
TWENTY PAGES A WEEK

EZRA - SONG OF SOLOMON

THE WRITINGS



HAL HAMMONS

**TWENTY PAGES A WEEK:
THE WRITINGS**

Ezra-Song of Solomon

Hal Hammons

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TWENTY PAGES A WEEK: The Writings - Ezra - Song of Solomon
by Hal Hammons

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Spiritual Equipment for the Contest of Life

Section 2

The Writings

(Ezra-Song of Solomon)

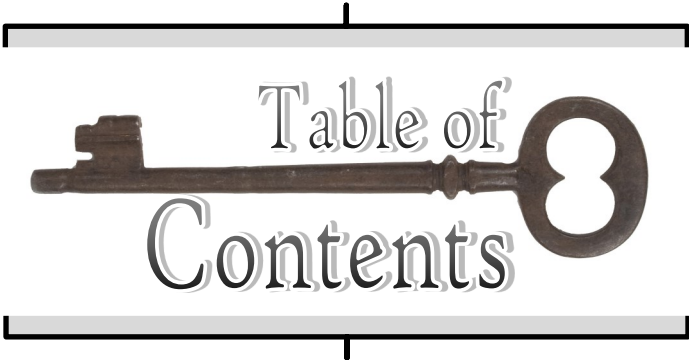


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Week 14: Ezra

8 Pages

Your hard work is rewarded; this section of the material begins with one of the shortest reading assignments of the year.

Ezra is broken up into two parts. The first six chapters occur before Ezra himself is even introduced; the Jews rebuild the temple against local and distant opposition. In the last four chapters, Ezra commits to teaching God's word. If the nation was to be built anew, it was going to be built on the only appropriate foundation: God's will, and His people's obedience.

Spiritual revival is all about learning God's will and doing it



Ezra begins with the same paragraph, almost word-for-word, that ended 2 Chronicles. Cyrus of Persia, having conquered Babylon, had authorized the exiled nations, including Israel, to return to rebuild their homelands. After 70 years in Babylonia, the Jews were finally going home.

Rebuilding the nation almost from scratch would not be an easy task. But the nation's efforts remind us how we can go about building something for God in our own lives.

First, determine to act. The Jews did not have to return to Jerusalem, and many did not. Some, however, were determined to reclaim the territory allotted by God Himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel (also called "Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah" (Ezra 1:8) and Jeshua, the people quickly laid the groundwork for spiritual recovery. They "set up the altar" (3:3); either the original altar was still somehow intact and reparable, or else a new one was constructed and put in place. The Feast of Booths was celebrated in timely fashion (3:1-4, Leviticus 23:34) and continual burnt offerings were made. They

Week 14: Ezra

More names! Some of these books seem on the surface to be little more than lists of people and their families, the vast majority of whom we never hear from again — unless they pop up on another list. But clearly, the Holy Spirit saw fit to keep a record of such matters; in this case, a list was needed of the new founding fathers of the revitalized nation. That may not mean anything to us 2,500 years removed from the event — but clearly, it meant a great deal to the people back then.

What is your initial reaction to the reading?



knew they needed God on their side in the new (that is, old) land, and they were determined to seek His favor. This was most notably seen in the reconstruction of the temple, which began almost immediately. Even laying the foundation was enough to move the people to song and to tears (3:10-13).

But acting in pursuit of the will of God inevitably leads to opposition from God’s enemies. Many, like those who had moved into the land after the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, may have a professed or even apparent attachment to God. “The enemies of Judah and Benjamin” (4:1-3) may have seemed to be on the same side as the Jews; they even wanted to be part of the process of rebuilding. But God’s people knew the difference between true believers and hangers-on. The worship that had begun in Samaria had been on its best day a corrupted service to Jehovah; on its worst, it had been out-and-out paganism. Zerubbabel and the rest of the people had no intention of allowing such “believers,” people who had no stock in Abraham either in faith or in blood, to contribute to their pursuit of holiness in the land. That was perhaps not the most politically expedient thing to do; however, it was the holy and righteous thing to do.

