
Know that God is Working

DAVE BAST

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans with devastating force, destroying much of the city and leaving thousands homeless. I still remember images of the gigantic Superdome stadium filled with refugees from the disaster. How does a community recover from such a blow? For that matter, how can a family...how can we recover if a personal disaster strikes? We will dig into that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. This is the first in a series that we are calling: Now What? Rebuilding when life falls apart.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what we are going to do in this series is go to a portion of the Bible that probably isn't super familiar to a lot of people, and that is the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These are books that...in the typical order of the Bible...these come before the book of Psalms yet and before the prophets, before Esther, and that can kind of mess up your understanding of what the events are, because these events actually take place after most of the prophets, or contemporaneous with prophets like Haggai and Zechariah. So, even though it comes in the Bible before the Psalms and before the prophets, most of the action in Ezra and Nehemiah are after the seventy years of exile in Babylon.

DAVE BAST

Right; the disaster that struck the city of Jerusalem was not a hurricane or a physical act of nature or natural disaster, as we say, of some kind; but rather, it was the result of war and invasion by the Babylonian army; and the city was destroyed. The people were carried off into exile, basically in a series of deportations that took place over about twenty years, and the end finally came in the year 587 BC when the last king of Judah rebelled against the Babylonian power and thought he could kind of somehow escape from under their heel, and instead Jerusalem was laid siege, and the whole city was destroyed. The temple was destroyed...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The temple was destroyed, yes.

DAVE BAST

And what was left of the cream of the people was carried away hundreds of miles to Babylon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we can draw some lessons, I think, from Ezra and Nehemiah in terms of where is God in all of that?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is there hope in all of that? What does rebuilding look like? Does it always go quickly? Does it always go smoothly? We are going to see that the answer to those questions is: No.

DAVE BAST

No; right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, that is why we are looking at this. This could just become a historical curio study, but we want this to be relevant.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely relevant; and you know, even a life change...something like retirement or becoming an empty nester...anything that might prompt you to say: Well, now what do I do? Where do I go from here? What does my life look like now? It is not going to be the same as it was. So, I think there is a lot of wonderful wisdom in these chronicles of ancient Jewish history...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And it is pretty much Jewish now by this point, because what was left was the kingdom of Judah or Judea, and that is where the actual word *Jew* comes from. So, it is no longer the larger people of Israel; most of them have kind of disappeared; but let's begin, then, by going to scripture and the opening verses of the book of Ezra. He actually doesn't appear until quite a bit later in the book, but this is how Ezra starts:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the Word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm, and also to put it into writing: ²The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel.

So, that is quite a deal, and you notice right at the outset that Jeremiah is named in this verse.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; that is what we said earlier. By the way, in older copies of the Hebrew scripture, this was originally 1 and 2 Ezra, but eventually got divided into Ezra, and then a separate book named Nehemiah. What we need to...and this is also why we said even though these books in the order of books in the Old Testament are before the Psalms and the prophets, this really should come after Jeremiah, because these events take place there; but we need to backfill the history a little bit: So the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar carried the people off into exile in 587 BC; but then the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. The Babylonian Empire went under; and so, now the Persians are taking over, and they've got all these Jewish exiles; and this king named Cyrus...and here is what Jeremiah said. Jeremiah predicted that somebody very unexpected was going to become God's servant. In fact, Dave, there were prophecies in Jeremiah, but also in Isaiah; and Isaiah had a remarkable line, too, where he said that this Cyrus was going to be God's *mashiach*; in other words, God's messiah—God's anointed one. Now, usually the kings of Israel were the anointed ones: David and Solomon...they were the *mashiach*, anticipating ultimately the final messiah, who was going to be Jesus, of course; but now, we are told this pagan Persian is God's anointed one. What a surprise that is, Dave. Where God's hand is at work, who'da thunk it?

