

Ezra 2

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 April 2018

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] So, Ezra chapter 2, and as I've really already suggested in introducing the reading, and I think also in prayer, when we look at this chapter and you've heard it read, at one level it doesn't really look very promising.

We might all be able to agree that there is a place for lists of this kind in what is a historical account of this nature. So, Ezra, or whoever wrote this first part of the book of Ezra, is recording for us those who returned from Babylon.

Last week we saw how Cyrus had issued this decree giving the Jews the right to return to Jerusalem, and here we have this record. Of those who availed themselves of that right are certainly the families who did so, and the numbers involved.

As I say, that is important. It adds to the account a historicity that is helpful. We see that these were real events, real people who were involved in this return to Jerusalem, and so we can all say, yes, it's good that we have this list.

However, it's less obvious what we can draw from it that is of profit or of instruction, and I guess that's the challenge.

[1 : 4 0] Now, my hope is that in the next 30 minutes or so, you are persuaded that the chapter does provide us instruction and challenge that is relevant and useful to us as God's people today in Bon Accord in Aberdeen.

And, well, I'll let you be the judge of that in due course. Well, where to start as we think about this chapter? The very fact that we're going to try and consider the whole chapter does mean that it is going to be, as it will be week by week, kind of an overview of the chapter.

But even as we think of it in those terms, an overview of the chapter, where to start? I think maybe the best place to start, or certainly one place to start, I think a helpful place to start, is to pose a very simple question.

And the question is this, who are these people that we've read this list? Who are these people? All these people with difficult-to-pronounce names from difficult-to-pronounce places.

Who are they? And the answer is a simple one. They are God's people. And we are God's people. And so that immediately establishes a live and crucial connection between us here in Aberdeen in 2018 and these people on this list.

[3 : 0 6] These are God's people. We are God's people. They are our people. And I think we want to consider what is said about them from that perspective.

And I think if we consider it from that perspective, it becomes more real and more relevant for us. But let's explore a little further this claim that they are God's people.

It's interesting to see the way in which the writer describes them. And I just want to draw, I think, a helpful observation from the language he uses at the very beginning of the chapter and at the very end of the chapter.

So, if you notice in verse 1 of Ezra 2, the people are described as the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles.

And it goes on. The people of the province who came up from captivity. And the question that arises, well, what province is being referred to? Well, the province that's been referred to there is the province of Judah, which was home to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

[4 : 17] So, the kingdom was divided. When the sons of Solomon were fighting among themselves, you had the division of the kingdom. And the southern kingdom, Judah, was the kingdom where those two tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained.

And, of course, it was that southern kingdom that was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. It's capital in Jerusalem. And so, it is from that province, the province of Judah, that the exiles were taken to Babylon.

Exiles from these two tribes, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. And just to take a step back in the history of this, the division of the kingdom took place roughly about 900 B.C.

And in the northern kingdom, that is generally spoken of as Israel, you had 10 of the 12 tribes. And in the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah, you had the two tribes I've already mentioned.

The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians, roughly about 720 B.C. So, roughly a couple hundred years before the events that Ezra records.

[5 : 29] And the 10 tribes in the northern kingdom were at that point dispersed to the point of their near extinction. Consequently, and this is the point, in Babylon, you don't have the 12 tribes of Israel.

We've noticed how even in James, when we started looking at James a few weeks ago, you know, the language of the 12 tribes is used, the 12 tribes scattered among the nations.

And yet, in Babylon, you don't have the 12 tribes. You just have two of the tribes. And then, of course, you have the Levites as well that are a kind of class apart as the priestly tribe.

You don't have, to use the language that we're going to see Ezra uses also, you don't have in Babylon all Israel. But how does the chapter end? So, let's look at the very last verse of chapter 2, verse 70.

The priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants settled in their own towns along with some of the other people. And then, the translation we have here in the NIV says, and the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns.

[6 : 38] I seldom question a translation because I'm basically not qualified to do so. I don't have my very modest grasp of the original languages. It doesn't allow me to, with any great authority, challenge a translation.

