

AUGUST 5

We have now read 21 books of the Bible. For most people, that is a couple more than last year. What I'm really hoping is that after reading about so many people, you are beginning to see the stream of life we are a part of as we follow the Lord on this planet. But in Christ, our lives fit into the redemptive purpose of God, not just into the mass of humanity that has lived and died. I had a professor at DTS who told students who were really bummed out to begin reading the Bible in Genesis and keep reading until everything made sense again. I've done this and it really works. The reality is that our lives fit, but they only fit and make sense when we are close to the Lord, in His Word daily and somehow involved in what He is involved in: Redeeming lost people and making disciples, who make disciples until this harvest is over and He returns. Then we'll all celebrate, and real life begins. Does that make sense?

Ezra 1-2

These charts are from the [Bible Knowledge Commentary-OT](#), and will help you see where Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther fit in. These are located at the end of the document.

“The Three Returns from Exile,” [Bible Knowledge Commentary-OT](#), p. 652.

“Chronology of the Postexilic Period,” [Bible Knowledge Commentary-OT](#), p. 654.

I'm going to be restating the historical connections between people and events several times. For many of you, myself included, you have never fully understood how all of this fits together. Briefly, when Babylon fell, Cyrus became the king in Persia; and Darius the Mede, Cyrus' general, became a co-ruler with him. Cyrus ruled from the capital of the empire in Susa, in modern-day Iran. The city of Babylon became Darius' home and he co-ruled the empire for some brief years. Babylon was where Daniel was; and through an amazing miracle, Daniel, the last ruler of the Babylonian Empire, became Darius' top governor. The book of Daniel is key to understanding what events led up to Cyrus allowing the Jews to return, but you'll have to wait until we read Daniel to put it all together. Daniel 6 is not only key to understanding Cyrus' decision, but to understanding why there is this emphasis on rebuilding the temple. Darius and Cyrus were awed by God and fearful of Him.

Cyrus sent about 50,000 people back to rebuild the temple in 538 B.C. Zerubbabel, in the line of David, was the governor. It took them 23 years to build the temple amid a lot of protest and opposition. In 520 B.C. Darius I, the king of Persia (named in honor of the Darius from the Book of Daniel), commanded the completion of the temple; but they couldn't touch the city to rebuild it. Anti-Jewish sentiment was strong. In the final years of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus, Esther's future husband), he installed his son, Artaxerxes, as co-regent to take care of local business while he tried to lift the sinking empire by starting a war with the Greeks. Xerxes held a huge party bringing in all of the clans, and wined and dined them for 180 days, getting them to sign on the line to fight against Greece. During that time he tried to bring in his wife to dance for the leaders, but she refused. They removed her as queen. While Xerxes was having this party, thinking the Greeks were just sitting around eating gyros (pronounced Gi-Row in Chicago), the Greeks were all organizing, especially a guy named Leonidas (Gerard Butler) who, with his 300 (digitally-enhanced) muscled friends, were doing one-arm push-ups just for fun and preparing for glory.

In the meantime, Artaxerxes got a letter on his desk regarding these pesky Jews in Jerusalem trying to rebuild the city; and he told them to stop the Jews from restoring the city, with force if necessary.

The Persians arrived in Greece with 2 million men, and the guys in skirts (the Greeks) sent them home with 5000 and Xerxes didn't feel like having a party. In fact, now that he didn't have a main queen, he was feeling kind of lonely. So his leaders decided to hold a contest called “Persia's got Babes” to find a wife for the king, and cheer him up. Esther was the winner and

married Xerxes. During that time the anti-Jewish sentiment built to an explosion and God saved the day. Esther's uncle, Mordecai, became Xerxes' right-hand man and now all was well.

Artaxerxes became the sole king of Persia. It was now 57 years since the temple had been finished in Jerusalem, and now the Jews are once again a favored people in the Persian Empire. Artaxerxes sent Ezra back to Israel to show how much he liked the Jews and to garner the favor of God. Ezra went back and found a mess and worked hard for the next 14 years to get the people to read their one-year Bibles every day and to have quiet times (and other stuff). Finally Artaxerxes noticed one day, 14 years after sending Ezra away, that the chief of his butlers, the master of his palace and house security, was crying. Art loved and trusted Nehemiah so much that he sent him back to Israel to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah got there and found the worship in order, but the city and politics were a mess. Together with Ezra, he got the worship in order and Nehemiah dealt with the corruption of the leaders.

