

Ezra 7

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[0 : 00] We're back in Ezra. I was going to say we've been missing Ezra.

I don't know if you have been missing Ezra or not, but I think it's been three weeks that we've left Ezra to one side. I think we had the communion weekend, and then the following Sunday evening we had the joint service at Gilcompton, and then I was away in Kilmiley last weekend.

And as we turn to chapter 7, there is a significance in this chapter, as I've already mentioned as I introduced the reading, in that it's the first time that we meet with Ezra himself.

The events that have been recorded in the first six chapters all predate Ezra's involvement, or certainly Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem as recorded in this chapter.

And so that in itself gives the chapter a certain significance. Now, given the time that has elapsed for ourselves in looking at this book, and also maybe for the benefit of those who have not been around for one or more of the sermons on Ezra, it will perhaps help if we set the scene with a reminder of some of the key dates that are relevant to our consideration of this chapter.

[1 : 24] So if we could have those up on the screen, I think the TV is probably easier. Oh, well, I don't know. I've got it on a bit of paper here, so I will use my bit of paper.

So just a quick reminder, some of these dates will be familiar to you. Some are ones that we've mentioned in the past, and there's one or two new ones that are relevant to chapter 7. But just very quickly running through some of these key dates.

So first of all, a crucial date in the whole of this period, in the history of God's people of the exile and the return from exile, is of course the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of exile in 586 B.C.

Then about, what, 50 years later, a little bit less than that, the Babylonians are defeated by King Cyrus, and immediately following that, Cyrus, as we read of in the first couple of chapters of Ezra, Cyrus issues his decree that allows for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, and tens of thousands of them do just that, and that's what we read of at the beginning of the book.

A couple of years later, temple rebuilding starts, which is really the primary purpose for which the Jews had returned to Jerusalem, but very soon it comes to a standstill as a result of the opposition of those who are roundabout, and just the discouragement that paralyzes the returning exiles from their labors.

[2 : 51] A few years later, Darius takes the throne in Babylon, in Persia, over the whole of the empire, and in parallel with that begin the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, and the rebuilding of the temple restarts.

There's been a gap of some 15 years, I think, and it begins again. And Ezra chapter 5 and 6, which we were looking at three weeks ago, speaks of the circumstances surrounding the rebuilding, recommencing.

And then a few years later, just five years later, the temple finally is completed. So that's in 515 BC. That's where we left the story at the end of chapter 6.

As we begin chapter 7, there's really quite a big gap, or a big jump in time. So we're jumping from 515 BC to about 458 BC.

And we can be quite precise about that, because in chapter 7, there is a very precise time reference in terms of the reign of King Artaxerxes, the seventh year of the reign of King Artaxerxes, which allows us to date the event really quite precisely.

[4 : 10] But you'll notice that 57 years have passed from the completing of the temple to the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem, with tasks relating to the temple, as we'll see in a moment.

Just another little historical detail that can maybe just enrich things a little as we kind of draw the threads from different biblical books. The father of Artaxerxes was King Xerxes.

I don't mention him there in the timeline. Now, the significance of Xerxes is that he is the king who married Esther. So you remember when Esther was angry with Queen Vashti and got rid of Queen Vashti, and he needed a new queen, and Esther, the Jewess, was selected and became the queen. And so there's maybe a significance there in terms of the proximity to the throne of a Jew in the events that will now transpire that are recorded in chapter 7.

Well, that's just for us to kind of have in the background as we proceed to think about this chapter. So there's this big gap between where we left matters, the temple completed, and now Ezra appears on the scene.

[5 : 27] The author of the book introduces the events of chapter 7 with a rather nonchalant after these things. And he's really referring to all that he's talked about, and he doesn't even see any need to mention that several decades have passed since the last of these things that he had recorded.

So we've read the chapter, and in reading the chapter, I hope that's allowed us to know roughly what is happening in terms of Ezra returning to Jerusalem, the favor that he found in the eyes of King Artaxerxes, the provision that was made for the temple and temple worship.

Well, it's all there in the chapter that we've read. The way we want to think about the chapter, the angle from which we're going to consider the chapter, is to understand what God is doing in the events recorded.

