

Rebuilding the House of God: Lessons from Ezra

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Church Name: 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel

References: **Ezra 6-7**, Ezra 6:14-18; Ezra 6:21-22; Ezra 7:1-10; 1 Corinthians 3:9-10; 1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Kings 8:10-11; 1 Kings 8:62-63; 1 Kings 9:3-7; Haggai 2:3-9; Numbers 25:1-13

Completing and Celebrating the Temple

Very good. Well, again, welcome to all. It's the book of Ezra, chapter 6. We're finishing off there tonight, and we'll move into chapter 7. So just a couple of thoughts at the end of chapter 6, before we realize that there's a transition in the book to pick up the second half. So Ezra 6:21 says:

[Ezra 6:21-22 NKJV]

²¹ Then the children of Israel who had returned from the captivity ate together with all who had separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land in order to seek the LORD God of Israel. ²² And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the LORD made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

So we've been reading over the last several months, and we've been reading a lot about the stresses and distresses that the people of God have undergone. And it's very encouraging to me to read this little paragraph summarizing some of the blessing that the Lord gave to those people who came back to the land of Israel to build the house of God.

Amir?

"I missed last week this fabulous decision, but I read the transcript on the side. And I have a question. The Second Temple was rebuilt after God's people humbled themselves and obeyed His word. What do you think is the New Testament equivalent of rebuilding God's house today? What is the equivalent of rebuilding God's house today?"

Good question. Someone want to answer that one?

Rebuilding God's House Today

What is the equivalent? And the equivalent is pretty much, what are we going to do with 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel? It's been around for—my math is very bad—it has been around for 79 years. 79 years. That's a long time. And before that, there was the Seymour Street Gospel Hall. Before that, there was the Cordova Street Gospel Hall. And I can trace back all the way to 1893. There's a book on the back shelf that will show you that information. 1893 was a long time ago.

What happened down through the years? Well, a lot of good things happened. And by the grace of God, many missionaries went from there to other parts of the world. What is our job right now? To **rebuild** the house of God, to lay foundations for the future. So the simplest answer to your question, Amir, is we've got to build 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel so that there will be, in the years to come, many missionaries go to the other side of the world, many men and women of God to stand tall for God here—men of God, women of God strong enough to lead the youth of the assembly in the ways of God.

What's going to happen to these youth? Many of them, Amir, many of them don't know the Lord well enough to stand. Many of them don't have a commitment to want to stand. So big needs. We have got to rebuild the work of God. So that's my simple answer.

"I think it starts the same way as it did in Ezra, with humbling ourselves first."

Amen. Humbling ourselves in what way?

"Well, many ways: repentance, returning to the Lord, falling on Him, going to Him for Him to do it with us, through us."

Yeah, amen. So we had many—if I can say—we had many programs in the past that we don't have now. Maybe we should be going back to some of that. We certainly had a general devotion to the Lord that was greater than today. If you'd taken—I think if you'd gone to the assembly 50 years ago and given them an exam on what they know about the Lord and what they are doing for the Lord, and then you took that same exam and gave it to everybody at the chapel today, the question is, where would the highest marks be? Would it be today or 50 years ago? And it might be 50 years ago, and that would be sad news. Other thoughts and comments? Good question.

Yes. The temple was a picture of the spiritual house that we are building today. And we don't build a brick and mortar, structural steel, and wooden members of a building. We're not building, nor are we building any kind of organization. We're building a spiritual temple. And each of us have a responsibility, because each of us have been given a gift. Just as there were

tradesmen that built the temple—skilled men, some who hewed the stone, cut the stone, others who logged the timber, those who were in the transportation business, those who were in the artistic business—each one according to their abilities, they worked.

And in the same way, we too have spiritual gifts, every one of us. And what we need to do is to use those gifts among the people of God, building up the body.