But I will make an exception on this occasion that this translation is quite unhelpful in that the last phrase there that's translated, and the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns.

The Hebrew there is simply, and all Israel settled in their towns. You can understand why the translators opted to say the rest of the Israelites because before that, in that verse, some of them are mentioned.

And so, it seems to make sense, and, well, the rest did this. But what it actually says in Hebrew is, and all Israel settled in their towns. Now, why is that significant?

What's going on? The returning exiles are, of course, exiles that belong to the two tribes that we mentioned, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

[7 : 39] They were the only ones affected by the conquest of Nebuchadnezzar. And so, it was folk from those two tribes who went to Babylon, and obviously, folks from those two tribes who returned to Jerusalem.

And yet, Ezra, or the writer, describes those who returned as all Israel.

So, again, the question, what's going on? Well, really what's going on is that God is reconstituting His chosen people. God is saying, He's saying, you see these people, this motley crew trudging across the desert?

These are My people. This is Israel, the people of God. Of course, that doesn't mean that those of His chosen people who, for whatever reason, remained in Babylon, and some did.

Some luminaries, such as Daniel and Nehemiah and Ezra himself, they did subsequently. Well, Nehemiah and Ezra subsequently did return to Jerusalem, but they're not in this first group who returned.

[8 : 49] They obviously are also part of God's people. But nonetheless, the critical point still holds. God views these returning exiles, these strange names from strange places, because these are His people.

These are all Israel, and He has plans for them, to reestablish them in the promised land as His people of promise. So, I think we've answered the question, or at least tried to answer the question, who are these people?

But now I've got another question that will occupy us in the time that remains. And the second question is, what kind of people are they? And using the material that we find in chapter 2, I want to highlight five truths about God's people in the 6th century before Christ that are relevant and applicable to God's people today, to us.

And each of the five statements or truths contains, I suppose you might say, an apparent contradiction or certainly a contrast. So, let me just say what these five truths are, these five statements about these people, God's people, all Israel.

First of all, they are unknown, but known. The second thing we're going to notice is that they are weak, but strong. They are diverse, but united. They are exclusive, but inclusive.

[10 : 08] And they are poor, but generous. So, let's just think about each of these without dwelling too much on any one of them. First of all, these people, they are unknown, but known.

Just imagine if you're standing on the eastern banks of the Jordan, as this mass of humanity arrives. They've trekked all the way from Babylon. They've crossed practically a continent to arrive at the Jordan, and they're crossing the Jordan.

I don't know how they did that, but anyway, they must have if they were to get to Jerusalem. And you're on the eastern bank, and you're watching them arrive. Just imagine yourself there. Would you recognize any of them?

That's kind of a silly question. Of course you wouldn't. You wouldn't recognize any of these people. Who are these people? There's a lot of them, but I have no idea who they are. Imagine if you had somebody standing next to you who was able to give you a little bit of the information and actually tell you their names.

And so as they filed past, they'd say, well, this is so-and-so and this is the other. Would that help? Well, not really, because you wouldn't even recognize the names. Maybe, maybe you might recognize as a rubber bell or as Yeshua.

[11 : 15] You say, oh, I've heard about him. I know who he is. But largely, this is an unknown mass of humanity. And they're unknown not only to you. They were unknown even to Cyrus.

You know, they're the one who was facilitating their return. They're liberating. They're certainly unknown to subsequent generations. These people are at best a footnote in world history, at best a footnote.

But, and this is the crucial point, the contrast, they're known by God, each and every one of them. I think one of the reasons, apart from reasons of historical record, one of the reasons for these seemingly dry and interminable lists is to highlight that from God's perspective, each and every one of these 42,360 exiles and the 7,337 servants and the 200 singers, they're important.

They're valuable. They're known by God. And they are God's people as we are God's people. And as that was true then, so it is true now.

I don't know how you view yourself. You may consider yourself to be very unimportant, perhaps very insignificant. And maybe at one level there's some truth in that.

[12 : 34] But be assured that you are known and valued by God. You are known by name, just as each and every one of these people are known by name. Even though the chronicler or the writer of the book doesn't give us the name of all 50,000.

