

God's Message to Us in Ezra

Halifax, NS

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Introduction:

Today in our sermon series on *God's Message to Us in Every Book of the Bible*, we are looking at the book of Ezra.

- Ezra was a priest—in fact, he was a direct descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was the first high priest.
- He is thought to be the author not only of the book of Ezra, but also of First and Second Chronicles and Nehemiah.

These four books present a continuous flow of history, and in fact, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book.

- You will remember that First Chronicles covers the forty year reign of King David from 1055 BC to 1015 BC,
 - Second Chronicles picks up with Solomon in 1015 BC and ends with the exile of Judah (Jerusalem fell in 586 BC) and the decree of the Persian king, Cyrus, in 536 BC that the temple be rebuilt at Jerusalem...
 - More about this in a moment... but as far as the flow of history...
- If you look at the opening of Ezra,
 - You can see that Ezra picks up where Second Chronicles ends—with the decree of Cyrus to rebuild the temple—
 - As a result of this decree a group of almost 50,000 Jews went up under the leadership of Zerubbabel (a descendant of David) to begin the work.
 - Ezra and Nehemiah actually speak of three separate returns to Jerusalem...
 - This first one to rebuild the temple in 536 BC under Zerubbabel,
 - A second one 58 years later in 458 BC when Ezra goes up to beautify the temple.
 - And the third one thirteen years later in 445 BC when Nehemiah goes up to build the city walls of Jerusalem.

But our great interest in this sermon series is not simply with history,

- but with exploring the message God has for us today.
 - The Scriptures are unique among all books because they alone are the very word of God.
 - We do well to read them and to meditate on them and to seek to apply them as God's message to us.

TRANS> And so let's begin with our first observation:

I. In Ezra we are taught how our gracious God restores gospel worship when it has been removed.

- A. He dearly loves His people in every age, and loves to communicate His acceptance of us through Jesus Christ.
1. Acceptance by God through Christ is the gospel...
 - the good news that God Himself is reconciled to us through the blood of the covenant, shed for the remission of our sins.

- He always keeps this assurance alive in the hearts of His people so that they will know that they are forgiven through the death of Christ for them.
 - In the Old Testament, it was through the promise of Christ who was to come, and in the New Testament, it is through Christ who has come and died for our sins.
 - He makes sure to maintain the gospel in each one of His elect people in some way or another so that we will not despair...
 - For no one can turn to the true God without faith in the gospel of Christ.
- But what I am calling “gospel worship” can decline and nearly vanish at times.
2. By gospel worship, I mean public worship in which He shows us through His ordinances the good news that He is reconciled to us by the blood of the covenant.
- a. It started out after the fall of Adam and Eve with God promising to separate a people for Himself and through them to bring forth a Son who would deliver them from bondage to Satan.
 - For worship, He appointed the killing of animals representing death in the place of us as guilty sinners.
 - Joined with these sacrifices were prayers and praises to God.
 - b. Then in the time of Moses, God brought Israel out of Egypt and developed gospel worship among them as His people.
 - Among the changes was that now there was an official altar at one place with priests who were especially called to offer sacrifices appointed by God at a tabernacle or temple appointed by Him,
 - again to show the people that God forgave their sin through the shedding of the blood that He appointed.
 - c. And then, 2000 years ago, God sent His Son, born of a woman, to be the sacrifice that atones for the sins not only of Israel, but of the whole world.
 - With the offering of Christ for His people’s sins, the sacrifices at the temple were replaced with the preaching of the gospel to all nations.
 - Worship consists in plain preaching of reconciliation through Christ, of prayers and praises, and of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
 - It is very simple, but very rich.
- And all through the ages, our heavenly Father has been very zealous for gospel worship to be practiced by His people!
- It is His way of making it clear to us that He is truly reconciled to us,
 - that we might have joy and comfort in serving Him with full assurance that He has dealt with our sins according to His sure promise in Christ.
3. But to our own hurt, it seems that it has been the way of His redeemed people to drift away from gospel worship.
- Always, within the church, there are those who deny the truth about God that He is a holy God who requires nothing less than the death of His own Son.
 - They want to pretend that He will accept us on the basis of something that we do rather than through Christ alone.
 - They are always pushing to replace the gospel message.