The picture for us—there's a couple of pictures there—and that is, the first one is in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. We often refer to this time in reference to the rewards that are given later on at the judgment seat of Christ. But he says here in verse 9:

[1 Corinthians 3:9-10 NKJV]

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

So there's a double view here: that each of us are living stones in the temple of God, but somebody has to put us there. It's the Lord, of course, overall, who's building His church. He's the master craftsman. But we are just the workers under His authority. So he speaks now of being one of the apostles that were the very foundation of the church. Because the church was born—the spiritual temple that is now on earth in the church was born—the work began on the day of Pentecost, not before. And so he says the apostles laid the foundation. And that foundation is found in the Scriptures themselves, the instructions that we have. As a wise master builder, they laid the foundation. But another, he says, builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

And so it depends on the materials that we use. Each of us have been given a gift. Each of us then have been given resources, as it were, to add to the church of God. What are we doing? Most that come to 16th Avenue, many just come, they occupy a seat, and they expect to be fed. They're looking to get, "What can I get out of this?" That's really what it is. They are babes in Christ. They have to be fed with milk; they can't take anything deep, otherwise they would choke upon it. But they refuse to grow up.

So there's a sense in which you are very right: there must be a great humbling of spirit among the people of God. That's the first thing, and it must begin with us. It always began with the priests and the prophets. Daniel, one of the most holy men on the face of the earth, said, "It was us and our fathers who sinned." We must acknowledge the departure that there

has been over the past some years. And those men that lived 50 years ago would probably acknowledge that there was a departure from 50 years before their time. Amen. And we can go right back to the very time when Paul was writing this letter to the Corinthians.

So, yes, we all have a responsibility in building in the temple. What is this temple? Well, 1 Corinthians again, chapter 3, he says in verse 16:

[1 Corinthians 3:16 NKJV]

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

You Corinthians, your little assembly there that meets wherever it met—you, not the building, not the surroundings, but you, the body there that was meeting, the believers that were meeting—you are the temple of God, and the Spirit dwells within you. So that's the picture of the temple.

Now, in Ephesians chapter 2, he is addressing these Ephesians now from a different city, but the same thing applies. They were believers in the city of Ephesus. Verse 19:

[Ephesians 2:19-22 NKJV]

¹⁹ Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

That is what the prophets and the apostles preached—the truth. In other words, they were based on the truth. That was their foundation: the truth that was revealed through the apostles and the prophets. And he says Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

So the local church is just a miniature of the whole church. Every local church is like a little building, God's building. And we're growing; we should be growing stone upon stone. But that requires faithful workers. Amen.

It's not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord. And in Ezra, we've been learning how that when they started to build that temple, what happened? There was opposition, so they left off building the temple. That's what's happening today. That's what Harold is describing, what Sebastian has been referring to, where people become cold. They become discouraged. And so rather than, in an active sense, to say, "What can I do to build up my brother, my sister? What can I do with my gifts?", they sit back and say, "Let's have a look. Somebody else do it. I'm going to look after my own interests."

And that's what they did. Remember what Haggai the prophet said. He said, "You spend your time decorating the ceilings of your homes and putting up paintings and making it all very nice, and My house is burnt to the ground. Nothing there." He says, "Consider your ways." And that was Haggai's message. He spoke right to the conscience. Read the book of Haggai, and you'll see how he spoke to the consciences of the people. He said, "Consider your ways. When you were fixing your ceilings and putting all the nice decorations up, what was your life like?" Well, their crops were failing. There was a famine. The rain didn't come. They were losing all the blessings that God had promised them there when they came back in the land. Everything went sour for them.

And why are the people of God today in such straits in many cases? Because they're involved with their own interests first, and God's interests second.

So really it comes right down to what Sebastian has said. The church—not just a few, every one of us—because we're all connected vitally together. And we can't separate ourselves in that sense from what's happening to our brothers and sisters. What happens to one part of the body affects the whole body. So we need to say, "Where have I failed, Lord? Where have I failed?" We need to humble ourselves. I think you hit the nail on the head, Sebastian. It's right there. So it's all our responsibility. We can't sit back and say it's their fault—it's the youth, or it's somebody else over here. You can't say that. We're all at fault, and we need to take responsibility for it.

