Introduction to the book of 'Ezra . . . and the God who restores'

When my husband and I moved to our current home in Adelaide in 2017, we moved into a house that was two years old, built on an original sized block. On speaking with our neighbours over the road, we learnt that their home (built new in the 1960s), and the one before ours, had been built with paddocks surrounding them. Now this street is in inner suburbia. A house on a block of original size that is sold on our street these days is being replaced by two houses (sometimes double-storey) on the same space. Over time and generations, the face of the suburb is changing! This has meant some processes of building, demolishing and rebuilding have happened and are happening.

Hello everyone. My name is Nola Hill. I have been involved in KYB studies over many years – sometimes as a leader and sometimes as a group participant. I love the study of God's Word and the truth and life it imparts, bringing revelation of who God is and how he sees the people he has created and dearly loves, offering them the free gift of salvation and life through the completed work of his Son Jesus on the cross, and longing for personal relationship with them. It is my privilege to share this introduction to a study of the book of Ezra.

TITLE OF STUDY

One of the key words in the KYB Ezra study is 'build'. In this study we will consider an historical account from God's Word of a similar process in the story of God's people, Israel. The title of this study *'Ezra – and the God who Restores',* tells of a man named Ezra who, along with others, is involved in a work of restoration by God for his people. We will learn about who God is, what he did for his people then, and indeed is still doing in nations and hearts today. There is both challenge and encouragement in this for us.

BACKGROUND

The book of Ezra is found in the Old Testament. It is a historical narrative telling the story of Israel, over a period of about 75-80 years between 400-500 BC. In some senses it could be called the 'second exodus', the first being when the people were released from Egypt by Pharoah under the leadership of Moses to journey to the Promised land. This exodus is from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem, because after some years of living in the Promised land the people had turned from God and his ways to false gods and the ways of surrounding nations. They had fallen into disobedience and broken covenant with God. Jeremiah (chapter 25) had prophesied 70 years captivity in Babylon as a consequence. We read in Ezra 1:1 that this part of the nation's story was *'to fulfil the word of the Lord'.* It was time for rebuilding to begin! Indeed, God's plans cannot be thwarted! All authority is his, and he is always faithful to his Word, even when humankind is not faithful to him.

In this current world of turbulence and instability with wars and governmental conflicts, scripture reminds us in Ecclesiastes 1:9 that there is *'nothing new under the sun'* and in

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Proverbs 21:1 that *'the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord: he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.'* Nothing surprises God, and he remains seated on his throne. As believers we are called to pray as the Holy Spirit leads us and trust God for every outcome. This is faith in action!

TIMELINE

Now we see God's Word in action in the book of Ezra….

When King Cyrus of Persia (a foreign king to Israel) began rule over Babylon, he issued a decree that those who had been deported there could return to their homeland (chapter 1:2-4). So a group of willing Jews led by Zerubbabel (the governor of Judah) and Joshua (the high priest) headed back to Jerusalem, laden with resources including gold and silver donated to the cause, and even precious temple articles previously plundered from the temple now being returned. God's people were free and going home…what rejoicing there must have been. For some it would be a return to a former home, for others who may have been born in exile it would be a new beginning in their true home.

The first task was to rebuild the altar of the temple (chapter 3). This was a vital part of worship and meant that sacrifices, offerings and celebration of festivals could resume. The people offered sacrifices for their sin of turning away from God and his order was being restored. The next priority was the rebuilding of the temple (also chapter 3) beginning with the foundation. How important a good foundation to a building is, enabling it to stand strong through the seasons ahead. We can ask ourselves…who or what is the altar of my heart dedicated to? And what is the foundation that my life is built on? Am I remaining faithful to it on my daily life journey? God's command for the people of Ezra in the Old Testament was *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*' (Deuteronomy 6:5) … and Jesus reminds us as new covenant believers of the same thing *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*' (Matthew 22:37) …not a part, not sometimes, not when I feel like it…but all the time with all of my being.

As the people set about these tasks, they had begun to settle back into their homeland. But foreigners (non-Jewish people) too had settled there during Israel's time of captivity. And opposition and distraction from them set in (chapter 4). They worshipped other gods with their pagan practices. There were accusations and false offers of help, and discouragement set in. Would God's people be faithful to his plan to build and restore in the face of enemies? But God in his faithfulness sent prophets to encourage them - Haggai and Zechariah (chapter 5)- and to be with them, and help them to persevere and remain focussed. God also continued to work at times through various foreign kings to support the work. There were stops and starts along the way, but finally the temple was completed and dedicated, and 'the exiles' celebrated the Passover - but they were no longer exiles! (chapter 6) What a celebration it must have been!

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Walking in faith at times was a challenge and at times a joy for Israel, as it is for us. Maybe you can recall a time of difficulty in your life, perhaps when you knew the enemy was attacking you? How did God guide and sustain you? Maybe you can recall a time of joy and celebration with thankfulness to God. May we always remember to look to him in every season, thanking him for what he is doing and trusting him with outcomes. He is always faithful to his plans and purposes. And may we remember to support those around us in their times of challenge, and rejoice with them in their joys, as witnesses to our faithful God.

