattern is very different to the old. **God is taking us – has taken us – to a new place; and it’s good for us to spend time as a community reflecting on what that means for us.** Allowing space to mourn what we’ve lost, and to celebrate what we’ve gained. Ezra allows us to do that, and to see how God’s people have managed extraordinary circumstances before. God never changes, and we can take heart that others have gone there before us.

So let’s hold those things in our mind as we read chapter 1 – and I’ve deliberately included the list of items at the end. It might sound strange to us, but it shows us just how generous King Cyrus was to God’s people, how much he gave them to allow them flourish in their new adventure....

READ EZRA ch1, vv1-11

Talk part 2

So what can we learn from this first chapter of Ezra today? **First, we can celebrate the fact that God is faithful to his promises.** What happens here under King Cyrus was something prophesied by both Isaiah and Jeremiah. For all that Israel had been judged for its long history of disobedience, God couldn't help but be merciful to His people. *We might not be faithful to God – but He is always faithful to us.* We'll be reflecting on that lesson in more detail in 3 weeks' time, but let's give thanks today that God is always as good as His word. He had told the exiles they would return after 70 years in exile – and they did.

Second, let's celebrate the resources that God releases for His work. A number of us have made numerous trips to the church building in the last couple of weeks, mostly carrying cleaning products. Reading today's chapter, I've found myself thinking: if only we were carrying articles of silver and gold! But those slightly strange lists of items are there to remind us that God provides generously for the work He intends to do. (And as an aside, wouldn't you love to know what those 1,000 'other items' were?) When God starts something new, He doesn't force everyone to scratch around in desperation: a true work of God will have God's resources behind it. God's people travel back home with *all they need* to start again.

And we too can take heart that God will continue to equip us as a community for the challenges that lie ahead. We don't need gold and silver – much as we like to think we do! – but we do keep seeking our generous God for every grace to be His people for this new season.

But finally, and perhaps most significantly for us today, **let's give thanks that God works in all circumstances – even the most surprising ones.** Who could have predicted how the church would change this year? Our buildings might have closed for a season, but instead the church has opened in millions of homes. We've used technology like Zoom designed for business to meet each other during the week – and let's be honest, after decades of business adopting church language like mission statements, followers and conversion rates for its benefit, it's about time the boot was on the other foot for a while! The point is: we haven't died – we've grown!

And let's notice that it was a decision by the secular authority of the day – Cyrus – which allowed God's people to return. Just as it has been in 2020. God has used unexpected decisions by the State to bless His church. No doubt there is a long road ahead, just as there was for the exiles trekking 900 miles back to their homeland. But the fact that God used a pagan emperor to achieve more for God's people than most of their kings in the previous 4 centuries, says a lot about how *our amazing God can be at work in all circumstances, and even in the most unlikely people.*

So today, as we meet in multiple locations offering the same worship to our same great God, let's give thanks for his faithfulness, let's give thanks for his provision, and let's give thanks for his extraordinary grace at work in all circumstances. Amen.