Lesson 4 – Ezra

Ezra was a priest, scribe, and teacher who led a second wave of exiles home in 458 BC. The book of Chronicles is traditionally attributed to him. The book of Ezra picks up where Chronicles ends. Ezra taught and led ongoing reforms in the post-exilic period. He overlapped with Nehemiah, who led a third wave of exiles home.

Ezra describes the rebuilding of the altar and temple foundation. This allowed the Jews to quickly resume the sacrifices and feasts. However, when they began construction on the temple, they faced opposition from the Samaritans and officials. Chapter 4 breaks the chronological flow to insert troubles the Jews faced later. Several Persian kings are mentioned: Cyrus (539-530), Darius (522-486), Ahasuerus [Xerxes] (486-465), and Artaxerxes (465-424). Ezra 4:1-5 summarizes the local opposition to rebuilding the temple until the beginning of Darius' reign in 522, and this part of the narrative resumes in Ezra 4:24, noting that work on the temple ceased until Darius' second year, c. 520. Ezra 4:6 mentions a letter to Ahasuerus, in 486. Ezra 4:7-23 jumps even further ahead to describe opposition to rebuilding the city walls under the reign of Artaxerxes. While the returning exiles managed to finish the temple by 516, the city walls were not rebuilt until c. 444. We'll discuss the walls when we get to Nehemiah. Artaxerxes is mentioned again in Ezra 6:14, where Ezra grouped him with Cyrus and Darius to combine the two major rebuilding efforts accomplished by their decrees. These insertions can be confusing, since we prefer chronological arrangement.

After finishing the altar and temple foundation, the Jews were deterred by their enemies. The work ceased for about fifteen years. They were motivated by prophets to resume. After finishing the temple and celebrating the Passover, Ezra's narrative jumps ahead almost 60 years to his own time (Ezra 7:1). The two major tasks remaining were to rebuild the city walls and set some spiritual things in order.

Ezra addressed spiritual problems. Of particular importance was the widespread violation of God's law prohibiting marriage to pagans. Although the exile had forever purged idolatry from Judah, the post-exilic period was plagued by spiritual apathy. The returning exiles were not zealous toward God, and they needed leaders like Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, and Malachi to motivate them.

The book of Chronicles, which substantially parallels Samuel and Kings, was written for the returning exiles to learn their heritage. It focuses on Judah, whereas the earlier narratives give equal time to Israel. Chronicles has a selection of material suited to serve its audience's unique needs.

A major theme of Ezra is how God's hand guides history to accomplish his will. Throughout the book, we read how God's hand turned foreign kings' hearts to support the Jews and how God's hand was upon faithful people to bless and protect their efforts to do his will.

Ezra 4-6 provides the historical context for Haggai and Zechariah, which we'll study in the new few lessons. Ezra also overlapped with Nehemiah (chs. 8 & 12), which we'll study later in this section.

Timeline

539-538 BC – Cyrus' conquest of Babylon and decree for Jews to return

536 BC – First group of exiles return (Zerubbabel & Jeshua)

520-516 BC – Temple rebuilt (Haggai & Zechariah)

486 BC – Adversaries' letter to Ahasuerus (Xerxes)

c. 464 BC – Adversaries' letter to Artaxerxes and decree to stop rebuilding the walls

458 BC – Second group of exiles return (Ezra)

Kings of the Persian Empire in Biblical History

Cyrus the Great (539-530)

Cambyses (530-522)

Bardiya/Smerdis (522)

Darius the Great (522-486)

Xerxes/Ahasuerus (486-485)

Artaxerxes (465-424)

Questions

1. About how long before Cyrus' decree (c. 539 BC) had Isaiah named him and prophesied his benevolence toward the Jews? (Isa. 44:28-45:7)

2. Name the two leaders of the first group of returning exiles. (Ezra 2:2; 3:2)

3. How many exiles returned in the first group? (Ezra 2:64)

4. What did the returning exiles build first? Why was this a priority? (Ezra 3:2)

5. What did they build after the altar? What was the reaction? (Ezra 3:10-13)

6. Who were the first adversaries to cause trouble? (Ezra 4:1-5)

7. Ezra 4:6-23 inserts trouble from a later time to demonstrate the ongoing difficulties faced by the Jews throughout the reconstruction. What two major rebuilding projects were delayed by opposition? (Ezra 4:12, 16, 24)

8. Work on the temple ceased for about fifteen years. In the second year of Darius, c. 520 BC, the work resumed. Who motivated and supported the Jews? (Ezra 5:1-2)

9. What request did Governor Tattenai send to King Darius? What was found in Ecbatana? What did Darius decree after the discovery? (Ezra 5:17-6:12)

10. What do we learn about Ezra's genealogy, jobs, and skills in Ezra 7:1-11?

11. What did Ezra have while in exile and carry back to Jerusalem? (Ezra 7:14)

12. What did Artaxerxes decree? What privilege did he grant to the returning exiles? (Ezra 7:13, 21, 24)

13. What is said about God's involvement several times in Ezra? This is a major theme in all the post-exilic writing. (Ezra 6:22; 7:6, 9, 27-28; 8:18, 22, 31)

14. What sin had the returned exiles committed? (Ezra 9-10)