The Six Stages of Israel's Return

So that's what Ezra has been teaching us. They came back from captivity. And when you run through the various stages that they came through:

1. First of all, they returned to the land. That was the place where God had called them to. And they came back voluntarily; they came back to their covenant blessings. So they were back in the land.

2. Then they rebuilt the altar. The altar was the central place for them. They returned to their center. Our center is Christ crucified. That's our center—Christ and Him crucified.
3. Then they began to build the temple. That's what our discussion has been so far: building the temple.
4. But then they became discouraged because of opposition. Sure, there's going to be opposition. But they were given a mandate by God through Cyrus, His servant, and they should have continued because they had a direct command from the Lord. So we too have a mandate from the Lord. But as soon as they encountered a lot of opposition, they gave up and went to their self-interest.
5. So then prophets are sent by God, men raised up by God. God didn't leave His people; He sent Haggai and Zechariah. And those two books you should read and study in relation to the repentance and the return of the people to rebuild the temple. That was the purpose for which they came into the land: to build the temple.
6. And then, of course, through the preaching of the prophets, they turned, they built, and the temple was completed.

And that's where we've come to today. Those are those six stages or steps. Those are basically something we need to review in our own personal life.

So what is the logic flow of the book of Ezra thus far? They found themselves in captivity. Cyrus offered them an opportunity to go back to the land. They went back to the land under great difficulty, but with great enthusiasm and zeal. When they got there, they started to build. And as they started to build, the problems arose. And the enemies gave them one sort of flak after another, after another, after another, until finally there was a letter from the king to shut down. And so instead of protesting the letter, saying that it was based on false premises, they allowed themselves to be shut down.

So they went from way down here, way up in their zeal and enthusiasm, and then they went down and down and down. And then along come the prophets and the letters from the king, and they go back up in their enthusiasm again, and everything is marvelous. And when you get to the end of chapter 6, they're pretty much on a bit of a pinnacle, because they have been rebuilding the temple of the Lord.

Now, this is all in a space of not terribly many years. Eric will give us a precise number, but it's from here, down, up, down, up. The Christian life often has its ups and downs. And so we don't always look at ourselves and say, "I'm certainly a better man, I'm certainly a better woman than I was five years ago." Sometimes we have to say, "I had more zeal for God five years ago." Sometimes we say, "I don't know where I am." Sometimes we're so confused, we don't know about our confusion.

So I think what we're saying is: how do we keep going for God? How do we keep building the temple? At the end of chapter 6, we've got a high point. It's not the end of the book of Ezra. We'll get more as we go. But there's a high point here. And frankly, it's wonderful.

Back again to verse 21: the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land to seek the LORD God of Israel, they did eat, and kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy.

What happens following a time of recommitment to the work of God? A feast of God and joy. Oftentimes we say, "Why is the joy missing?" It might very well be missing because the zeal and enthusiasm have gone. Here they returned to their commitment, and when returning, they finished the work of God, and they kept the feast, and they were happy.

Now I think there's maybe another reason why they were happy. I want you to go back. It says, "those who were come again out of the captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land." Who kept the feast? The Jews who'd been building, and who else? The Gentiles who had watched what was going on and had seen the glory of God! They'd seen the temple in ruin before the people came back. They had seen the zeal of the people who'd come back. They'd listened to the sermons of the people who'd come back. And then they saw the opposition to the people who'd come back, and they saw them heed the counsel of Zechariah and Haggai and others, and they continued to build the temple. And they were converted! And I think there were baptisms, if we can call it that. There was joy. The people of God—many got converted.

And there's great joy when people get converted. We like baptisms; they're wonderful things, and they keep things going in the right direction. So I think that's what happened here. There was dual joy, dual happiness—not only from what had happened to them and the work of God that had been accomplished through them, but they were happy for all the others who had trusted the Lord in the process.

So the other thing is that they had seen the miracle of the king of Assyria strengthening their hands. It wasn't just that they did something; it wasn't just that God helped them. It was that God helped them by strengthening them and encouraging them through the king. That's very encouraging. When the king's for you, even if he's a bad king, you're happy he's not against you!

