



Biblical Building

Sermon #1

An Overview of Ezra

Intro:

- Today we officially launch our Biblical Building Sermon Series as well as our 'Field of Dreams Vision'.
 - *Just a few moments ago you were able to hear our advertising team's spokesperson, Lee Sanford, give a God size vision.*
 - Church Family, I know that this is going to be a big endeavor, but I want to remind you, that we have a REALLY BIG God.
 - *There's nothing that He can't do.*
 - *As your Pastor I truly believe the time has come for us not to just talk about this vision, but it's time to follow God's Leading.*

- *Trust me, it is scary. Very scary. But I believe wholeheartedly that God is leading us in this direction.*
- *Which is why this morning we are beginning a verse-by-verse sermon series through the book of Ezra.*
 - Today we will begin with an overview, and through 21 sermons, we will journey verse-by-verse through the book of Ezra as we look at how God's people rebuilt the temple once they returned from Babylonian captivity.
- *The process and planning of our Multi-Purpose Facility that will sit across the street is not merely construction related, but is also a spiritual act and we must rely on God's Word every step of the way.*
 - Another super unique aspect to this sermon series is that each week when you exit, you will be able to pick up your devotional packet for the week.
 - I will be writing a devotional each week that will summarize and recount Sunday's Sermon, and give three important prayer points for you to talk to God about in your personal prayer time.

- *Prayer Point #1: What is God teaching you in today's devotional?*
- *Prayer Point #2: Will be praying over a particular aspect of the new building.*
- *Prayer Point #3: Pray about what you will personally give towards the building fund this coming Sunday.*
- So, this is a big deal that we are starting today, and I am going to trust God all the way, and the only way we can get through this and be obedient to God, is to fully trust Him.
- *If we truly have faith in God like we say that we do, now is the time to show it.*

● *Now before we start our verse-by-verse exposition of Ezra, this morning I want to provide an overview as we look at the book of Ezra with a 30,000 foot view.*

- While there is so much that we could point out in an overview sermon, I want to remind you that I'm hitting the highlights that will prepare us and give us a strong outlook for the 20 sermons we will encounter through this text.

Question to Ask:

What are some important characteristics of the book of Ezra that we need to look at as we overview this OT book?

#1: The Relation Between Ezra & Nehemiah:

- We must understand from the beginning this morning that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally viewed as just one book. (In fact, during my time in seminary I wrote

a paper arguing that Ezra-Nehemiah should be interpreted as one book).

● *Up until the 15th century, Ezra and Nehemiah appear as one book in the Hebrew manuscripts.*

- In the original/older Hebrew manuscripts there is no gap between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1, they flow together in the masoretic text.
- *Origen, a Church father (185-253 A.D.), is the first known person to distinguish the two.*

- Though Church Father Jerome did divide the two books in his Latin Translation of the Bible, called the Vulgate.

- Since then, many translators began to follow this viewpoint which is why the two are divided in our canon today.

#2: Title of the Book.

- The Title of both Ezra and Nehemiah comes from the name's of the main characters of both of the book's.
 - *Many scholars consider each respective book as the personal memoir by their main character.*

- Who are Ezra and Nehemiah?

- *Ezra's* name is the shortened form of 'Azariah', which comes from the Hebrew **עֲזַרְיָה** which means 'Yah[weh] helps'.

- *Nehemiah's* name, **נְחֶמְיָה** means 'Yah[weh] comforts'.

#3: Authorship.

- When it comes to who wrote Ezra, it is more debated and controversial than other OT books.
 - *The short answer to a potentially long answer, is that we do not know who wrote the book of Ezra.*
 - *But, the Talmud (Jewish Central Text), claims Ezra was the Author of both 1&2 Chronicles as well as Ezra-Nehemiah.*
 - *Some scholars will argue that whoever the Chronicler is (writer of 1&2 Chronicles), is also the writer of Ezra-Nehemiah and edited the material into final form, but that this person was not Ezra.*
 - Then there are some who will hold to the opinion that the writer of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles is a completely different person..
- What makes this particular question on authorship with Ezra-Nehemiah complex and different from other anonymous works in the Old Testament, is that there are large portions of both books that include text written from the 1st person point of view.
 - *In Ezra specifically:*
 - Ezra 7:27-28
 - Ezra 8:1-24
 - Ezra 9:1-15
 - *In Nehemiah:*
 - Nehemiah 1:1-7:5
 - Nehemiah 12:27-43
 - Nehemiah 13:4-31

