

Sermon Series

Ezra: (Re)building a Christian Community  
by Steve Dawe

## **Introduction:**

Community is both the easiest, and the most difficult part of Christian life.

Community is easy in that it is built by God Himself as He calls people and renews them by His Holy Spirit. It is hard because most of us, because of our sin, are not good at living in community when we are called. Most communities that we attempt to develop by ourselves fall apart after a time, or worse are destroyed because they become so corrupt that God no longer blesses it.

This was the situation of the ancient people of Israel. While the community of God's people in Israel had started off desiring to follow God, and had early leaders such as David that were seeking after God, their leaders had become proud. Problems first showed themselves as the kingdom built up under David and Solomon split when Rehoboham had taken the throne. Eventually, the leaders of both Israel in the north, and Judah in the south had turned away from God.

While there were some kings that sought God, most did not, and some had been truly evil, filling the land with blood. As a result, God eventually fulfilled the promise he had made to Joshua and Moses, destroying the kingdom of Israel first, and then the kingdom of Judah, leading both into exile in Babylon.

The prophet Jeremiah was left with the prophecies that the kingdom would finally be destroyed, but that 70 years later, God would punish the Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem, and lead a people back to Israel to rebuild it (see Jeremiah 25:11-14, 29:10).

This prophesied destruction began in roughly 605 B.C. with a first invasion and exile, and when Babylon's puppet king in Jerusalem (Zedekiah) rebelled, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon utterly destroyed Jerusalem and led the leaders into exile in 587 B.C. The story of this downfall is told in 2 Kings 24 and 25. Then, a little less than 70 years later, the Persian king Cyrus rose to power, and eventually in 539 B.C.

brought about the fall of the Babylonian empire. This fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah marks the beginning of the book of Ezra.

Ezra is a chronicle of the long, sometimes boring, and always difficult process of rebuilding the temple and community of God after an earlier collapse. We Christians, living in a day and age where many do not believe in Christ, and many churches are in need of renewal and rebuilt community, have much to learn from God's work among the ancient people of Israel as they fulfilled God's call in their time. This is why we will spend the next 10 weeks looking at the book of Ezra.

**Author:**

What we now call the book of Ezra, according to many Biblical scholars, was once part of a single book that also included Nehemiah. For that reason, we more commonly speak of at least 2 authors for what we now call the book of Ezra. The first author was Ezra himself, who wrote a narrative of his own work on behalf of God's people in the rebuilding of the temple. The second author is most probably an editor that used the original story of Ezra and added an explanatory section using documents he probably had in front of him as he fashioned a single story of God's fulfillment of His promises in the lives of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the post-exile people of Israel.

We can see clearly two parts of the text of Ezra. The background material and story is contained in Ezra 1-6, with Ezra's story beginning in chapters 7-10. The second section of Ezra begins almost a century after the beginning of chapter 1.

**Date:**

The date of writing of any ancient work is going to be approximate. The section written by Ezra was most likely finished by 400 B.C., and the editor's work was finished by 300 B.C.

**Themes (From ESV Study Bible):**

1. The Lord is faithful to his promises, and his mercy exceeds his anger (9:13).
2. The Lord works providentially by all means, especially through powerful rulers, to bring about his greater purposes (e.g., 6:22).
3. The exiles—being the remnant of Israel, or the “holy race” (9:2, 8)—are bound by covenant to guard their identity and character as the people of the Lord by obeying his law.
4. Belonging to the people of the Lord, however, is not essentially by membership in a “race” but by willing acceptance of his covenant, and thus it is open to people of any nation (6:21).
5. Allegiance to the Lord is demonstrated by due attention to worship. In Ezra, this is shown especially in the building of the temple and in the proper ordering of its work, as evidenced in the institution of priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, and other temple servants in their duties (2:36–58; 3:10–11).
6. The keynote of worship is joy (6:22).

**Historical Chart (adapted from Holman Charts of the Bible):**

The Exile and Return from Exile			
Phase	Date	Scripture Reference	Babylonian / Persian Ruler
Exile Begins (605, 587 B.C.)	605-562 B.C.	2 Kings 24:10-17 (1st Exile) 2 Kings 25:1-18 (2nd Exile) Dan. 1-4	Nebuchadnezzar II (Babylon)
Exile	562-560 B.C.	2 Kings 25:27-30; Jer. 52:31-34	Evil-Merodach (Babylon)
	560-556 B.C.	Jer. 39:3, 13	Nergal-Sharezer (Babylon)
	556 B.C.		Labashi-Marduk (Babylon)
	556-539 B.C.	Dan. 5; 7:1	Nabonidus / Belshazzar (Babylon)
Return Phase 1 (538 B.C.)	539-530 B.C.	2 Chr 36:22-23; Ezra 1; Isa 44:28; 45:1; Dan 1:21; 10:1	Cyrus (Persia)
Rebuilding	530-522 B.C.		Cambyses (Persia)
Rebuilding	522-486 B.C.	Ezra 4-6; Neh. 12:22; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1,7	Darius 1 (Persia)
Rebuilding	486-465 B.C.	Ezra 4:16; Esther	Xerxes 1 (Persia)