And we want to understand what God is doing from how Ezra, the main protagonist, describes it. And for that, we need to look at what is said at the very end of the chapter, verses 27 and 28.

In verses 27 and 28, we find Ezra writing in the first person. I mentioned a few weeks ago when we started our study of Ezra that we don't know for sure who wrote the book, whether it was Ezra himself, and if it was, then clearly the material in the first six chapters, he would have had to have been provided by somebody else, or maybe somebody else compiled it.

[7 : 08] But even if it was somebody else who compiled the material, it's clear that these verses, 27 and 28, and other parts of the book, were originally written by Ezra because they're written in the first person.

You know, he says, I took courage, and, you know, the king said to me. So, clearly Ezra is the author of these words, which gives it, you know, a greater weight in terms of us saying, well, this is what Ezra thought, this is what Ezra believed.

And the question is this, how does Ezra describe what God is doing through him, and indeed through the help of the king?

And the phrase I want you to particularly focus your attention on is there in verse 27.

And the reason I read in the ESV is because the language that it uses, I think, is more helpful in allowing us to make the connection that we're going to make in a moment with Isaiah.

[8 : 09] So, if I can just find Ezra chapter 7 in the ESV, I've got the NIV open here. But Ezra chapter 7, and I'll just read what Ezra says about all that has been described in the chapter.

And he says this, Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing, so all that's been described in the chapter, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.

So, what Ezra is saying is, you know, you read about all the gold and the silver and the oil and all the rest of it, and he's saying, what's that all about? What is God doing? Well, what God is doing, what God is pursuing, is that the house of God, the temple in Jerusalem, be beautified.

The language or the translation that we have in the NIV is to bring honor to the house of the Lord. But I think the verb to beautify captures what is being said more helpfully.

So, that is what God is doing. Through Artaxerxes, through Ezra, he is beautifying his own house. And everything we say will revolve around this idea or this reality that that is what God is doing.

[9 : 28] And so, we're going to consider the chapter with this as the central theme or axis around which our exploration will revolve. And three matters in particular I want to highlight in connection with this mission of God to beautify his house.

First of all, I want to notice how it is a prophecy fulfilled. This beautifying of his house in Jerusalem, from one perspective, is the fulfillment of prophecy.

But then also, I want to look at it in terms of the purpose that is being pursued by God. So, really, we're posing the question, why does God want to beautify his house? What purpose is served by God beautifying his house?

So, a prophecy fulfilled, a purpose pursued, and then we'll think a little bit about the means employed. How does God go about beautifying his house? So, that sets out what we're going to try and cover.

First of all then, a prophecy fulfilled. Now, the language used by Ezra to beautify the house of the Lord is unusual in the sense that it's not an expression or phrase that we find repeatedly in the Old Testament or in the Bible.

[10:39] And it's unusual to the point of suspecting that Ezra is making reference to the one other occasion when similar language is used, namely, in Isaiah chapter 60.

Now, we read that chapter, or part of that chapter, and let me just remind you of what Isaiah says in that chapter as he has this vision of the future glory of Zion, of Jerusalem.

One of the elements of that is as described in verse 7, when God declares through the prophet, and I will beautify my beautiful house.

That's quite a phrase, isn't it? God is saying, my house is beautiful already, but I am going to beautify my beautiful house. Now, given the similarity, indeed, the exactly same language that Ezra uses to speak of what God was doing in his day, and the language that Isaiah uses to speak of God's intentions for his house in the prophecy in Isaiah 60, I think it is reasonable to see the two as being connected.

Isaiah is prophesying concerning the future glory of Zion, and the language that he employs points to a fulfillment that extends beyond the days of Ezra to the coming of Messiah, to the ushering in of the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells.

[12:10] Without doubt, Isaiah 60 is pointing beyond Ezra, beyond Jerusalem in the 5th century BC or the 4th century BC, and that's clear when we read on in Isaiah 60.

We don't have time to read the whole chapter, but let me just read verses 19 and 20 of Isaiah 60 where it is very clear that Isaiah's prophecy extends way beyond the events that are recorded here. Verse 19, The sun shall be no more your light by day, for brightness shall the moon give you light, but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.

Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified. And so the language there clearly points to events that will take place beyond the days of Ezra, beyond indeed our days, to the fulfilling and the consummation of all things when our Lord returns.

[13:21] But that reality of an ultimate and full-orb fulfillment that is yet in the future, even for us, does not preclude a partial fulfillment in time and history.

Indeed, it can be on different moments or occasions in history, including in Ezra's day. And Ezra would seem to be identified what God is doing through King Artaxerxes, who had placed it in his heart to do this.

He is identifying this as a fulfillment, at least in part, of Isaiah's prophecy that God would beautify his beautiful house.

This is what God is doing. He is beautifying his temple, the place where he dwells, and where his people worship. Well, it's a very beautiful picture of what was happening two and a half thousand years ago in Jerusalem.

But what has that got to do with us today? Well, in the light of how God's people are described in the New Testament, we know that as God's people, we are God's temple.

[14:25] We are God's dwelling place. Paul, as he writes to the believers in Corinth, describes them, indeed, individually as God's temple. And then we think of the language of Peter in 1 Peter 2, where he speaks of the community of believers together as living stones, forming, composing God's house, God's temple.

There isn't a physical temple now that we go to to offer sacrifices. We are the temple of God. And if we recognize that, as we grasp that, when we see how relevant this purpose of God remains to beautify his temple, just as he was of a mind to beautify his temple in Jerusalem, so today he is of a mind to beautify his people, to make us more attractive, to make us more like him.

If we note the language of Isaiah, we can say that we are already beautiful, but God's desire is that we might be even more beautiful.

I will beautify my beautiful house. It's already beautiful, but I will make it more beautiful. I think that's how God views his people. He views us, and he says, you are a beautiful people, bought with the

blood of my son.

You are a beautiful people, but I want to make you more beautiful. Just as he was of a mind to beautify his temple in the day of Ezra.

[15 : 58] Everything that God does in your life, the pleasant stuff and the painful stuff, must be understood as serving this objective to beautify us, to make us more like Jesus.

So, a prophecy fulfilled, but I also want to notice what I'm calling a purpose pursued. Why does God want to beautify his temple? Now, I'm sure we could identify a number of reasons, but let's allow Isaiah chapter 60, from where we're making this connection, to inform us as to one pivotal purpose pursued by God in beautifying his temple.

And we can read verses 8 and 9, which are the verses that immediately follow this language of God beautifying his beautiful house. And Isaiah goes on to say, Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their windows?

For the coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful.

Now again, the language and the place names are not familiar to us. We think, well, what's going on here? Well, basically what's being said here is that God will make Jerusalem, will make his temple so attractive, so beautiful, that the nations will be drawn to it.

[17 : 29] That's why God is in the business of beautifying his temple. Now, as I say, we could no doubt identify other reasons for it, but at the heart of God's mission to make his temple beautiful is that the nations would be drawn and that they would find their home, that they would find their reason for being, that they would find love and fulfillment and hope and purpose within the succor and the refuge of God's city, of God's temple, of God's people.

That is why it's important that the temple be beautiful. Certainly one of the reasons it's important that it be beautiful, that it would serve to draw others to the God of the temple.

Now, in Ezra's day, the beautifying of the temple would not perhaps have served this ultimate purpose of drawing the nations, certainly not to the fullest degree, but it would have in a measure as the nations looked on in wonder and admiration.

Perhaps for Ezra, the greatest concern was that God's people be drawn back to God by the beauty of his temple. Well, again, let's think about ourselves.

How does this purpose that God pursued in beautifying the temple in Ezra's day, how does that purpose apply to us today? Well, in many ways it applies to us much more significantly than it did to the beautifying of the physical temple in Ezra's day.

[19 : 00] Because God is still in the business of drawing the nations to himself. And how does he do that? How does he draw the nations, representatives of the nations, the peoples of the world, how does he draw them to himself?

How does he draw them to his Son? How does he draw them to faith in Jesus Christ? Well, certainly by the preaching of the gospel as we proclaim the good news to all who will hear.

But also, we accompany that by the drawing power of his beautiful people. On Wednesday night, yeah, on Wednesday we had a discussion at our neighborhood fellowship about how we go about reaching unbelievers with the good news of the gospel.

