

Study 5 – Week of March 29th 2006

Ezra 9-10: What Ezra Discovers

Think of a time when you had high expectations that turned into disappointment. Share with your group what you came up with.

As we'll see in our last look at Ezra in this series, that disappointment is exactly what you're meant to feel when you finish the book! Things looked so positive for the people of Israel. They were taken off to exile as judgment for turning away from God. Now they have a fresh start and new beginning where they could recommit themselves to being God's nation living in God's land, but then.....well let's have a look at Ezra.

As a review, summarize some of the exciting highlights for the Israelite people that we've seen in the book of Ezra so far?

From passages such as 4:1-3 and 6:21, how have the Israelites gone at keeping themselves separate from the people around them and maintaining proper devotion to God?

If the book of Ezra finished at chapter 8, what would you conclude about the people?

Read Deuteronomy 30:1-6 and Jeremiah 29:10-14. If the book of Ezra finished at chapter 8, would you think Deuteronomy 30v5 and Jeremiah 29v14 have a good chance of being fulfilled?

It all looks good so far. The Israelites have been returned to the land. There is nothing left to get in the way for these returned exiles to receive all the promised blessings of God. But before we get too excited, there is the matter of that phrase found in Deuteronomy 30 and Jeremiah 29:

When you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and will all your soul..... Deuteronomy 30:2

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.
Jeremiah 29:13

So let's have a look at Ezra 9-10. Until chapter 8 there is high excitement, but what happens next? It seems that it's one thing to be transplanted into the land, but it looks like they need a heart transplant as well.

Read Ezra 9

What is the issue that comes to Ezra's attention, v1-2?

How does Ezra respond v3-15?

From Ezra's prayer, how does he understand the history of Israel and the reason for their exile?

From Ezra's prayer, how does he understand the time that they have enjoyed in the land following the return from exile?

From Ezra's prayer, how does he understand this episode of mixing with the people of other nations and following after their gods?

Ezra seems to quote some prophets in v11-12, but it's not an exact quote from any specific part of the Old Testament. Ezra is drawing together a theme that is found in many places in the Scriptures. **Read Deuteronomy 20:10-18 and 1 Kings 11:1-6.** Mixing with other nations around and going after their gods was the reason the nation of Israel was taken into exile in the first place! How much have these returned exiles learnt from these past mistakes?

Read Ezra 10:1-17

In chapter 9, we see Ezra's passionate sorrow over the sinfulness of the people. At the start of chapter 10, it seems some of the people take the hint and want action to rectify the situation.

Describe the course of events that take place in v1-17.

How do you react to the step that is taken to separate the Israelite men from their foreign wives?

The separating of Israelites from the foreign wives does seem harsh, particularly in light of the fact that some of these women had children by the Israelite men (10:44). Perhaps there are some parallels with what the Israelites were told to do in Deuteronomy 20:1-18. Why is this seen as the right course of action?

By the end of chapter 10, we're told the Israelite people have separated themselves from these foreign women, that is, there is some improvement in the situation. But what sort of tone is set by the book ending on this note?

Does it seem that the turning to God with all their heart spoken of in Deuteronomy 30:2 and Jeremiah 29:13 has taken place?

Ezra, Jesus and Us

The sad fact is, there's nowhere in the Old Testament where we see the people returning to God with all their heart. And so there is nowhere in the Old Testament where we see those promised rich abundant blessings coming to the returned exiles in the land. But it's not as if God has asked them to do something that will never take place. It's just that God promises to be the one who will transform their hearts to make it possible.

Deuteronomy 30:6 says, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you make love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live".

Jeremiah 31:33-34 says "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write in on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

And Jesus and the Holy Spirit is the one who brings this heart this forgiveness, this heart transformation, about. Jesus comes as the obedient one whose heart is fully devoted to God. He is rejected by Israel, but there on a cross he bears the punishment for sin and so forgiveness can come to the nation. Following Jesus' resurrection, He sends the Holy Spirit to transform both Jew and Gentile believer. Now with the Spirit we have transformed hearts, able to live lives of – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self control (Galatians 5:22).

It's interesting that throughout Ezra, there is much concern to be separate from the peoples around them and to be holy (Ezra 1:62; 4:1-3; 6:21). It's an attempt that ultimately fails (Ezra 9) because their hearts just aren't directed that way. But for those who have come to Christ and have the Spirit, it's different. 1 Peter 2:9 says, *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"*

1 Peter 1:14-15 says, "*As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*"

As Christians we stand in a very different position to Ezra. As Ezra prayed with deep sorrow, he could only wish that the people's hearts would be devoted to God in holiness and purity. But what Ezra wished for, is what Jesus Christ has done for us! For ourselves we have we have new hearts, we have forgiveness, we are made holy. But in our desire to be holy, as God is holy (1 Peter 1:14-15), what can we learn from Ezra's response to sin?

In what ways are you tempted to compromise with the people around you and follow their way of life?

What radical steps do you need to take, in order to be holy?

Church Family Notes and News

Chappo's visit is this weekend. It's not too late to invite a friend. Would you please also make it a priority to be at church YOURSELF this Sunday. It's always a let-down for those who bring guests if the church is half empty on an Open-Church Sunday! John Chapman is worth hearing – even if you've been a Christian for years. Why not take notes and learn to be an effective gospel communicator yourself.

Your Growth Group Project... How's progress? Some groups have been very active in working on their project already. One group delivered a housewarming package to the Atkinsons when they moved into their new home at Wilston, where Stuart is the new assistant minister. Another group has been keeping in touch with the Vineys and the Fletchers as they settle into life at Moore College. Another group is supporting the Gibson's new kids group. Email phil@mpc.org.au with your progress and we'll let everybody know what you're doing.