- While it is possible that Ezra and Nehemiah were both responsible for their own sections, it does seem as if an editor may have come along a century later.
 - *At the end of the day, we truly don't know.*
 - It's interesting to add that Ezra 4:8-6:18 and Ezra 7:12-26 are written in Aramaic in the original masoretic texts. The rest is written in Hebrew.
 - *I personally believe that Ezra is the writer of Ezra and Nehemiah, and that he could be the writer of Chronicles as well, thus making him the Chronicler.*
 - *Here's my personal reasoning:*
 - After Ezra arrived in Jerusalem (in 458 BC), he changed from writing in the third person to writing in the first person.
 - Meaning, Ezra 1-6 would have been him using the third person in order to quote his own personal memories about days that had gone by.
 - *Could Ezra be the Chronicler? It would make sense...*
 - JM said, *'It would have been natural for the same author to continue the OT narrative by showing how God*

*fulfilled His promise by
returning His people to
the land after 70 years.'*

- Even though we don't know if Ezra is the author, he is a huge character in this book, but who is he?

#4: Who is Ezra?

- Ezra was a Jewish Priest/Scribe who was a strong leader for Israel.
- He was responsible for leading a group of priests as well as Jews back to Jerusalem, although many of them did decide to stay back in Babylon.
 - *Ezra was very rigid on obedience to the law of God, since things had become very lackadaisical and non-existent when they were in babylonian captivity.*

#5: Dates of Events in Ezra.

- The events that are found in the book of Ezra cover almost a century.
 - *The Jews were taken into Exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.*
 - *Then in 539 B.C. King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonian King, Nabonidus.*
 - *When Cyrus did this, he ended up taking control of a large and vast empire, which included the former kingdoms and territories of Israel and Judah.*

- One year later, in 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles could return home to Jerusalem.
- *Ezra 1-6*, covers the return of the first waves of exiles who came with Zerubbabel and the Priest Jeshua.

■ *The journey of these exiles under these leaders took place between 538-535 B.C.*

- Ezra 7:9 seems to indicate that the journey would have taken several months. For some, longer.

- *The chapters in Ezra will continue the narrative until the time when the temple is rebuilt at Jerusalem in 516 B.C., on the same location that Solomon's temple had stood until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.*

- *Ezra 7-10*, cover a time that is more than a have century later.
 - It begins with Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem in 458 B.C. and His teaching to them on how to properly worship the Lord in the rebuilt temple.

○ *Timeline of Events:*

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<i>Ezra 1-6</i>	537-515 B.C.
<i>Ezra 7-10</i>	458-433 B.C.

- None of these dates reveal the actual time that the book was written, but I personally believe it was most likely between 433 and 424 B.C. when this book was written and compiled together.

#6: Close Relationship between Ezra-Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles.

1-2 Chronicles	Ezra-Nehemiah
Chronicles Ends with the Cyrus Edict.	Ezra begins with the Cyrus Edict.
Chronicles Emphasizes Jerusalem and the temple.	Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes Jerusalem and the temple.
Chronicles has a priestly focus.	Ezra is more focused on the law itself.
Chronicles is more focused on Davidic leadership, suggesting composition around the time of Zerubbabel	
Chronicles does not mention Solomon's downfall due to intermarriage.	Nehemiah portrays Solomon as a negative Example. (Nehemiah 13:26)

More narrative storytelling in style, no first person.	Ezra-Nehemiah contains unique first-person memoirs.
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- This gives further evidence in the minds of some scholars as to why the writer of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah is the same person.

#7: Major Events in Ezra.

Event	Year	Scripture Reference
King of Persia, Cyrus, captures Babylon	539 BC	Daniel 5:30-31
First year of king Cryus; issues proclamation freeing Jewish exiles to return	538-537 BC	Ezra 1:1-4
Jewish exiles, led by Sheshbazzar, leave Babylon, return to Jerusalem.	537ish BC	Ezra 1:11
Altar rebuilt.	537 BC	Ezra 3:1-2
Temple	536 BC	Ezra 3:8

<i>rebuilding starts</i>		
<i>Adversaries oppose the rebuilding</i>	<i>536-530 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 4:1-5</i>
<i>Temple Rebuilding stops</i>	<i>530-520 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 4:24</i>
<i>Temple rebuilding resumes in the 2nd year of Darius</i>	<i>520 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 5:2 and Haggai 1:14</i>
<i>The Temple is completed, in the 6th year of Darius</i>	<i>516 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 6:15</i>
<i>Ezra leaves Babylon, heads to Jerusalem</i>	<i>458 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 7:6-9</i>
<i>Men of Judah and Benjamin assemble at Jerusalem</i>	<i>458 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 10:9</i>
<i>Officials launch a three-month</i>	<i>458-457 BC</i>	<i>Ezra 10:16-17</i>

<i>investigation.</i>		
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#8: God uses Persia.