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and notice how Ezra 1 introduces this: In order to fulfill the word which the Lord had spoken through Jeremiah, the prophet, he says. Well, Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile would last seventy years...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is why he said to the people: You know, when you go to Babylon, you are going to have to settle there and seek the good of the city, in a famous passage, and plant your vineyards and your gardens and try to help things go well there...but, seventy years...and the first attack by the Babylonian army on Jerusalem in Judea took place in about the year 607 BC. This return happened in 538 BC, roughly seventy years that the exile lasted, from the very beginning. Then there was the destruction of the city, and then finally the return under Cyrus. So, this whole story is really a story of God's faithfulness...faithfulness to his promise: Yes, he has punished his people for their sin...their rebellion, but he hasn't forgotten them. He is not going to leave them there; and so, he moves the heart of Cyrus the king to issue this proclamation, which is a wonderful thing to think about. What controls world events, really? Is it politics? Is it economics? Well, behind it all is the hand of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, this was a refrain all through the prophets, that yes, you are going to go into exile. Ezekiel saw the presence of the Lord lifting up from the temple. We had a series recently on images for the Church, and we talked about the temple, and we went to Ezekiel, where Ezekiel sees the Spirit of God leave the temple; but Ezekiel would say...and Jeremiah would say...and Isaiah would say...and they would *all* say: But you are going to come back; you are going to come back; I will restore you. Comfort, comfort my people, Isaiah 40, for your sin has been paid for, and now you are going to come back; but again, who would have thought that it would have been a Persian king who would help them to come back; and we will see in just a moment that Cyrus does a few other amazing things in terms of what he sends back to the land with these people. So, we will keep following this story in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are in this series on Ezra and Nehemiah, talking about how do we rebuild after disaster comes? How did the people of Israel, specifically here, rebuild after seventy years of captivity; captured by the Babylonians, but then, after the Babylonians are conquered by the Persians, God raises up Cyrus and anoints him—makes him the messiah...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

For the people, and he sends them back.

DAVE BAST

In accordance with his Word, by prophet after prophet—in particular, the prophet Jeremiah—and you know, speaking of Jeremiah, there is a wonderful verse that I think many people may be familiar with. It may be the most familiar verse in the book of Jeremiah, where he says...God says through Jeremiah: (29:11 paraphrased) I know the plans I have for you, and they are plans for good, not for evil.

The big thing is, if our life has hit a rough patch, or even we feel like it has fallen apart, we hang on to the idea that God has this; God is with us; God still has a plan for us and it is good, and he can make it happen because he controls even world events on the stage of empires and kingdoms and nations. So, I mean, this is a wonderfully reassuring message.

Let's go on and read a little bit more from the book of Ezra, from the first chapter still, and see what happens next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites, everyone whose heart God had moved, prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. ⁶All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts in addition to all the free will offerings.

So, God moved Cyrus, and now God is moving some people, but not all the people. Jeremiah said, you know, seek the good of the city where you are going to go into exile. Don't try to destroy it. Well, they did that; I wouldn't say they led comfortable lives in exile, but it was better than going back to Jerusalem, which by now, seventy years later, was probably a haunt for jackals and wild animals. The city had been destroyed. So, Cyrus said: You can go back; and some of the people of Israel said: Go back to what?!

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thank you very much. We will stay right here.

DAVE BAST

Yes; let me just settle down here. Actually, historians date what is called the Diaspora of the Jewish people from this very act of exile; so that by the time of Christ...and again, you think about the providence of God...one of the great messages of these books is that God has a plan and God is in control. So, Jewish communities eventually scattered all over the Mediterranean world; all the way from Babylon to Spain; and when Christ came and died and rose again, and then the apostles began to spread the Gospel, they found ready-made audiences in most of these major cities of Jewish people, who had been scattered there. So, this too fit the plan of God; but first and meanwhile, he wanted his people to return; and so, he stirs their hearts, but not all of them, as you said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but some do...quite a few end up going back, and Ezra Chapter 2 is actually a really long list. It is interesting, too, that they bring back a lot of materials, but there is something interesting also, and they even have some gold and silver to bring back. Some of the neighbors in Babylon we assume maybe gave them some things. It reminds you of the Israelites leaving Egypt...