Got that? Good!

Ezra 1

V. 1 This verse isn't as "mystical" as it seems, but it is totally miraculous. If you really want to know what happened that stirred Cyrus, you have to read Daniel 1-6. When we get there, this connection will be made very clear. The immediate event was Daniel, chapter 6. Notice that this command was sent out to the entire empire.

Vs. 2-4 This is a continuation of what we just read at the end of 2 Chronicles 36. Ezra was going back and is now telling us what happened about 70 years earlier. Notice what the focus of Cyrus' command was. This was not commanded out of respect for the Jews. It was done out of respect for Yahweh, the God of the Jews. The events of Daniel 1-6 will show us how God moved Cyrus to feel this way.

Vs. 5-11 Keep in mind that Ezra would follow about 80 years later, leading the second return of people to Jerusalem. Ezra was probably born after the first wave of Jews returned. As a young priest, understanding the challenges of the Jews reestablishing themselves in Judea, God put it on his heart to write a history for the returnees and to keep track of the genealogies and the historical records like these. Also, remember that the focus of the prophecy, the focus of the command of Cyrus, and the focus of the first people who returned was to rebuild the temple, not the city.

V. 8 There is some thought that this Sheshbazzar is the Babylonian name of Zerubbabel of 2:2.

Ezra 2

Vs. 1-2 We know by now that some names were very popular, and people were fond of naming their kids after great men or people in their own family. This Nehemiah is not *our* Nehemiah from the book of Nehemiah. This Mordecai is not Esther's uncle in the book of Esther. The chart at the end of this document might help you see when events occurred. Also, Jeshua is actually a different spelling for Joshua the priest who will be accused by Satan in the book of Zechariah.

Vs. 3-35 This is a listing of the people of the first wave of returnees, most of whom came from the area around the city of Babylon. These would have been people who would have been exposed to the influence of both Daniel and Ezekiel.

Vs. 36-58 Because the temple and the worship are the focus of Ezra, he is taking particular care regarding the genealogies of these people. Without being able to prove their lineage, no one could serve as a priest or as a Levite.

Vs. 59-63 You see how important the register was. This is why the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles were nothing but family registers. It was important that the priests and Levites could prove their origins.

V. 63 It is interesting that the governor, Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, became involved in the building of the temple, the establishment of the worship and the enforcing of this register. Remember in Chronicles that Ezra showed that a godly king and godly leaders involved themselves in ordering and leading the worship of Israel. It was interesting that even when there was no genealogy, they could use the *Urim and Thummim* to determine from the Lord who the legitimate priests and Levites were.

After the building of the temple and the mention of Zerubbabel in Zechariah, we won't hear much of him anymore. FYI, Zerubbabel is the son of Jehoiachin, the king that was taken into captivity after obeying God to surrender Jerusalem.

Vs. 64-66 In short, there weren't many people and they didn't concentrate in Jerusalem. Remember that in 1 & 2 Chronicles Ezra was trying to give the people a sense of the calling and glory of Israel in the redemptive plan of God. At the point of this return to Israel, Israel was a wasteland and the city of Jerusalem, a ruin. Why would you want to leave the glory of the city of Babylon and the richness of Persia to go to a land with no indoor plumbing, Walmart or McDonalds? Nationalism and reclaiming family property would only take you so far. The people needed a glimpse of God's glory and the calling/mission of Israel.

Vs. 67-69 They gave toward the rebuilding of the temple, but most of the people lived miles away.

V. 70 Until Nehemiah got there almost 100 years later, Jerusalem was really still a wrecked city. Most people went back to their family lands from before the exile. It would take the leaders from Zerubbabel, to Ezra, to Nehemiah, to convince the people to come to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and then the city.

One of the things that comes out of this history, plus the books of Haggai and Zechariah, is that if we lose the focus of our mission and try to live life ignoring why we are here, life itself begins to look pretty bland. These people were about to forget their mission, and the result would be increased work and decreased satisfaction in life. As disciples, our greatest satisfaction comes from following the Lord in the harvest, reaching the lost and making disciples, who make disciples. That is why we have been left here. Heaven is in heaven, not on earth. Now is the time for work in the harvest. Doing what God commands now will give us more joy and satisfaction than any pile of earthly baloney ever could. But we still go for the earthly baloney. Why?