Return Phase 2 & 3 (458, 444 B.C.)	458 B.C.	Ezra 7-10 (Phase 2) Nehemiah 1-13 (Phase 3) Malachi	Artaxerxes Longimanus
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### **Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah (From New American Commentary)**

- I. Prophecy Fulfilled: First Return from Exile (1:1–2:70)
  1. The Providence of God: The Decree of Cyrus (1:1–4)
    - (1) Introduction (1:1)
    - (2) The Proclamation of Freedom (1:2–4)
  2. Moved by God to Return (1:5–11)
  3. The Restoration of the Community: List of Returnees (2:1–70)
    - (1) The Leaders (2:1–2a)
    - (2) Names of Clans (2:2b–20)
    - (3) Geographical Names (2:21–35)
    - (4) The Priests (2:36–39)
    - (5) The Levites (2:40–42)
    - (6) The Temple Servants (2:43–54)
    - (7) Descendants of Solomon's Servants (2:55–58)
    - (8) Others (2:59–63)
    - (9) The Totals and Contributions for the Temple (2:64–69)
    - (10) Settlement in the Villages (2:70)
- II. Restoring Worship: The Construction of the Temple (3:1–6:22)
  1. The Foundation of Worship: Preparation and Beginning (3:1–4:5)
    - (1) The Altar and Sacrifices (3:1–6)
    - (2) Materials for the Temple (3:7)
    - (3) Beginning to Build (3:8–9)
    - (4) Praise to God (3:10–13)
    - (5) Rejection of Help from Enemies (4:1–3)
    - (6) Persistent Opposition (4:4–5)

2. Examples of Opposition (4:6–24)
  - (1) In the Reign of Xerxes (4:6)
  - (2) The Letter to Artaxerxes (4:7–16)
  - (3) The Reply of Artaxerxes (4:17–22)
  - (4) The Effects of Opposition (4:23–24)
3. Prophecy Fulfilled: The Temple Built (5:1–6:22)
  - (1) A New Beginning (5:1–2)
  - (2) Building Activity Investigated (5:3–5)
  - (3) The Report Sent to Darius (5:6–17)
  - (4) The Edict of Cyrus Discovered (6:1–12)
  - (5) The Completion of the Temple (6:13–15)
  - (6) The Temple Dedicated (6:16–18)
  - (7) The Passover Celebrated (6:19–22)
- III. God Sends Ezra to Jerusalem (7:1–8:36)
  1. Ezra's Genealogy (7:1–7)
  2. Ezra the Scribe (7:8–10)
  3. Ezra's Commission (7:11–26)
    - (1) Introduction (7:11–12)
    - (2) The Decree to Return (7:13–17)
    - (3) Instructions concerning Silver and Gold (7:18–20)
    - (4) Command for Imperial Support (7:21–24)
    - (5) Ezra's Royal Authority (7:25–26)
  4. Ezra's Praise and Preparation (7:27–28)
  5. The List of Returnees (8:1–14)
  6. The Recruitment of Levites (8:15–20)
  7. Preparation for the Journey (8:21–30)
    - (1) Spiritual Preparation (8:21–23)
    - (2) Administrative Preparation (8:24–30)
  8. The Journey (8:31–32)
  9. The Temple Donations Delivered (8:33–34)
  10. Worship and Sacrifices (8:35–36)
- IV. Keeping the Covenant: The Problem of Intermarriage (9:1–10:44)
  1. Ezra's Humility and Consternation (9:1–5)
  2. Ezra's Prayer of Confession (9:6–15)
    - (1) Confession of Sin (9:6–7)
    - (2) Recognition of God's Goodness (9:8–9)
    - (3) Recognition of Disobedience (9:10–12)
    - (4) Plea for God's Mercy (9:13–15)
  3. The Covenant to Change (10:1–6)
  4. The Assembly of the People (10:7–11)
  5. Positive, Orderly Response (10:12–17)
  6. Those Guilty of Intermarriage (10:18–44)

**Sermon Schedule:**

Nov 20, 2011	Ezra 1 - Pagans Serve God
Nov 27, 2011	Ezra 2 - God's called work
Dec 4, 2011	Ezra 3 - Nostalgia, Joy and Hope
Dec 11, 2011	Ezra 4 - Opposition and the work of God
Dec 18, 2011	Ezra 5 - Working for God in the World
Dec 25, 2011	Christmas (not in Ezra)
Jan 1, 2012	New Year (not in Ezra)
Jan 8, 2012	Ezra 6 - God's Vindication
Jan 15, 2012	Ezra 7 - Calling and Provision
Jan 22, 2012	Ezra 8 - Practically Following the Calling
Jan 29, 2012	Ezra 9 - Humility and Confession
Feb 5, 2012	Ezra 10 - Repentance

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