

Ezra: Rise Up, Take Courage, and Do It

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Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed and do what you have commanded. Amen.

Background

The book of Ezra picks up where 2 Chronicles left off. The long and bumpy road of the Israelite Kings finally reached a dead end in 587 BC when Jerusalem was sacked and Solomon's glorious temple was destroyed.

This was one of *the worst things imaginable* that could ever happen to the Jewish people, because the temple symbolized God's presence with his people on earth.

On top of that, most of Israel was sent into exile in their Babylonian Captivity.

Israel's despair is vividly captured in Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps...
How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*

But the good news of Ezra is that this death paved the way for new birth.

Fifty long years after Solomon's temple was destroyed King Cyrus of Persia made a decree:

The Lord God of heaven has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem. All Jews in Babylon are permitted to return to Israel and rebuild the house of the Lord.

Even in defeat, the hand of God continued to shape history and guide his people. In God's mysterious ways, he was using a pagan king "to let my people go" from slavery and bring about a Second Exodus and a Second Temple for Israel.

But this rebuilding wouldn't happen overnight. Israel was no longer a monarchy, but a small remnant amongst a vast polytheistic and multicultural empire. There would be struggle, tension, and opposition—from within and from without to keep their identity. Progress would be two steps forward, one step back, yet God would be faithful through it all.

The ancient book of Ezra is vitally needed today because it teaches us how to recover & rebuild when the world breaks you. How to keep faith in a time when less and less people in the West are a part of a community of faith.

Our Scripture reading is an account of the first round of exiles returning to Jerusalem. The people have gathered as one. They've been busy rebuilding the altar and the temple foundations over the ruins of Solomon's temple. It would be many years before the Second Temple would be completed, but they were on the road to recovery.

The people have now gathered to celebrate their small victory. It's a very humble, scaled down version of King Solomon's temple dedication we looked at last week.

Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:

Scripture: Ezra 3: 10-13 (NRSV)

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

"For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

Sermon: Ezra Rise up, Take Courage and Do It

Have you read in the news recently about the rebranding IHOP restaurants are going through?

The restaurant chain we've known as "The International House of Pancakes" has now "re-branded" itself as "IHOB." They've turned the "p" upside down to be a "b." IHOB. I'm not joking. Can you guess what the B in IHOB stands for now?

"Breakfast?" Maybe "Bacon?" Nope.
The "B" now stands for "Burgers."

IHOB: The International House of *Burgers*?

Some are saying they should change IHOB to IFLOP! 😊

You've got to hand it to IHOP—I think they're having fun with this and not taking themselves too seriously. It's a temporary campaign to get some publicity and highlight new things about them. IHOP wants people to know that they have other items on their menu than pancakes. That you can eat lunch and dinner there. Even a burger.

But *they know it* and *we know it*—IHOP will always be IHOP. Anything else just wouldn't be right. It's about identity.

This is the first lesson Ezra is teaching us about when we're having to make a fresh start: *it's all about IDENTITY*. To move forward in life you've got to know who you are. You can't be an imposter. We've got to be IHOP, not IHOB believers. You have to be true to yourself and true to God.

In their Babylonian exile, Israel lost touch with their identity. They felt more IFLOP than IHOP. Ezra's divine task was to help Israel get back in touch with their spiritual roots. To rediscover their true identity as God's people. That they were a holy nation set apart from other nations. Anything else just wouldn't be right. And Ezra still is reminding us—don't be scared to be different from the world. Be who you are—you are a believer. A Christian. Stick out for the right reasons.

First, to do this, you have to be real with where you are in life right now and not pretend. Sometimes you feel like rejoicing. Other times you feel like ranting. No matter what you're feeling, it's important to have the freedom and self-knowledge to be honest before God and honest with yourself.

In our Scripture reading, there were cries of disappointment mingled with cries of hope when the temple foundations were dedicated. Not everyone was feeling the same. Some were still grieving the

destruction of the glorious temple of Solomon that they gazed upon with their own two eyes in the past. Others who were younger or had never lived in Israel before, had no memories of “the golden years” pre-exile. They had no attachment to it. They were ready for the future.

Ezra knew the key is to have the freedom to express yourself in the moment you find yourself in. But just as importantly, you still have to move forward and not get stuck in a rut. You have to cultivate loving eyes through which you see the world, even if the world as you’ve known it has been dashed.

I think Ezra is asking us today:

How do you see the world as you come out of exile?