EZRA THE MAN / AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

Now to chapter 7…

The man Ezra now enters the narrative in person at this point. Ezra is deemed by Jewish tradition to be the author of this book. He possibly wrote the earlier chapters as a record of events while in Babylon himself, but he enters the story now. His genealogy is listed in chapter 7:1-5. He was a priest and scribe (teacher), a man of authority and a man of courage and faith. He was devoted to knowing, obeying and teaching God's Word. Ezra 7:9 tells us that *'Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel'.*

Having only ever known life in exile, Ezra now leads another group of returnees to Jerusalem, knowing the hand of the Lord was on him (chapter 7:28). On this challenging and dangerous journey, he took courage and demonstrated implicit faith as he led the people and carried great treasures (again silver and gold offerings). Ezra 7:6 tells us, *'The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.'* He refused help from the king's armies and relied solely on God's protection for this trip. This journey took four months (NIV footnotes 7:7-9). And Ezra's testimony on arrival in Jerusalem was *'the hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way'* (8:31). We meet a man of prayer, faith and courage who knew and obeyed God's Word as a living example to others as he led them back to Jerusalem. There was both provision and protection for the journey. Indeed, as we walk in obedience to God, our King, he faithfully supplies all our needs too (Philippians 4:19). We can be encouraged! Reflect now on some of these moments in your life and remember the goodness and faithfulness of God with praise. If you have a need at this time, bring it to him in prayer with thankfulness that he will listen, hear and respond.

On arrival back in Jerusalem, Ezra indeed observed the completed physical building of the temple, but was appalled to find that the temple of the hearts of the people had not been rebuilt. He addressed the issues of intermingling and intermarrying with neighbouring peoples which was unfaithfulness to God's covenant. His focus was spiritual reform and he cried out to God in intercession with weeping on behalf of them (chapter 9), then leading them in confession of sin and repentance (chapter 10). True worship was being restored, and the people were being taught and challenged by the truth of God's Word. Spiritual demolishing of

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compromised beliefs and behaviours was happening, and rebuilding of truth and right living was being made known and outworking in God's people. This spiritual reform would undoubtedly have pleased and delighted God's heart.

The words of Ezra still ring out across the world today. *'The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake Him'* (8:22) If Ezra were here in person today with us, he would be proclaiming the truth of God's Word with the same urgency. We are admonished to study God's Word, know his ways, confess and repent of sin and idolatry, and walk faithfully and whole-heartedly in relationship with him. In the New Testament the apostle Paul also implores us to *'let the Word of God dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God'* (Colossians 3:16). There would have been much of this happening when the temple of Ezra's time was rebuilt and dedicated! Furthermore, at this time in our own nation's story, how important it is for us as believers to intercede like Ezra for God to be known and revered, and for governments and people to follow him and is ways.

As you complete this study, you will notice a number of lists included. Among them are two lists of returned exiles. The first is found in Chapter 2, recorded by name and family. This list is like an honour roll for those who obeyed God's call. These returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua. Another list is found in Chapter 8. These returned with Ezra. We may wonder why these lists are included in the Bible. Both these two show God's order and heart for identity and belonging to a family - most of all his family! Each is named and numbered. Every person was important to the Lord and worthy of his attention. The heart of God is that we too are each created by him, valued by him and he delights in relationship with us. Our identity as his children (sons and daughters) is of utmost importance to him. Be assured of your value and worth to him, and his delight in you. What a precious gift from God our Father! Remember this with thankfulness as you consider the lists of people and families in this study.

Also included in Ezra are seven official documents and letters, which compare favourably with non-biblical documents of the Persian period. The truth of God's Word is confirmed by worldly records! Not all these details and events are written in chronological order in Ezra's account (a helpful table of events is found in your KYB study book and will be a good reference as you study).

CONCLUSION

The book of Ezra ends rather abruptly, but the story continues on into the next book of the Bible, Nehemiah. This man leads Israel in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. God's prophesy is fulfilled and His promise kept. He never gives up on his people - he is the God of 'new starts.' Can you see how he is just and cannot tolerate sin and evil, and yet lovingly draws humanity back to himself in love, mercy, grace and compassion, forgiving sin and delighting in hearts

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committed to him and his ways? His love for his creation is truly everlasting. A wonderful invitation to come to him is offered! He – the God who Restores – rescues, delivers and sets us free. He really is the one true, living, holy God who has always been sovereign over all people, times and places, and still is today. He is building his kingdom and his people and we are given opportunity to participate with him in his plans and purposes. Although we can be unfaithful and wavering at times on our life journeys, his faithfulness endures forever and his promises are true. All praise and glory to him alone. Be blessed, encouraged and challenged as you study the book of Ezra!

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