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Well, this is just great stuff. If this doesn't get your gooses bumping, then your wood's wet or your goose is dead or something. Just take note of everything that stands out to you.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Notice how integrated the gospel and the harvest is in all of Paul's thinking. There is no difference in Paul's mind between doctrine, theology, the harvest, or the commission for Christ. It is all one thing.

Vs. 18-20 The gospel doesn't just look silly to the world because of its content, but because God planned it that way. It doesn't matter how smooth we get in our presentation or how politically correct we become, God wants unbelief to have an allergic reaction to His truth. That is why it is foolish and disobedient to tamper with the message of the gospel to make it more acceptable to people. God doesn't want that. He wants the plain truth of heaven, hell and redemption to make people show who they truly are. We are not to be unloving and abusive, but neither are we to become so vague and mealy-mouthed that we speak and say nothing. The message will always be accepted by the seeking and rejected by the disobedient. God said so.

V. 21 This is God's wisdom. We are not wiser than God, so we don't need to adjust His truth. Jesus said something like this in Matthew 11:25 after His discourse on John the Baptist, "*I thank*

you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

Vs. 22-24 Notice that v. 23 says that we are not to give unbelief what it desires. Our message seeks faith in the heart of the hearer. We can give answers to honest questions but we don't have to dwell there, trying to convince the unbelieving. Jesus didn't, Paul didn't, and none of the apostles did. They simply preached the gospel, and God used it to turn the Roman world upside down. We may be too wise for our own good. The message in the harvest is simple, simply following Jesus' example. And this message holds the amazing power of God.

V. 25 What a powerful statement of reality.

Vs. 26-29 Is this why I am the way I am??? If so, I'm cool with it. Look at the last verse of Isaiah 55. God transforms us to make a name for Himself and an everlasting sign pointing to His truth and glory that will never be removed. Amazing! You also hear Ephesians 2:8-9 in here.

Vs. 30-31 What great verses. You might want to find another version that reads smoother, like the RSV. Compare this to Romans 15:17-21. The boasting is not just in the Lord, but in what the Lord does in us in the harvest.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Vs. 1-2 Apparently Paul didn't do any market research, demographics or studies before he showed up. That is sort of "opposite" of today's church planting strategies and methods. Oh well, it must have been God who made it work for Paul.

Vs. 3-5 In 2 Corinthians we'll hear that Paul's opponents criticized him for his "weak" presence. God humbled Paul through his weakness, and the gospel exploded to life. The message and the Spirit were all he needed. For our work in the harvest, the message and the Spirit are all we need. We need to abide in Christ, looking for what He is doing around us in the harvest and be ready to give the very simple message of the gospel.

Psalm 27:7-14

It is interesting in memorizing this psalm how the thought of one verse flows into the next, just like when you are pouring out your heart to the Lord.

Vs. 7-10 David was told to seek the Lord and to cry out and he did. Yet in cultivating David's heart and his faith, God didn't quickly answer David's cries. I find v. 9 easier to feel in my heart than to comment on. It is how you feel when you have resolved to find hope in nothing or no one else. All you want as you wait is the Lord.

Vs. 11-12 Following the Lord with simple uprightness and sincerity of heart was David's desire. He knew this only came from being taught by the Lord and having the faith to follow rather than hide in fear, lies, or one's own resources. David's enemies were very wise and powerful. He knew only God could protect him.

Vs. 13-14 What a great testimony from a man who was still in the process of learning. These words are God speaking to us too, telling us not to doubt Him, but to wait on Him.

The ESV has a lot of things going for it, but the heart of the KJV wins here. ¹³*I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.* ¹⁴*Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD.*

Proverbs 20:22-23

V. 22 is so much like a couple of verses out of Romans 12. Paul not only says not to repay evil for evil, but when it comes to "waiting" he raises the bar in Romans 12:19-21, ¹⁹*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will*

repay, says the Lord.”²⁰To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

V. 23 Injustice and being cheated are some reasons to feel like you don't want to wait and don't want to rely on the Lord. You want to sue and avenge yourself. Again, Jesus raised the bar on that one too.

Luke 6:27-30 But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.²⁹To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.

Personally, I think this is only possible if you are a disciple, living only to follow Jesus in the harvest, making disciples, who make disciples. Every other "version" of Christianity lacks this power and perspective. It may look foolish in the eyes of the world, but we live before the eyes of Him who searches the earth to strongly uphold those whose hearts are fully His. (2 Chron. 16:9)