- Do you see the world through a fearful eye? Does fear freeze you and keep you from stepping out in faith into God’s new thing?
- Or do you see the world through a greedy eye? Do you feel entitled to take everything and look after #1 in order to survive?
- Do you see the world through a judgmental eye? Do you feel like the only way you can build yourself up is by tearing others down and looking down on them?
- When the world breaks you, do you see it with a resentful eye? Has disappointment made you bitter and negative towards everyone and everything around you?
- Or maybe you see the world through an indifferent eye? Where you’ve become apathetic to protect yourself from being hurt or disappointed. By not caring, your love grows cold, distant, and indifferent.
- You could also see the world through an inferior eye. Maybe hardship has given you a chip on your shoulder. And everything that happens to you, you take the wrong way and very personally. With an inferior eye, you feel like a victim and everyone’s against you—even God.

Ezra inspires us to see the world differently—with a loving eye.

Author John O’Donahue says that the loving eye can coax pain, hurt, and violence towards transfiguration and renewal. Love protects us from getting entangled in pettiness, bitterness, selfishness, and self-pity. Seeing ourselves and the world with a loving eye helps us rise above the ashes of blame, judgment, and despair. A loving eye sees situations, others, and ourselves honestly and redemptively.

So Ezra is like a spiritual optometrist who helps correct our blurry vision, so we can see with a loving eye again. He points us in the right direction so we can, as Ezra 10:4 says, “Rise Up, Take Courage, and Do It.”

First, Ezra reminds us to both *pray* and *act*. Give your challenges and fears to God in prayer. Ezra was a true man of prayer.

But don't stop there. After prayer, focus on what you can do in your life—namely your response. Repairing, learning, moving forward, obeying God, and preparing for the future—even if it's very different from what you imagined it would be.

Second, Ezra teaches us to keep a continuity between the old and the new.

When Israel returned home and was building their new temple—they were guided by (but not constrained by) their past. This gave them a connection to their identity and their roots. Like Solomon making the first temple, Israel got helpers from Lebanon and Tyre for the second temple. They brought vessels from the old temple into the new temple. They started their rebuilding in the same month that Solomon started building the first temple. They sang and worshiped in the manner proscribed by King David.

In the same way, we need to stay connected to our living tradition of faith. We need to keep looking through our family of faith albums: remembering our spiritual ancestors like Abraham and Moses, David, Solomon, Ezra, Peter and Paul, Augustine, Luther and Calvin, and of course Jesus Christ. Our spiritual heritage grounds us in times of tumult and rebuilding. We're reminded we're not alone. That we can learn from those who have gone before us. That we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Third, Ezra reminds us our identity is formed and fashioned by the Word and Worship. Ezra was a priest and a scholar. He travelled 900 miles and over 4 months from Babylon to give the Scriptures back to his people in Jerusalem. Ezra was a quiet and bookish man—but he had a fiery soul. The Scriptures say Ezra “set his heart to study the Law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach the statutes to the people of Israel.” For Ezra, Scripture isn't just interesting, it's a story that shapes us more and more into God's image.

Scripture, prayer, and service shaped Ezra's heart to be like God's heart. And he knew these practices were what would keep his fledgling community true to their identity and destiny in God. Worship and the Word are antidotes to a lax and ambivalent faith. The Scriptures say that Ezra was “entrusted with the wisdom of God.” And he didn't keep the wisdom of God to himself. Ezra shared it with the community. And it was contagious. His heartfelt confession inspired his people to renew their covenant with God.

Regular immersion in worship and the word frees us to be different. We can reject materialism, narcissism, and mean-spiritedness.

Seeing with the eyes of faith, Ezra saw God's blessings and hand at work all around him—even in difficult times. He was able to perceive that God was using pagan kings. That God was providing and protecting his people. That his people had a hope and a future.

Consistent worship and study of the word keeps fresh the reality that: As God's people, we're salt and light. We're known by love. We're resilient and can recover our spiritual edge when we experience setbacks and standstills.

As a worshipping community we sing, we confess, we pray, we celebrate, we serve, we give to God our hopes and dreams. All of these spiritual practices become woven into the fabric of our being. By God's grace they become second nature to us—they form our identity in Christ.

Ezra is a hero in Judaism. His re-giving of the Scriptures to the people of Israel upon their return from exile is seen as kind of Mt. Sinai Part Two by the Jewish people. He's considered a Second Moses and the pioneer and the forerunner of the Rabbis. He helped his people realize that they were a People of the Book. Jesus' understanding of himself as Rabbi was influenced by Ezra.

Ezra encourages us today to persevere in hardship. To be mindful that we're under God's watchful and loving eye. And that by God's grace we can keep calm and carry on.

Amen.

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