That would have been a challenge if we had to read out such a list. So they are unknown and yet they're known. But the second thing that I think we can notice about all Israel, as all Israel is presented in this list, is that they are weak but strong.

Now sometimes somebody who is weak and poor can be described as a charity case. Now I'm not recommending the use of that language. I think it's a very cruel way of describing somebody.

But we hear that language used. And I guess Israel as a nation could have been described at this juncture in its history as a charity case. Even the resettling of Judah and Jerusalem was at least in part on Cyrus' tab.

You know, this pagan Persian emperor. And also partly financed by the generosity of the neighbors spoken of in chapter 1.

[13 : 50] Who also would have been, I would imagine in their majority, Babylonians or Persians. And so they're relying really on the charity of others even to make their way from Babylon to Jerusalem.

When you contrast all Israel that reoccupied Judah with the Israel of David's day or Solomon's day, well the contrast is stark, even pathetic.

And notice the list. And notice who is not included. Sometimes in a list like this what's equally revealing as those who are included are those who are not included. And who are missing, if we can use that language.

Well, we don't find any soldiers, no men of war, no chariots. And had Cyrus not secured safe passage for the exiles, I doubt they would have even made it home at all.

They are weak. They are a weak people. But they are strong. Because their strength is not in themselves, not in their resources, but they are strong in God.

[14 : 52] They are strong in the Lord. They are a weak people, but with a strong God. And we can notice a couple of evidences of God's strength in their favor. Well, the obvious one is God's powerful deliverance of them from captivity in Babylon.

Now, though this redemption, this rescue, isn't accompanied by the miraculous signs that accompanied the exodus from Egypt, the return from exile in Babylon was, in many ways, an even more remarkable demonstration of God's power.

In less dramatic ways, but in some ways, more powerful. You know, we saw last week how God moved the heart of Cyrus. Well, if that isn't a demonstration of God's amazing power, that you can move the heart of an emperor to act in favor of his people, then I don't know what is a demonstration of power greater than that.

And so, at that level, we see that this weak people are blessed with a strong God. But not only their experience of deliverance, you also have God's striking assurance to them.

And that's recorded for us not in this chapter, but in Zechariah. Now, Zechariah was a prophet who was contemporary to the governor Zerubbabel, the priest Yeshua, who are mentioned here in Ezra.

[16 : 13] And he was a prophet to both the exiles in Babylon and the returning exiles who returned to Jerusalem. But listen to what Zechariah says, that the message that he receives from God to deliver to Zerubbabel, the governor, the king, if you wish, certainly the leader of this group of 50,000 people who returned to Jerusalem.

Listen to what message he has given to deliver to Zerubbabel. So, it's Zechariah chapter 4 and verses 1 to 6.

Let's just read those verses. Then the angel who talked with me, so Zechariah is sharing his experience of hearing this word from God. Then the angel who talked with me returned and wakened me.

As a man is wakened from his sleep, he asked me, what do you see? I answered, I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it with seven channels to the lights. Also, there are two olive trees by it, one on the left of the bowl and the other on its left.

I asked the angel who talked with me, what are these, my Lord? He answered, do you not know what these are? No, my Lord, I replied. And then listen especially to what follows. So, he said to me, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel.

[17 : 25] He was mentioned at the very beginning of this list as the governor of these people. This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel. Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty.

What's the message of God to Zerubbabel and to all Israel as they're so conscious of their weakness and their poverty? He's saying, listen and listen good.

It's not by might. It's not by strength. It's not by what the world would deem to be power that you will secure what I have for you, but by my spirit.

Your strength is in me. Your strength is in the working and moving of my spirit in you and amongst you and in favor of you. And of course, that was true for God's people.

What would it be 2,600 years ago? And it's true for us today. We are weak, but God is strong. Our strength is in Him and the power of His spirit.

[18 : 28] Of course, we hear echoes of this *modus operandi* of God in the words of Paul to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 1, verses 27 to 28, what is it that Paul says to the church in Corinth?

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are.