Then, persist in acting. The Jews’ enemies showed their true colors quickly, writing repeatedly to various Persian kings in protest of the Jews’ actions. Finally, having referenced the Jews’ persistent habit of rebelling at the first opportunity, “King Artaxerxes” (not to be confused with the historical Xerxes the Great, who is likely identified with Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6) issued a decree for the temple construction to cease, and the people complied (4:23-24). All parties acted incorrectly here. The Persian government under Cyrus had already authorized the construction, so Artaxerxes erred by misunderstanding his own law; and the Jews erred by using the threat of coercion as an excuse for abandoning the work. Even if the only authority given was from God, that would have been enough. In time, and with another change in administrations, Haggai and Zechariah successfully convinced the people to resume work (5:1-2).

Then learn how to act better. If there was ever a dearth of knowledge in the land, it was during this time. Ezra the scribe purposed “to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (7:10). Ignorance of God’s law had already showed itself. If any real progress was to be made in rebuilding the national character (and no temple would be adequate without it), the people would need to be taught God’s will.

Then you seek God’s help in making difficult choices. Almost immediately, it seems, the problem of intermarriage reared its head. The people, ignorant of the things of God, had entered into marriages with indigenous nations — precisely the mistake that had doomed the nation time and time again in its past. Ezra was “ashamed and embarrassed” (9:6) at the sin of the nation. The national sin had shown immense ingratitude toward the God who had made them “a peg in His holy place” (9:8). Ezra stood in the public square in the pouring rain and condemned the actions of the nation, and the people listened (10:9-12). Families, including some in high ranking stations in Jewish society, voluntarily broke themselves apart. But the covenant between God and His people, which ultimately was far more critical, was preserved.



- **Ezra 4:3 — “But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers’ households of Israel said to them, ‘You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us.’ ”**

An expressed interest in the things of God does not qualify one for service. Only those in true fellowship with the Father are fit to come into His presence with acceptable worship.

- **Ezra 7:10 — “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.”**

Every great accomplishment, and certainly every one done in service to God, began with determination of heart; and nothing of significance can be accomplished in His name and for His glory without it.

- **Ezra 10:4 — “Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.”**

Godly leadership is critical for success; however, it is equally critical that the rest follow after their godly example. If both strive for righteousness, they wind up feeding one another.

In what situations might we have to choose between keeping the law of man and the law of God?



Explain the term from Ezra 9:8 – “give us a peg in His holy place.”

Do the principles of marriage found here apply to us today? Why or why not?

- **Restoration**

For those who managed to survive downturn and disaster, nothing is more marvelous a concept than putting things back the way they were before.

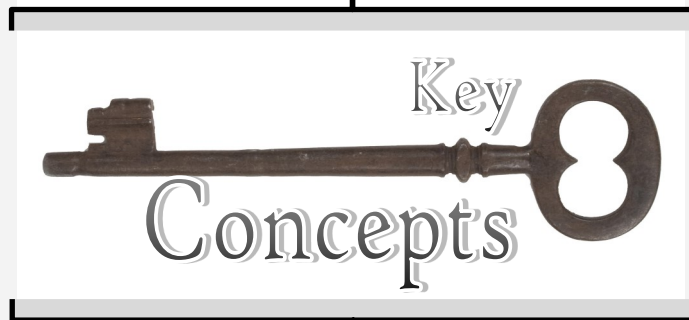
- **Fast**

Fasting was never bound on the Israelites.

Individuals and groups occasionally fasted in attempts to draw closer to God, often as a response to sin or as a sign of mourning.

- **Ashamed**

Sin causes an emotional and even physical response in the one who is truly penitent. The one who partakes freely of God’s blessings and returns disgrace to Him has no excuse.





Ezra: The man who wrote and spoke so others could learn

Ezra was a lineal descendant of high priests (7:1-3). But his calling was not temple service; he will be known forever as the man who reintroduced the people

to the Law of Moses.