- And sadly, even those who know the truth and can lose their love for the gospel and become ungrateful...
 - When this happens, the Lord will sometimes, for a time, remove gospel worship from us—it will cease to be publicly set forth as it once was.
 - That is what happened when God sent the enemies of His people to destroy the temple and take them into captivity.

TRANS> But the Lord has no delight in depriving us of gospel worship for long.

B. And so for the sake of His people, the LORD graciously goes out of His way to restore gospel worship when it has been removed.

- In Ezra, we see two things our heavenly Father does to restore “gospel worship” at the temple. Let’s look at these two things:

1. First, in Ezra 1:1-4, we see that He moves the hearts of kings to restore gospel worship.

a. Look at these opening verses of Ezra and you will see this.

- Now keep in mind that the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, carried off all of its articles and carried off the people to serve Babylon in other places.
 - There was no temple for seventy years; no sacrifices such as God appointed were offered during this time.
- But during those seventy years, God raised up the Persian Empire to overthrow Babylon.
 - And here we are told how God turned the heart of King Cyrus the Persian to decree that gospel worship be restored!
 - **Ezra 1:1-4: Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying, ² Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which *is* in Judah. ³ Who *is* among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which *is* in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He *is* God), which *is* in Jerusalem. ⁴ And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which *is* in Jerusalem.”**
- Understand that Cyrus was not a true believer.
 - It was rather that it was his policy to have all the nations that Babylon had displaced return to their lands to worship their gods.
 - In this way, he hoped to gain the favour of all the gods for his empire.
- But notice the main point...you can see here how Ezra says that God was the one who stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to do this.
 - God was behind the fact that the Persians had conquered Babylon, and He was behind the fact that the Persians wanted all the nations to serve their own gods...
 - And that in particular Cyrus wanted to restore worship at Jerusalem that was true gospel worship.

- b. This teaches us that when worship is prohibited by kings and rulers and governments in this world,
 - God will not leave it that way for long.
 - He has the heart of kings in His hand, and He turns them wherever He desires...
 - The reason gospel worship is permitted in our land today is because God in His mercy has brought this about.
 - When we see the church's ingratitude for the gospel, we can expect God to raise up more and more official opposition...
 - But also, in places where we see faithful brothers and sisters in places where the gospel is not tolerated by their rulers,
 - we can pray with confidence that the LORD will soon turn the hearts of these rulers to support it.
- But Ezra teaches us that it is not just the hearts of the kings that God moves...
2. We are told that the LORD also moves the hearts of His people to restore gospel worship.
- a. This is brought out for us in Ezra 1:5 – 2:70.
 - In Ezra 1:5, it says: **Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.**
 - And then we are told how Cyrus sent these willing people to do this work, and we are given a list of names—telling us of almost 50,000 who come to build the temple...
 - to restore gospel worship, to set up the one altar that shows how God is reconciled by the blood of the covenant.
 - If the people had not been willing, this could not have happened.
 - b. The Lord has continued to stir the hearts of His people to proclaim the gospel through the ages...
 - 1) Think of our Lord Jesus Himself, who declared, **Luke 4:43: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent."**
 - 2) Or the Apostle Paul said, **1 Cor 9:16: Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!**
 - 3) And of the Protestant Reformation, where the Lord turned the hearts of both the people and their leaders to re-establish gospel worship.
 - The Roman church was preaching reconciliation by indulgences and penance and sacrifices by their priests...
 - but God turned the hearts of His people to return to gospel worship again.
- A now a question for each of you—
- Are you among those who are zealous for true gospel worship?
 - Is your name on God's list of those whose hearts He has turned to delight in our Lord Jesus Christ and the public preaching of Him?

- c. You can see how eager the people were for gospel worship in Ezra 3. Truly God has turned their hearts!
 - 1) First, in that they built the temple first—
 - Instead of building the city walls first for their protection, they build the temple first.
 - 2) Second, in that they begin worship even before the temple is begun...
 - The first thing they do upon returning is set up an altar, and the appointed priests of the LORD begin offering the morning and evening sacrifices each day while the temple is being built.
 - Ezra 3:6 summarises: **“From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, although the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.”**
 - Those who love gospel worship will do what they can with what they have to engage in gospel worship... they will travel great distances or do whatever they can to have it.
 - 3) Third, their eagerness for gospel worship is seen in that they begin praising Him in song when nothing but the foundation of the temple is laid.
 - Ezra 3:10-11 tells us how the Levites who were commanded to play music and sing when the offerings were offered begin to do so.