DAVE BAST

Right; yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

On the night of Passover, when the Egyptians gave jewelry...

DAVE BAST

Here, take this...take this...get going.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But in Ezra 1:7 we find out something else amazing about Cyrus. He brought out the articles belonging to the Temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the temple of his god; but Cyrus king of Persia brought them back out.

So, Cyrus returns the stuff Nebuchadnezzar stole from the temple, so that when they rebuild the temple, they can put that stuff back.

DAVE BAST

It kind of makes you wonder what is going on in Cyrus's heart, in his spiritual life; but at any rate, there are some interesting things to be gleaned, even from this very dry list of names and numbers that Ezra goes through. It is kind of a catalog of who decided to go back; and he doesn't name, obviously, all 42,000 individuals, but he kind of lumps people together by their clan or from whom they were descended, or in some cases, by their town or place of origin. So, people had hung onto this identity through seventy years, and they still remember: Well, we are actually, you know...we are from Anathoth, or we are from Kirjath Arim, or we are from Rama; we are from Bethel, we are from Ai, we are from Bethlehem; and so, all those groups are enumerated in Ezra, too; and what is striking to me, Scott, about this is that they were towns from all over Israel, not just from Judah. Yes, Bethlehem; we get that. That is just outside of Jerusalem—the city of David. The birthplace of the Messiah Jesus eventually; but also places like Bethel and Ai in the northern part—in the heart of the northern kingdom of Israel. So, there were some of those. I mean, God's people came from all over, and they came from all the tribes when they returned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the northern kingdom, the ten tribes were mostly wiped out by Assyria and never heard from again, really; but some of the remnant are heard from again here. Interestingly, though, too Dave; in verse 59 of Ezra 2...and again, if you stick with Ezra 2 all to the 59th verse, good for you; but it says: The following came up with the towns of...and it lists a whole bunch...Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, and so forth...but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel.

So, in other words, some people from the nations said: We would like to go back to Israel, too. Well, we see this now and again in the Old Testament. Sort of the fulfillment of what God said to Abram in Genesis 12: Through you, all the nations of the earth are going to be blessed. This is going to go beyond Israel eventually, and here is another little hint and whisper of that.

DAVE BAST

I remember reading a great line from somebody, I cannot remember exactly who it was...it might have been Will Willimon, I am not sure, but it is like when God, you know, shares the message with people or the Word or the Gospel, he doesn't just say believe it. He says come and join up...come and join up; because that is what it is, it is a movement; and even back in the book of Ezra, it must have been that somehow, they were hearing: Come and join up. You can come, too. Yes, it doesn't matter who you are. If you are willing to get up and go...if God has stirred your heart...and it was, again, as we said, only a minority...it is a remnant of a remnant who feel moved to return and undertake the rigors of that desert journey and come back to a desolate place, and face a lifetime of toil and hard work; and they are not going to see the fruit in their own lives, maybe; but if you are willing, you are welcome; and that is really the message of the Bible from beginning to end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, it is interesting to see notes of that even in some of this otherwise dry-looking history. The hand of God is at work here; and that is something I think we all need to remember; that God...when we are rebuilding our lives...when we are asking that question, which is the title of this series: Well, now what? Well, we are not always sure now what or what is next or where God is going to pop up, and through whom he is going to work, but we have that confidence that he is going to do that. Well, we want to...in the next program in this series, we are going to look specifically at a lot of the events that happen across a very long period of time before the title character of Ezra even shows up...so we want to look a little bit at Ezra, but then we also want to, in the final segment, jump ahead to the other book that will be part of this four-part series, and introduce the character of Nehemiah, and how he comes into the action. We will take that up in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. So, let's move on in Ezra to Ezra Chapter 7, where the character of Ezra is actually introduced.