That is the way God ordinarily operates through our weakness. We are weak, but He is strong. A third characteristic of this people that we can find in this chapter is that they are diverse as a people, but they are also united.

All Israel, to use the language that the chapter ends with, all Israel was a diverse people at different levels. Different families, different places that they hailed from, different tasks and professions, different levels of wealth and education.

Maybe more significantly in terms of their diversity, this group of God's people is made up of Israelites by birth, by lineage, but also Israelites by choice or adoption.

[19 : 41] It's very likely that the temple servants, spoken of from verse 43 to verse 54, would have been from families who were not originally Israelites.

In the time of David, they were incorporated into the temple service for the more, let's call them menial tasks. And certainly, the descendants of the servants of Solomon that are mentioned immediately following in the chapter, they certainly would not have been originally Israelites.

And so, at that level, there is a diversity to this group of people described as all Israel. So, there are diverse people, but there are united people. And what united them?

Well, what united them above all else is the temple. It's all about the temple. And, of course, that then needs to be unpacked somewhat. But it's all about the temple. There in verse 68, when they finally arrived, what do we read?

When they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. And it's really a very striking way of saying what's happening, because there was no house of the Lord in Jerusalem. It was in ruins.

[20 : 47] And yet, you know, the writer says, when they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. Now, just a little bit later on in the verse, it explains to us, it's talking about the site of the temple. And yet, it's described as the house of the Lord, because that's what it's about.

That's what it's about. It's not about them resettling a territory principally. It's about building the temple. And, of course, the reason that's important is that it's the temple where God chose to dwell with His people.

It is the temple where the worship of God was conducted. So, they're united by their loyalty to God and to the worship and service of God.

The whole enterprise revolves around the worship of God. This is what unites them. They're very different in many ways, but they're united on this point.

Indeed, as we noticed last week, that the language of Cyrus' proclamation is the language of worship. Even the Persian proclamation, maybe the drafting of it helped by a Jew.

[21 : 50] Who knows? But even the language of it in chapter 1 is of the people going up to Jerusalem. Remember the psalm? I joyed when to the house of God go up, they said to me.

Even the language, the verbs used are the verbs that are used of worship, of gathering in Jerusalem to worship God. This is what unites this diverse people.

And, of course, that is what must unite God's people in every age. We are, and we thank God for it, in some measure, a diverse congregation at many levels. And that's a good thing.

But we are, I hope, united in our shared commitment to the worship and service of God. So, that's another feature. A couple more that we'll just mention about these people that we discover in this chapter.

And the penultimate one is that they are exclusive but inclusive as a people. And I'm thinking really of what we find from verses 61 through to verse 63.

[22 : 48] And the final group on the list that we find recorded there, it's an intriguing one. Because they have a problem. And what is the problem that they have? Well, the problem is that they're not able to establish their credentials as bona fide members of all Israel.

I won't reread the verses, but you recollect, I hope, the reading where it says that there's this problem. They can't provide evidence of their membership of Israel.

And so, somehow, there's this question mark next to them. This is their problem. As Zerubbabel, the governor, even denies them the right to eat of the sacred food because there is this question mark about them.

Zerubbabel, the governor, is conscious of the reality that not all who claim to be God's people are God's people. He is careful in as much as is in his power and prerogative to make that distinction.

He's also of the view that obedience to God is more important than popularity with men. I can't imagine that those who were denied, at least for a period, would have been too happy about that.

[23 : 58] And that reality is also true today. Not all are God's people. There is a great divide in human society between those who are God's people and those who are not God's people.

Now, it's certainly not for us to imagine that we have some kind of infallible opinion on where that line of division falls. But we do, and I think rightly so as a church, seek to establish in as much as we are able to do so, that those who are to form part of our fellowship, those who are to participate, for example, in the Lord's Supper, should be those who have, and we use the language of a credible profession of faith, that in as much as we can determine, in as much as we can discern, they are God's people.

That is important to acknowledge that distinction. And really, that's what Zerubbabel is doing here. And that is, at one level, might seem quite exclusive. And perhaps there would be those who would criticize such an exclusive way of viewing matters.