TRANS> What a grand thing it is for our God to turn the hearts of His people to gospel worship and to turn the hearts of their rulers to support it!

- But as wonderful as that is, we are taught a second lesson in Ezra that we must take to heart.

II. Secondly, in Ezra we are shown that even when we are in the process of re-establishing Gospel worship, God will test us to see if we are wholehearted.

A. In a way, His tests actually help to make us wholehearted...

- 1. When opposition to gospel worship comes, we have to decide if we think that the gospel worship is worth the effort.
 - You are forced to look at gospel worship and to consider how valuable it is—and if you do that with any discernment,
 - You will see more than ever how precious it really is.
 - You will conclude that it is well worth the effort...
- 2. Of course it should be patently obvious to us from the start that gospel worship is worth the effort...
 - But we are yet sinners.
 - Consequently, our resolve is often weak when there is any opposition.
 - God uses this to humble us and then, by His grace, to wake us up and form in us an even greater zeal.

B. Take a look with me at the form in which these tests came...

- 1. First, there was the test of what we might call political correctness.
 - As we have seen, the politics of the day were that all the gods should be worshipped. Does that sound familiar?
 - And so in Ezra 4:1-2, we are told that the adversaries of Israel from the land around them come and ask if they can join in the building of the temple...

- But look at how the Jews respond to them in Ezra 4:3. They say:
 - **“You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”**
 - What sort of evangelism is this? It sounds rather unfriendly!
 - But I tell you, it is sound evangelism.
 - These people of the land had indeed worshipped the LORD, but only in the politically correct way—as though He were one of many gods.
 - To let them join in would be to deny the very quality that makes true worship unique—that it is the worship of the one true God through the one and only way that we can come to Him... Jesus crucified!
 - Too often, churches, because we are eager to grow, will welcome those who are zealous, but who do not really love the gospel.
 - They believe that God can be approached in many different ways and that the blood of the covenant is just one of those ways.
 - Such persons do not know the true God who is holy and who can only be worshipped through Christ.
 - The politically correct crowd will be offended when we claim that Christ is the only way and that they are not welcome at His table unless they have a sound profession of faith.
 - If we give in to the temptation to welcome them, we undermine the very gospel that we are trying to promote!
- But when we pass this test, we will often be faced with another test as the people were in Ezra.
2. When we do not allow those who do not truly know Christ to join us, they will set out to oppose us.
- a. In Ezra 4:4-5, it summarizes what these adversaries did: **Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.**
 - Then, after illustrating the kind of opposition that they had experienced even up until the time when he wrote this.
 - Ezra concludes chapter 4 (in verse 24) by informing us that the work on the temple ceased because of such opposition.
 - The people had been so zealous for this work, but now it has been stopped for a time.
 - b. When governments rise up and oppose the gospel, and forbid us to preach it, it can certainly hinder us.
 - If the ordained ministers of the word are imprisoned or executed, it hinders the gospel in terms of public proclamation (though it is never bound).
 - We can continue and we should continue the best that we can, and God will bless us just as He blessed His people even when they were in Babylon.
 - Gospel worship in the New Testament is actually much easier to continue under persecution than Old Testament worship was.