So those are my thoughts. I think chapter 6 ends on a high point, a point of enthusiasm, a point of rejoicing. And frankly, I think if you'd been at that feast for seven days, you'd be saying "Hallelujah!" too. So, any other thoughts on up to chapter 6?

Dedication, Sacrifice, and Solomon's Contrast

Yeah, I'm going to make a few comments, especially regarding the dedication of the temple itself. They had completed it:

[Ezra 6:14-18 NKJV]

¹⁴ So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. ¹⁵ Now the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. ¹⁶ Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷ And they offered sacrifices at the dedication of this house of God, one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸ They assigned the priests to their divisions and the Levites to their divisions, over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

So this now is 20 years after the captives first came back from Babylon under Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest. 20 years. 16 years the temple had not been built, once Darius' edict to rebuild was given. Then it took them another four years to build. 20 years. But then there was the dedication of the house. Verse 16: "Then the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the descendants of the captivity celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy."

And they offered sacrifices at the dedication: 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, 12 male goats. Now that was a very small offering when you compare it to the dedication of the first temple. And if you go back to 1 Kings chapter 8, you'll see what a contrast there was in the dedication of these two—Temple 1 and Temple 2. 1 Kings chapter 8, verse 62. We read Solomon's dedication of the temple:

[1 Kings 8:62-63 NKJV]

⁶² Then the king and all Israel with him offered sacrifices before the LORD. ⁶³ And Solomon offered a sacrifice of peace offerings, which he offered to the LORD,

twenty-two thousand bulls and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the children of Israel dedicated the house of the LORD.

Well, when they dedicated the second temple, it was only 100 bulls, 200 rams, whereas Solomon sacrificed 120,000 sheep! Tremendous difference. Now, if they would compare that, you would say, "Oh man, this is nothing."

And, in fact, Haggai picked up that theme, as a matter of fact. If you go to the book of Haggai, chapter 2 and verse 3, he says to them:

[Haggai 2:3-9 NKJV]

³ "Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? ⁴ Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,' says the LORD; "and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,' says the LORD, "and work; for I am with you,' says the LORD of hosts. ⁵ "According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!' ⁶ "For thus says the LORD of hosts: "Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; ⁷ and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,' says the LORD of hosts. ⁸ "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,' says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ "The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts. "And in this place I will give peace,' says the LORD of hosts."

And he mentions that more than once through his messages: that the Lord would be with them. And as the Lord was with the early apostles in the book of Acts, He'll be with us today. That's the encouragement: that we don't have to worry about the fact that He has departed from us. He's with us!

The Future Glory and the Necessity of the Sin Offering

Now what he does is point them to a further glory of a future temple that is going to eclipse the glory of Solomon's temple. Amen. He said this is a temporary thing. And he raises their eyes to look into the future when the Lord Jesus comes and the millennial temple is going to be built, and it will be the most magnificent structure on the face of the earth. He says, "I

will once more... shake heaven and earth and the sea and dry land. I'll shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations." That is our Lord Jesus. He's the Desire—that's the hidden desire of every nation, is that there will come a Savior. Different nations have different ideas at different times, but there's the idea of a Mahdi coming, or other cultures have had the hope of someone coming—that One, the Coming One, the Desire of All Nations. And then, of course, it will be revealed that one desire that's in the heart of those nations is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled.

And He says, "I will fill this temple with glory." He's not talking about the temple there that they had just erected. He said, "The silver is Mine, the gold is Mine." He said, "Don't worry about the fact that you can't plate it with gold and silver like Solomon's temple. It's all Mine. I can give it to you if you want it." As a matter of fact, when we read about Artaxerxes, he sends a bunch of gold and silver with Ezra in the next chapter.

But He says, "The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace." So the prophet not only stirred up the people, but he gave them a vision of the future as well. So that when the Lord of glory comes to claim His own, there will be a place, a center on earth, that the nations are going to bring their glory into. And the Lord will rule out of Zion over the whole earth during that time.