But this seemingly exclusive stance is accompanied by an inclusive desire that all be welcomed into all Israel. Zerubbabel, as we read in the chapter, does not place a definitive prohibition on this group of people.

But rather, he waits until the priest is able to minister with the Urim and Thummim. A very kind of mysterious operation that we don't know that much about.

[25 : 28] We don't have that much information about. But it seems to have been a means that was employed by the priest to determine God's will on a given subject, without going into all the details of it.

And it would seem that that was a concern here, that the priest would seek God's direction as to the status of these people. And everything would suggest, what follows in the chapter, would suggest that these men and women were, in due course, welcomed into, or rather recognized, as part of the community of faith.

A final feature of these people that we can discover or we notice in this chapter, and that is that they are poor, but they are generous.

Now, we've already focused on their weakness and poverty. And things, as history records for us, are only going to get worse for them, at least in the short or medium term.

But even at this point, in as much as you can draw some conclusions from the information that you have, that is fairly sparse. But even when you look at the livestock that is recorded as accompanying them, or aiding their travel, I suppose, back to Jerusalem, even the numbers there, in comparison to the number of people, does seem quite paltry, and perhaps would suggest that this was not a wealthy group of people.

[26 : 48] They had been exiles in Babylon, though many of them had lived normal lives and had the opportunity to establish businesses. They weren't slaves. They weren't prisoners. But nonetheless, they are marked by poverty.

But, as we discover in the chapter, even in the midst of their poverty, they are generous. The end of the chapter speaks of how they arrived there at the site of the temple, and the heads of the families, or some of the heads of the families, offered freewill offerings towards the construction of the temple, and the numbers are given there.

It's always difficult to try and bring numbers that are given in antiquity and try and provide a modern-day equivalent. It's fraught with difficulties. But if you do kind of measure the amount of gold that is spoken of there, and if you try and give it a kind of modern-day value, a figure of roughly \$20 million, or what would that be, 50 million pounds, was the value of the gold that was provided for this temple-building project.

But these were freewill offerings. Nobody was obliged to give in this way, but many chose to do so. Of course, that's the spirit of giving in the New Testament. We're not obliged to give.

Nobody is going to force us to give, but we are, as God's people, as those who are conscious of all that He has done for us, concerned for His worship and His glory, we want to give, and to give generously.

[28 : 23] So, there are a few features that we can draw from this chapter about God's people, and there are features that also are true of us as God's people. But one final thing to say about this people, about all Israel.

They are a people with a blessed past, a difficult present, and a glorious future. These people are a people of promise.

They were a messianic people from whom would come the promised Messiah. Indeed, if you turn to the genealogy in Matthew chapter 1, you'll find that Zerubbabel, the governor who is mentioned here, is named among the lineage from where came Messiah Jesus.

Also fascinating, though we're not going to look at it this evening, is to read also in Zechariah in chapter 6, where you have a prophecy concerning the Messiah who would come.

And it's interesting how the prophecy speaks of how the roles of Zerubbabel as the king, governor, of Yeshua as the priest, Zechariah, Haggai as prophets, would all be brought together in one man.

[29 : 32] And that man, of course, was the coming and promised Messiah, Jesus. And so these leaders of these people together point forward to the coming Messiah.

So, there we have it. Ezra chapter 2, this list of unpronounceable names from places that are also unpronounceable. But the key thing is that these are God's people.

They're our people. They're your people. And we are one with them. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that it does provide us with this historical record of your dealings with the world, but very particularly with your people.

From the very beginning through history, through the centuries and millennia. And we thank you for the way you are the one who has ever kept a remnant for yourself, who has ever protected your people and carried them forward through time.

Ever with that view to the culmination of your redemptive purposes in the coming of Messiah, Jesus, our prophet, priest, and king. And we thank you for what we can learn as we examine and as we consider your people in different points and stages in history.

[30 : 55] And how spiritual lessons concerning your people can be identified and applied to ourselves. And we pray that we, like these people of old, we know what it is.

That though we are weak, we are strong in yourself. And not by might or by power are we to serve you, but by your spirit. Help us also so to serve in that way.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.