- But it is still a great test of us when we are persecuted as to whether we will continue to faithfully preach the gospel—or if we will compromise.
 - Will we do what we can under the circumstances?
3. It appears that the Jews did not do what they could with rebuilding the temple.
- a. The opposition of their enemies discouraged them...the test was too much.
 - Nevertheless, God in His faithfulness sent two prophets (as it says in 5:1), Haggai and Zechariah, to preach to them.
 - In the book of Haggai you can read of how Haggai rebukes them for showing more concern about building their own houses than the house of the LORD.
 - b. This is a huge problem for us today!
 - We neglect the worship of God because we are more concerned about our own affairs.
 - The least little thing will distract us and draw us away from gospel worship—even a ball game or a music recital can do it. That’s pitiful!
 - When there is opposition from family and friends about worship, it makes us even more tempted to slack off.
 - God tests us today by bringing these distractions to us.
 - We may be tempted not to tithe because we are more worried about our houses than we are about God’s house.
 - My brothers and sisters, this is how you find out what is most important to you.
 - If you renovate instead of tithing, there is a definite problem.
 - If you play soccer on the Lord’s Day and even skip church to do it, there is a problem with your priorities.
4. But the outcome is good—Haggai and Zechariah preach and get the people back on track.
- a. The building of the temple resumes...
 - Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the river where the opposers lived sees the building resume and comes to inquire about it...
 - He sends a letter to King Darius to tell him what the Jews are doing!
 - But God had prepared the heart of King Darius for this.
 - Darius is the King who threw Daniel into the lion’s den... you know the story about how God shut the mouths of the lions so that Daniel was not harmed...
 - After that, Darius respected the LORD more than ever... so when he gets this letter from Tattenai asking if he wants to let this temple building continue, Darius sends a reply expressing his strong support it!
 - Look at the last part of it in chapter 6 verse 8-12: **“Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king’s expense from taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered...** then he continues in verse 11: **Also I issue a decree that whoever alters this edict, let a timber be pulled from his house and erected, and let him be hanged on it; and let his house be made a refuse heap because of**

this. ¹² And may the God who causes His name to dwell there destroy any king or people who put their hand to alter it, or to destroy this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I, Darius, issue a decree; let it be done diligently.”

- b. You see what God did when the people set their hearts on establishing full gospel worship again!
 - The testing of their faith had made them falter at first, but they came forth stronger than ever!
 - In 6:15, we are told that the temple was finished—in March of 516 BC.
 - The people dedicate the temple with many offerings and soon it was the time of the Passover where they remember how the lamb was offered for their first born sons.
 - By God’s grace, though they faltered, they have finished the house of God and are worshipping Him as He graciously instituted.
- c. So you see how God uses testing to make us stronger!
 - If you find yourself slacking off regarding the gospel, you need to repent like they did and God will restore you.
 - Hebrews 12:12-13 says: **Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.**
 - And then it warns you not to be profane like Esau who for one morsel of food sold his birthright!
 - A profane person is one who has no real interest in the things of God.

TRANS> But what a good outcome when God brings us through the test!

- In Ezra, the temple is built and gospel worship is flourishing once again.
 - May it be so with us with the gospel worship that God has appointed for us!
- But alas there is a third lesson in Ezra:

III. Third, in Ezra we are shown how much we need Christ our priest to keep us in the way of the Lord.

- A. We see in Ezra what is often the case with us as God’s people...
 - that though we have been re-established in gospel worship, our zeal decays again as the years go by.
 - 1. Even the church of the Ephesians where Paul had spent so much time is accused by Jesus in revelation of having lost their first love in the next generation!
 - And the Laodicean church is charged by Him with being lukewarm.
 - Too often it is the case that where we were once wholehearted, we are now half-hearted.
 - It can happen to the people of God at all levels... in a nation, in a denomination, and in a local congregation...
 - 2. And so it was with the people in Ezra’s day.
 - When we come to chapter 7, it is about sixty years after the temple has been built...

- And if we look ahead to the end of the book of Ezra, we will find that there are two problems with the people of God...
 - The form of their worship has deteriorated...
 - The temple precincts and its service have been neglected.
 - And secondly, we see that the people are in need of reformation in their moral conduct—for many of their leaders have broken God’s covenant by marrying pagan wives.
3. It is in connection with this declension that we are introduced to Ezra himself.
- a. Ezra is a wonderful picture of Christ our priest who comes to us to restore our worship and our morals.
 - Our risen Lord is active among His church today—He is the one who prays for us and He is the one who restored both our worship and our morals.