Now, there's one other feature about the dedication of the second temple that I'd like to draw your attention to, and that is found in verse 17, where we read that there was a sin offering for all of Israel: twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. Now, it was only Judah and Benjamin, really, that came back, but there was sufficient sacrifice for the whole of the people of God. Amen. All of the ten tribes that were perhaps missing—although there may have been representatives of all those tribes that came back—in God's view, all the people of God are seen in His sacrifice.

Now, if you go back again to the eighth chapter of 1 Kings, just a reference, because we're making a comparison between the dedication of Solomon's temple and the dedication of this second temple, and the differences between them—not only in scale, but also in type. Because in the dedication of Solomon's temple, there was no sin offering. But there was a sin offering that had to be made for the second temple. And the reason for that is that it was necessary.

In the first temple, God had consecrated the first temple by His presence. In 1 Kings 8:10-11, it says:

[1 Kings 8:10-11 NKJV]

¹⁰ And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

That is, when the temple was all set up and the ark had been brought in, God didn't wait for an official dedication of that temple; He went in immediately and filled that temple with His glory, with His presence. And then we read of their sacrifices: they were all sacrifices of sweet savor offerings. No sin or trespass offering was needed. Because in chapter 9 of 1 Kings, in verse 3, the Lord said to him:

[1 Kings 9:3-7 NKJV]

³ And the LORD said to him: "I have heard your prayer and your supplication that you have made before Me; I have consecrated this house which you have built to put My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually. ⁴ Now if you walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded you, and if you keep My statutes and My judgments, ⁵ then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, "You shall not fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'" ⁶ But if you or your sons at all turn from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, ⁷ then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight. Israel will be a proverb and a byword among all peoples.

Well, David's throne was given to him unconditionally, but there would come a time when they would be dethroned for a short while, and that's during the captivity and during the time that we're living in now. But he says in verse 6—and here's what's important—if you or your sons turn away, "then I will cut off Israel... and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight."

And that is exactly what had taken place. And that's what we're looking at in the restoration that we read about in the book of Ezra: the return of the captives and the rebuilding of the house. And that is why the sin offering was necessary—because the first temple didn't need

sin offerings; it was consecrated by the Lord. But this one did need a sin offering. And so, because Israel didn't heed their warning that was given in Solomon's day, they then bring their sin offering: 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

And any rebuilding—again, coming back to what Sebastian said—requires repentance and a return again. On the day of Pentecost, there was no repentance necessary; the Holy Spirit came down on that day. It was like the day when Solomon's temple was filled with glory; on the day of Pentecost, that house was filled with the Spirit of God. It was all praise to the Lord that went up that day. But if there's going to be any restoration work done, it's going to be like the rebuilding of the second temple. For the people of God, it's always been that way: there has to be humility, repentance, a return to the word of God as it is written.

We read there in verse 18 of Ezra chapter 6: "They assigned the priests to their divisions and the Levites to their divisions over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses." And that's the third time we've read that phrase: "as it is written," "as it is written." So it's a return to the instructions that are given to us by the Holy Spirit. We return in humility to fulfill the word of God.

Those are my comments on the dedication of the house. And then just a brief commentary on the Passover that was celebrated at that time. The priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were ritually clean, all of them. You know, we are priests—you and I. We're holy priests and we are royal priests: holy priests in the sense that we offer up our thanksgiving and praise to the Lord, we can worship in the presence of God; but we're royal priests in the sense that we go out to the world and represent our Lord.

These were all purified, every last one of them. There's a beautiful picture here, so much so that there was no impediment to the work of God. Every priest was available to do the service of the Lord because they were all ritually clean; none were excluded from their service. What have we got today? Well, we have to admit: sin has pervaded the church of Jesus Christ locally and worldwide—sin everywhere. We've allowed it to come in, and that's weakened us. We have a priesthood that is not clean, and there are perhaps very few to carry the work. So there's a sense in which we need to mourn over this.