A “scribe” is one who writes. Before the printing press, the value of one who could accurately copy God’s word was inestimable. Ultimate trust was placed in such ones, and the accuracy of the documents preserved for us testifies to their ability and to God’s providence.

We are not told why Ezra’s family did not participate in the first wave of emigrants. He arrived in Jerusalem, it is estimated, in 458 B.C., almost a hundred years after Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the people back home. He had the support of Artaxerxes I, the ruler of the Persian empire, but that is not where he placed his confidence; he believed the hand of his God was with him, and that He would guide him to success (7:28).

His faith met with an early challenge, though. The trip from Persia to Canaan was long and arduous. Carrying as much wealth as his party was, the natural thing would be to request a royal escort. He almost certainly would have received it, considering the emperor’s open support of the mission. However, Ezra saw a logical disconnect with this. If he was truly doing God’s work for God’s people, surely the God he served would be adequate to provide protection. After fasting and prayer, Ezra and his party determined to proceed on their own, and God provided them safe passage (8:21-23).

We do not know how Ezra determined that the Jews back in their homeland were in need of his services, or how he came to the task. But if ever there was a man for the job, Ezra was the man “to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (7:10).

What might I do that would make me more like Ezra (for better or worse)?

Jesus was frequently called “Rabbi,” or “teacher.” He constantly went about expounding upon the word of God and urging people to put it to work in their lives. But He did so differently than any other teacher they had ever had; “for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

Ezra read the Law to the people. That is to say, he simply said what God had already said. The only extra work done was by those who were “translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8). Evidently, most of the people had forgotten how to speak Hebrew while in Babylon.

Jesus’ method of teaching was quite different. Not only did He reference the Law, but He also gave His own application of it — and bound it on His audience as though it were also in the Scripture. “But I say to you,” as He says repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount, carried just as much weight as the text itself.

This method mystified and angered the other rabbis. “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” they ask in Matthew 21:23. But if they had been genuinely interested in authority, they would have respected the words of John who came before Him. And they certainly would have respected Jesus. After seeing Jesus cast out a demon, they credited His power to demonic forces — and then had the gall to ask for a sign (Matthew 12:24, 28)! But this power, most obviously pointed out in the incident with the man lowered through the roof (Mark 2:5-12), testified to His authority. When He claimed to be one with the Father in terms of authority (John 10:30), that was nothing less than the truth.

*Wonderful Story
of Love*
**“Jesus Christ is the same
yesterday and today and
forever.” — Hebrews 13:8**

How should our teaching sound, as compared to Jesus’ teaching?

Do we have authority to speak sins forgiven today? Explain.

Two men’s names are mentioned more prominently than any others in the early days of the restoration: Zerubbabel, the political leader, and Jeshua, the religious leader. Jeshua, like Ezra, was from the priestly ranks. It would be his responsibility to be the first high priest in the new temple that was under construction. Like Zerubbabel, he waited for the prophets to direct them before renewing the temple reconstruction; but when the word of God came, he listened and acted (5:1-2).



Much of Zechariah’s prophecy centered directly on Jeshua. And Zechariah certainly seems to put him in a good light. His vision in Zechariah 3 calls him (his name is spelled Joshua in most texts) “a brand plucked from the fire.” Yes, his garments were filthy, representing the uncleaned nation. But he was the right man for the job, just as the nation was right for the job God had assigned it.

But part of that filthiness touched very close to Jeshua’s heart. Four men, either sons of nephews of Jeshua, are listed among those who had unfit marriages (10:18). Breaking up parts of his own family could not have been easy. But for the man of God, God always comes first.

What have we left out that you wish had been included, and why?

Choices must be made. Ezra chose to give himself to God’s work. The people chose to pursue holiness. But choices, including noble ones, come with consequences. Ezra’s heart was broken over the failure of the people. Families were torn apart because of the new priority placed on God and His word. Obeying God often comes at a cost — not as great a cost as disobeying will bring, but a cost nevertheless.

What is your takeaway from the reading?



My Takeaway