➤ By looking at Ezra, we learn of Christ—Ezra reveals what Jesus does.
 - b. Look at how Ezra is presented to us in chapter 7.
 - At the beginning of the chapter, we are told that Ezra is a descendant of Aaron the High Priest under Moses...
 - Then, in Ezra 7:6, he is described like this: **this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.**
 - And in 7:10, we are told that: **Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.**
 - He was equipped to lead the people God had redeemed to follow Him.
- B. So look at Ezra and learn how our high priest restores us.
1. First, He comes to restore the outward form of our worship.
 - When we slack off; our worship slacks off.
 - Even the King of Persia saw this and sent Ezra to beautify the temple.
 - He sends him with a great company of volunteers, plus all kinds of provisions for and commands to sacrifice faithfully to God.
 - Christ is our worship leader, and He often has to reform our New Testament worship—now it is no longer about repairing the temple precincts...
 - It is about restoring His ordinances—
 - Preaching becomes compromised, it lacks fire and conviction, it does not set forth the beauty of Jesus Christ, it starts to distort the law and accommodate the world’s ways...
 - songs are sung without zeal, and songs of human composition are put in place of the Psalms...
 - prayers are offered that are cold and indifferent instead of fervent and warm.
 - reverence is replaced with levity, and joy is replaced with complaining.
 - The sacraments are neglected, and church discipline is not exercised.

- And sadly, ordinances that God never appointed are brought in—things like pagan style tongue speaking, interviews, musical entertainment, puppet shows—whatever.
 - Yes, the form that God has appointed for us is important—and when Christ our priest visits us, He sets things in order.
 - The Reformation was a reformation of worship in form as much it was a reformation of doctrine.
 - Prayers to the saints and burning of incense were excluded, and reading the word in the language of the people and preaching it were restored.
 - The Mass as a sacrifice was excluded, and the Lord’s Supper restored.
 - If only doctrine is reformed, there will be no lasting change, but when worship is reformed, there is great hope.
 - Christ our priest is our worship leader and we must follow His directives—so He comes to do that first...
2. But then, when worship is restored, He reforms our morals.
- Often in that order—
 - a. Ezra went to beautify the temple, but when he got there he realised that the people had done a very foolish and wicked thing!
 - In chapter 9:1-2, it says: **When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ² For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.”**
 - This is a very wicked thing indeed that happens when God’s people turn cold toward him.
 - Instead of marrying for the glory of God, they marry for selfish reasons—for advancement in status or for lust...
 - They would be so much happier to marry in the LORD,
 - but perhaps because of impatience with loneliness or because of lust or wanting to impress others... they marry ungodly persons!
 - What sort of children will come from such marriages for God?
 - What should matter more to us than the kingdom of God and the health of His kingdom?
 - b. How beautifully does Ezra portray Christ our high priest here!
 - 1) The first thing he does is tear his clothes and pray.
 - Our dear LORD Jesus intercedes for us.
 - What grief He has for our sins—for our foolishness.
 - He weeps for us—He is tied to us as our priest and our sins all fall upon Him—
 - He prays as Ezra does, as one of us who bears our sins with us...
 - Look at how Ezra does this in chapter 9:5:

- Ezra 9:5-10: **At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. ⁶ And I said: “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than *our* heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. ⁷ Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as *it is* this day. ⁸ And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹ For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. ¹⁰ And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments...”**
- Who can continue in such sins when we have a Saviour like this?
- 2) Indeed, the people are moved when they see their priest Ezra interceding for them like this; how much more are we moved when we come to recognise that our dear priest Jesus Christ is interceding for us.
 - Look at chapter 10, verse 1: **Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.**
 - And then Ezra, seeing them broken, calls upon them to do a very difficult thing... to put away these pagan wives who did not love the LORD.
 - This was not a situation where they had come to the Lord and had an unbelieving wife that wanted to live with them.
 - No, this was a situation where they, as believers, had married pagan wives in direct disobedience God.
 - It was thing that had ruined Israel before the exile, and it would ruin them again, just as it will ruin us if we tolerate it.
 - And so before the LORD, they put away their pagan wives—they divorced them lest the kingdom of God be destroyed.
 - A list of their names is given as a testimony of their repentance.

Conclusion:

How the love of God is revealed to us in the book of Ezra!

- Here He is, our Father in heaven who loves us so much that He sent His Son to redeem us by His own blood.
 - And we see Him so zealous to maintain gospel worship among us that He turns the hearts of kings and the hearts of His people to see that His worship is done!
 - And even as He restores pure worship, He tests us to purify our hearts and to ensure that we are wholehearted in our worship.
 - And when, as the years go by, our devotion begins to decay, Christ our priest comes to restore us.

- Dear people of God, serve Him with ardent love and devotion!
- How thankful we ought to be for our Ezra, Jesus Christ, who takes responsibility for our sins as His own and leads us to repentance.