After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra...(and then there follows a whole bunch of son of son of son going back to Aaron; so, he is a direct descendent of the high priest, Aaron—the original high priest) ⁶Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher, well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. ⁸Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. So now, Scott, it is 459 BC, and I know these numbers are hard to keep straight, but let me just...seventy years have passed since Cyrus and that initial return to Jerusalem. So, two generations have gone by; and now, all of a sudden, a new leader is sent back, and it is Ezra.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is going to be sent back under the blessing of the *next* king of Persia, a man named Artaxerxes. Seventy years...that is a long time. If you think of American political history, seventy years is how long passed between Teddy Roosevelt being president and Ronald Reagan. That is a long time. It was 1910 to 1980; so, seventy years... The work isn't going fast, in other words. We are going to read some of the intrigue in the next program in this series, of why the work took longer and why it sometimes stalled out and why it was opposed, and some of the political intrigue that went on; but things didn't happen quickly, and there might be a lesson for us there, too. We kind of live in a fast-forward culture: I want it my way right away as the old Burger King ads used to say; but it doesn't always work that way.

So, a lot of time has passed, and now this character of Ezra, in the priestly line of Aaron—that is important for the role he is going to play—now he is going to be sent from Persia, under the blessing of Artaxerxes, to help the people continue to rebuild the temple, and particularly the altar in the temple.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and he is also a preacher. That is made clear. He is well versed in the Law, which is not just the ten commandments, of course, but Torah, the first five books of Moses; and we could expand that and say he knows the Bible backwards and forwards, and he is equipped to preach it and teach it to the people; because they had a spiritual component to the rebuilding, too. It wasn't just a physical or political disaster...it was certainly that...but, you think about how the exile must have been hard on Israel's faith, because their life...their worship life...centered on the temple; and with the temple gone, and the people carried away into exile, there was no more worship. They had not yet developed the practice of weekly worship. The synagogue would emerge later, and perhaps it had a start, even, in the exile, as they tried to hang onto God's Word, but no worship, no sacrifices, no offerings, no priests, and no Bible to speak of. Most of them couldn't read; and one interesting thing we learned later in the book of Ezra, and Nehemiah in particular, most of them couldn't understand Hebrew anymore, so they couldn't understand their own Bible.

So, Ezra is going to have this spiritual rebuilding that he has to do; and if you think about it, often our faith takes a hit, too, if we have experienced some kind of personal setback, or some kind of problem in life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, God is at work; he is at work in the sending of Ezra, but we also want to talk about Nehemiah before we close out this program. So, now we have to go forward about thirteen years...so, Ezra is sent by Artaxerxes around 459 [BC]; thirteen years later, it is 446 [BC]—remember, the BC years count down—and now we hear about this cupbearer to the Persian king, a man named Nehemiah, and here is how Nehemiah begins:

The words of Nehemiah...(and then it says) in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ²Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile; also about Jerusalem; ³and they said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down. Its gates have been burned with fire." ⁴When I, Nehemiah, heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

So here is a man who has probably never, ever...definitely has never, ever been in Jerusalem. He was born after the exile happened—*long* after the exile happened, but he knows of Jerusalem...he has heard of Jerusalem. Maybe he knows the Psalms, and the psalms of ascent, of going up to Jerusalem. It is in his heart as a vision, and so when he hears that it is in complete disrepair yet, all these years later, he weeps.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he does something else, too, that is remarkable. We don't have time to read Nehemiah 1. It is a great chapter. He confesses the sins of Israel before God; and then he goes to the king, and you mentioned, Scott, he is the cupbearer...and we shouldn't think Downton Abbey butler, you know, of that position. We should think more like presidential chief of staff. That was a very important political position. So, he is not going to be able to skip town very easily; but he goes to the king with a request: Can I get a leave of absence? And he prays just before he asks the king, and the king says yes. So, a wonderful blend, Nehemiah is, of piety and activity, of prayer and planning. It is a both/and. We should reject, as one of my friends used to say, the tyranny of the *or* for the glory of the *and* when it comes to the work of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed, and we are seeing that again and again; God's hidden hand of providence. It is going to continue in this story, and we are just thankful to God to know it is continuing in our lives today, too.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue in Ezra to study the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and discuss what all was happening when they were reestablishing the anchors of their faith after life had knocked them down.

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