And our discussion revolved around the alternatives. On the one hand, you know, we were thinking about how one way perhaps of approaching this matter is to try and convince the skeptic, convince the unbeliever with well-honed arguments, with some slick apologetics and, you know, some clever arguments that can persuade them as to the truth of the Bible, maybe the truth of the resurrection or the reliability of the scriptures or, you know, and you could multiply the examples.

That's one way of persuading people, of convincing people, of bringing them to faith. But then there's another way, and I'm not saying these two are mutually exclusive, but there's also the way, and maybe a more effective way, of drawing the skeptics to faith by drawing them into and by a beautiful community of love.

[20 : 47] And in due course, they'll hear the arguments and be persuaded by them. Now, as I say, I don't think we need to see these two things in opposition one to the other. But if we think of the purpose that God pursued in beautifying His temple, and as we apply that to ourselves, as He would beautify His people, this is the purpose that God is pursuing, or certainly one central purpose that He is pursuing.

As He makes us more beautiful, so we become more attractive to those who look on, hungry and thirsty for meaning and for purpose and for hope and for love.

And they say, well, maybe there I can find it. But is that what they see? Is that what they are, is that what draws others to us?

And as they are drawn to us, so drawn to our Savior. And of course, remember, as we've already stressed, we are God's temple.

So this is the purpose that is pursued. But then finally, and just briefly, notice the means that are employed by God in beautifying His temple with the purpose that the nations would be drawn to Himself.

[22 : 02] Now, before noticing the means employed, it is worth explicitly stressing who is the one who beautifies the temple. Well, it is, of course, God Himself. He beautifies His own temple, but He uses means.

And in identifying the means that He used to beautify the temple in Jerusalem, we can focus on the two main characters in the account, Artaxerxes, the king, and Ezra, the priest.

First of all, Artaxerxes. Well, Artaxerxes was the king of the dominant world power of his day, the Persian Empire. Now, Artaxerxes was a pagan king, but he could provide the material resources required to fulfill God's intention of beautifying His temple.

We won't go into the details, but the chapter speaks about that. All the material resources that Artaxerxes ensured were at the disposal of Ezra for this purpose.

Artaxerxes has the resources. What does God do? Well, in Ezra's words, God put such a thing into the heart of the king. There at the end of the chapter, God put such a thing in the heart of the king to provide these resources.

[23 : 22] Of course, this is a recurring theme in Ezra, isn't it? In chapter 1, we saw how God moved the heart of King Cyrus in chapters 5 and 6, how He moved the heart of King Darius. How did God so move the king's heart of Artaxerxes?

Well, we don't know. It could have been a sudden, miraculous movement of God in the heart and mind and life of Artaxerxes. That's possible. But perhaps God used other means to soften his heart. Remember what I mentioned at the beginning when we were looking at the timeline, how his father, Xerxes, had married Esther, the Jewess, and also held Mordecai, the Jew, in high regard.

I wonder if Artaxerxes' stepmother, because I think that's what she would have been, Artaxerxes' stepmother, have an influence on the young prince. Well, we don't know.

But it's possible that in God's providence, these were some of the ways in which God made Artaxerxes predisposed to helping Ezra when the time came.

[24 : 29] As I say, God may have used other means, but I wonder if that might not have been one of them. The point is, God has Artaxerxes at his disposal for the fulfilling of his purposes.

But then he also has Ezra. If Artaxerxes could provide the riches of the nations, Ezra could provide the riches of God's word, the spiritual resources for the mission of beautifying God's temple.

Now, it is a curious thing that 57 years after the temple had been completed, there is still a need to beautify the temple, you know, at the level of the physical beauty of the temple.

And the fact that that need still exists does perhaps point beyond the merely physical to the need for a spiritual beauty or attractiveness.

You know, as we continue through the book of Ezra, we'll see that that was the big problem. There was a physical temple, but the people were far from God. And so there was a need for them to become beautiful, for them to be beautified in the worship and service of God.

[25 : 34] And this is where Ezra is called and steps up to the mark as an instrument in God's hand. Let me just highlight a couple of characteristics of the man God chose to call and use.

His training in God's Word and his passion for God's people. In verse 10 of Ezra 7, you have this amazingly concise summary of the kind of man Ezra was and the kind of training that he had enjoyed in God's Word.