Ezra's Lineage and Purpose

But then, at that time, they were on a great, great high point. Almost 50 years pass as we turn the page to chapter 7. Ezra arrives—that's about 70 years after Zerubbabel had come, 69 years to be exact or so, 59 years after chapter 6. During that time, the story of what took place in the book of Esther takes place. So Esther comes during that time between these two chapters. I guess if you were to study the Bible chronologically, then you'd go from this point

now on into Esther, which we probably won't be doing. We'll be carrying on in Ezra and taking Esther as it comes.

So there's sort of the end of that first section. Ezra himself was not there during that 20 years that the first part of the book of Ezra from chapters 1 to 6 covers. Ezra wasn't there, but he has now come with a small contingent from Babylon.

Chapter 7 begins now:

[Ezra 7:1-10 NKJV]

¹ Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, ² the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, ³ the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, ⁴ the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, ⁵ the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest--
⁶ this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. ⁷ Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸ And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. ¹⁰ For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

So this Ezra is introduced to us here, and he's a pretty good man. He's a solid man, and he's a zealous man. His name is on the book, and much of the work that he's involved in are good works. He was a good man, and he accomplished a great deal.

So in this particular chapter, in the early verses, we read of his genealogy. You can count up, if you want, how far he is from his father Aaron. He is qualified as a priest; he is in the priestly line. If you weren't the son of Aaron, you weren't qualified as a priest. But he was, and he could count his genealogy back. And I don't know if you counted, but I tried to count: I think if Aaron was number one, he was number 17. That's a long way. And most people, when they go back that far in their generations, they forget a lot of things. I can't go that far in my generations. I can maybe go back on some parts of the family five or six generations,

but how can you go back that far? And I have no idea what the men were doing five or six generations back among my forebears.

Ezra recognized that the hand of God was upon him, that he had been born into a position of responsibility. The responsibility he'd been born into was a responsibility from God. And Ezra said, "That's my responsibility. That's what I'm going to live up to." Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was part of that same generation. He went back far more than 17 generations, but he went all the way back and he said, "That is my responsibility. My responsibility is to God."

Our youth tend to think that success at university is really important. Frankly, it's not. They think success in things like sports, personal glory, a good job, and money are important. They're not. Ezra didn't place priority on any of that. Ezra simply said, "I'm a priest of the Most High God. I think there's work to be done still in Jerusalem." His forebears didn't go back with Zerubbabel. They could have gone back with Zerubbabel, probably, but they didn't. But he, in his generation, said, "I've got to go back." He caught the vision. He said, "I'm going. I'm gonna do it."

Good man, Ezra. Not easy for him. And when you get to the end of the book, he becomes an outstanding man, standing against evil, standing for God. Good man. How did it all start? It started by him recognizing, "This is why God called me."

And so each of us look back and say, "Now, why am I here? What did God call me for?" For Ezra, it was relatively easy. But he had other forebears, and he could have said, "There hasn't been much of the priesthood for all those years of the captivity; I don't need to worry about that." But in simplicity, he said, "This is the call of God; I will give myself to it."

And so he starts out another wave of the movement of God in rebuilding the work of God in Jerusalem. So what is the wave in the rebuilding of the work of God in Vancouver that you and I are to be part of? By the grace of God, we say, if we can serve the Lord here in Vancouver, if we can serve the Lord at 16th, hallelujah! Some say, "I think I've got to serve the Lord in other parts of the world." But we all have got to say, "I have got to serve the Lord. This is my job. I'm going to get to it." Ezra, that's what he did.

What does the word Ezra mean? It means **help**. And I think it's a help in both directions. Ezra recognized that the Lord was his helper, and he allowed the Lord to help him. But Ezra also recognized that his name was help, and he was to be the help of the people of God. And he would use whatever he could to be a help for the people of God. And I think if you meet Ezra, you'll say, "Thanks, Ezra. You were a help to me as well as all the others." Good to have

a name that goes both ways—a name that you've received and passed on. So that's Ezra. Good man.