- The Babylonians were extremely tough on the Israelites and exile for them was extremely difficult under the rulers of Babylon.
- *While there were times that Persia was hard on the Israelites, for the most part, Persian policy towards its captive people was pretty loose.*
 - *While under Persian rule the Jews tended to flourish since they were granted their independence in Judah.*
 - While many of the Israelites would end up staying in Babylon and mixing with the Babylonians, those who came back were able to receive religious freedom and independence under Persian rule and authority.
 - *Some scholars even estimate that 42,000 Jews came back to Jerusalem, while close to a Million Jews stayed in the comforts of Babylon.*
 - This number in Ezra and in Scripture is often referred to as the Remnant.

#9: The Early Kings of Persia.

- Without going into great detail on each and every King and all that they did in Persia, I do want to give you a timeline of who the different Kings in Persia were and when they served. This will prove helpful as we begin our verse-by-verse study.

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Kings of the Persian Empire	
559-530	Cyrus II
530-522	Cambyses
522-486	Darius I
486-465	Xerxes I
464-423	Artaxerxes I
423-404	Darius II
404-359	Artaxerxes II

- Cyrus and Darius are more of the influential kings of persia that will directly affect Israel.

#10: Genre.

- Ezra is a historical narrative.

#11: Purpose of Ezra.

- I believe the purpose of the book of Ezra is **to present the life of God's people as it unfolded in the years following Babylonian Exile. This is done in the immediate aftermath of exile as well as later on.**
 - This is written and presented in Ezra through a religious lens, and because of that the temple and religious ceremonies are of paramount importance.

- **With no temple being in existence among the people for quite some time, the unity and purity of God's people was a big concern.**

- **When considering the context and content of Ezra, I believe one can see that these books were written to show God's faithfulness and Grace to His people.**

- Though the Israelites had been through a lot and had disobeyed a lot, the remnant did try to keep their faith in the Lord.

#12: Key Themes in the Book of Ezra.

- Through the 20 sermons that we have and will be going through in the book of Ezra, there are several different themes we will find in the text. Some that I'll go ahead and mention, and others that we will discover together.

○ #1: Separation from the World.

- The remnant that came back after exile was a tiny island of people within a great sea of people and religious traditions.
- To say that they were the minority would be an understatement.
- **It is stressed all throughout Ezra that the covenant community remain pure in doctrine, customs and ethical norms.**
 - While Ezra is going to come across as strict at times in the book, it shows how important it

was in God's plan that this covenant community continue, which we know would bring us Christ.

○ **#2: Supremacy of Scripture.**

- The book of Ezra affirms the centrality of the Law (The Torah, aka Pentateuch) of God in the life of the community.
- Ezra will teach later on in this book that Scripture is imperative to understanding God because it reveals God's will.
- *In Ezra 9:4 and Ezra 10:4 a revival will break out because people trembled at the words of the Lord.*

○ **#3: Sacredness of Worship.**

- The worship experience of the people in Ezra is important to understanding the book.
- When the first group of exiles returns from Babylon, they first build an altar, so that they can give sacrifices to God.
 - *Then, they will build a temple.*
 - *Then, as Nehemiah explains, they will build walls.*
- The priority that they have is so correct. Worship and a correction relationship to God must be at the center of our personal lives and the community of believers.

- *This includes when we are beginning to start a building program.*

- In Ezra 3:10-13 and Ezra 6:16-22, there is an emphasis on Worship that is visible and involves sacrifices, the priests and levites and even singers.

- *The temple was vital to them. I know today that we don't have to have a physical temple to worship, our bodies are temples for the Lord, but how often do we truly worship when we come into this place?*

- If we want worship to increase in our community, we'll want to build a new location where that can be the place.

#13: Scarlet Thread of Salvation in Ezra.

- *The time of Exile was not the end of the story for God's ancient people.*

- Throughout this book Ezra stresses God's providence and mercy in moving imperial rulers to favor His people and in raising up new shepherds to serve them.
- *Ezra makes it clear in Ezra 9:8-9, that all the promises of the prophets have not yet come to pass.*
 - God isn't finished with Israel yet, and the return from exile was a second

chance for them to live as God's people once again. Through these people, our Savior will come.

#14: Why Ezra for FBC Gaston right now?

- It's important to know that we realize the time is now for our field of Dreams Vision.
 - *This book is important because it will help us to remember the main banner cries of why we exist as a Church.*
 - **#1: Separation from the World.**
 - **#2: Supremacy of Scripture.**
 - **#3: Sacredness of Worship.**
 - But also, this book comes at a timely time because it discusses the roadblocks we may face as a Church as we begin this journey. But while remembering, God is faithful.