In few words, notice all that is packed in. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord, or the study and doing of the law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

He studied God's Word with diligence, with devotion. He did God's Word. He didn't just talk the talk, but he walked the walk.

And he taught God's Word. In Babylon, no doubt for many years as a priest there to the Jewish community, but then in due course in Jerusalem. And of course, that is what was so sadly lacking in Jerusalem.

[26 : 44] A man after God's own heart, skillful in the Word of God, knowledgeable of the law of Moses to come and to teach the people God's Word. And Ezra was uniquely qualified for this task.

So, his training in God's Word. But what we also detect in the account is his passion for God's people. In verse 6, there's a kind of curious detail about the matter of how Ezra secured all that he secured for the purposes that were being pursued.

So, in chapter 7 and verse 6, we have this detail at the end of the verse, the king had granted him everything he asked. And the interesting thing, of course, is that we don't have recorded him actually asking.

But it's implicit that he had asked. And that speaks something of his courage. It speaks something of his passion for God's people. He would have heard, as Nehemiah did in due course, of the plight of God's people.

And he wanted to help. He felt that he needed to be there. He needed to be in Jerusalem. He was comfortable in Babylon. It seems he occupied a very comfortable place, highly regarded by Artaxerxes as a priest to the Jewish exiles who chose to remain in Babylon.

[28 : 03] Very comfortable. But he knew that he was needed in Jerusalem. And so he takes the initiative. He goes to the king with all the danger that that entailed and he asked for all of these things.

And we're told, of course, that he was granted all that he asked for. But when we consider the courage of Ezra, born of his passion for God's people, we're also told by Ezra himself, the ultimate source of that courage.

In those final two verses where he's speaking in the first person, when he speaks of how God had granted favor to him, how he had put it in the heart of the king to do these things, he then says at the very end of the chapter, I took courage.

Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage. So yes, there is courage that is commendable. And we admire his courage, but we also acknowledge his humility in recognizing that it is God who granted him that courage to gather those who would go with him to beautify the temple of God in Jerusalem, to beautify the people of God in Jerusalem by the teaching of his word and by instruction in his law.

Of course, this was not a task that he fulfilled by himself. We're told of how many others went with him on this journey, on this mission. And God is continuing to beautify his people.

[29 : 32] He continues to use men and women who are diligent in the study of God's word, in doing God's word, in teaching God's word, as the means whereby his people are built up, the means whereby his people are beautified and so better able to serve as those who would draw others to the Savior.

Well, as we draw things to a close, in Jewish tradition, Ezra is a huge figure. We tend not to think of him as such a significant figure if we had to identify the major figures in the Old Testament.

He probably wouldn't be near the top of the list. But in Jewish tradition, he is a huge figure, often considered as a second Moses. You can understand why that would be given the mission that he fulfilled.

Now, while we respect that tradition, we're perhaps better advised to see Ezra as a teacher and servant of God's people who points forward to the coming Messiah, to the flawless teacher who studies God's word, who does God's word, who teaches it to perfection, to the suffering servant who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

God is still in the business of beautifying his temple. He is beautifying his church that we might draw the nations to himself.

[30 : 54] And he uses means. He can and does use the kings and presidents and prime ministers of the great powers. And he can and does use servants like Ezra, devoted to the studying, the doing, and the teaching of God's word.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the God that we encounter in your word. We thank you for this great mission that is your mission to beautify your people.

And we thank you that we are the objects of this great intention on your part. We acknowledge and we confess that we are often unwilling collaborators with you.

We are resistant. We are stubborn. We sometimes fail to see or understand what it is you are doing. But we pray that you would help us to evermore cooperate with you in this great work that you are performing, transforming us into the image of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, making us that beautiful bride without blemish of any kind.

And we thank you that that purpose will not be frustrated, even when we are slow to cooperate with you in this mission. We do pray that as you so work in us, we pray that we would become ever more beautiful and attractive, that as a community of your people, we would ever more draw others who thirst for such beauty, who thirst for love and purpose and hope and forgiveness, all of the resources that we have in your Son.

[32 : 39] And all of these things we pray in His name. Amen.