The Journey from Babylon to Jerusalem

Verse 7 says that there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim unto Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king. Who went with him? He was a priest. Who did he bring up with him? Well, some of the children of Israel, but mostly he focused on bringing up those who could help him in the priesthood when he gets there. And so it's encouraging that there are groups who go along with Ezra: first the children of Israel, then the priests, then the Levites, then the singers, then the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim unto Jerusalem. That's six groups. They went with him, number seven, and they went to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

Ezra was an organizer and an administrator. He didn't just say, "I'll go." He said, "By the grace of God, I'm going to encourage others to come with me. There's work to be done for God." And regardless of who comes with you, do the work. But if you can encourage others to come with you, then encourage others to come with you, and let's work together. Most of us need a lot of encouragement to get started.

I was in charge when I was younger of two groups of young people. When I was quite young, I was approached by the oversight, and two of us were responsible for doing a work for God. And the oversight just basically said, "This is your job; you go and do it." And to the best of my knowledge, neither one of us did anything. Very embarrassing. The job had to be done; we were delegated, and we did nothing. On a later occasion, the oversight came to me and to a group of others, and the words on that occasion were, "This is what we would like you to do, and we will help you." And frankly, we did something, and they did help us and lead us and guide us and direct us and periodically rebuke us, but an accomplishment was made for God. The first was a complete disaster, but by the grace of God, something happened the second time around.

And so Ezra says, "You come with me." And they did come with him, but I think Ezra helped them. And so I say, good man, Ezra!

So anyway, those are some introductory comments on the life of Ezra. Probably we can go down to the end of verse 10. He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good

hand of his God upon him. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

How far was it from Babylon to Jerusalem? The note that I read said about 900 miles. Is that a long walk? When was the last time you walked for 900 miles? How long did it take to get there? Well, from the first day of the first month to the first day of the fifth month would be four months. They came a little later, they arrived a little earlier, but when you add it all up, it's between three and a half and four months for 900 miles. That's pushing nine or ten miles a day, taking a Sabbath off! It was a big deal.

How did they get there? Well, one commentator I read said there were about 1,500 of them. We'll get to that later, but 1,500 people going on a 900-mile hike with really no outward encouragement to do so, other than the words of Ezra and the letter from the king. God hadn't sent prophets at this point to go the second round, and there was no direct demand from the Lord to go. But Ezra encouraged his brethren, and he went. What a wonderful thing when you look around and somebody's following you!

Ezra, good man. And all these men, all these women, went along with Ezra on a four-month hike from one land to another, taking with them all their stuff. It was a big deal. It was a big deal in the first Exodus when there were 50,000; it's a big deal in this one as well.

The Legacy of Phinehas

All right. So that's sort of the introduction to the life of Ezra, and time for just a few other comments. More on it next week—we're going to have a little more information in chapter 8. We're going to get some details on the journey that didn't just go very smoothly at all. There was a lot of fear as they began their journey.

But just a comment on the genealogy of Ezra in verse 5. Of course, there's a number of gaps in that genealogy. If you add them up, you couldn't get back to Aaron the priest; you'd run out of years. They'd be pretty old people, a whole string of them. But they recognize that, and often in these genealogies, they skip certain portions of it as not being for their purposes.

But there is one name I'd like to draw your attention to, and that is the name Phinehas, who was the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—the grandson of Aaron, Phinehas. You recall the story of Phinehas, how the children of Israel had committed adultery with the women of Moab under the direction of Balaam, who had instructed the king of Moab to send their daughters down to seduce the men of God. If you read Numbers chapter 25, there we find the details:

[Numbers 25:1-13 NKJV]

¹ Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. ² They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel. ⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the LORD, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor." ⁶ And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. ⁷ Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; ⁸ and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. ⁹ And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand. ¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹¹ "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. ¹² Therefore say, "Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; ¹³ and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel."

So He made a covenant among Phinehas' descendants, which would go through Zadok the priest and then come eventually to Ezra. Ezra was of that same line through Phinehas. So just a biographical note regarding one of the forebears of Ezra.

I see our time has gone, so I won't make any more comments this evening. We'll look forward to next evening, as the Lord has it come. Amen.