

Influencers - Ezra

Last year I ran a short series on Influencers from the bible, people who through the way that they lived their lives – the things that they did and the things that they said – influenced not just those around them but those who came after them right through to the present day and will continue to influence others in the future. The three services that I did in this series are still available to view on our YouTube channel if you are interested. Since then I have had a number of other ideas for this series so have decided to continue it over this Sunday and next. Today we are going to look at the story of Ezra.

We start by reading from the Old Testament book of Ezra 7:1-10.

The events of the book of Ezra after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the exile of the Israelites. The book of Ezra records two separate periods of time which directly follow the seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Ezra 1–6 covers the first return of Jews from captivity, led by Zerubbabel—a period of twenty-three years which ends with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in approximately 516BC. Ezra 7–10 picks up the story more than sixty years later, when Ezra led the second group of exiles to Israel. The passage that we have just read from chapter 7 introduces us to Ezra and as is common we get his genealogy which shows us that he is a direct descendant of Aaron the chief priest and brother of Moses. As a result of his heritage, Ezra was a priest and scribe and the passage tells us that Ezra took his role seriously and was devoted to studying the God's word in his laws and importantly not just studying it but putting it into practice – observing the laws that it contains. He also wants to make sure others know God's word and His laws. This zeal for God and God's Law help us to understand why Ezra leads a second group of Jewish exiles back to Israel during the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes. He does this with the King's blessing and if you read on in chapter 7 you can see the letter that King Artaxerxes wrote to Ezra giving permission for the Israelites to return and providing them with silver and gold with which to buy offerings to God and whatever is needed to fulfil his will.

Ezra recognised that God had moved the heart of the King to not just allow but support and encourage the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. This secular king may seem an unlikely person to be involved in fulfilling God's promise to restore His chosen people but the king recognised that God was with Ezra and saw through Ezra the power of his God and as a result supported Ezra in his calling to rebuild God's people. It serves as an example to us that there is no one that God cannot use to further his will and to bless his people used these unlikely allies to fulfil His promises of restoration for His chosen people. In your own journey with Christ, whether you have only recently started it or have been on it for many years, have you seen God use someone unlikely to further his Kingdom? In our world we can feel threatened by the rise of secularity and this can lead to us feeling unable to display our faith. But we should remember the example of Ezra and King Artaxerxes and realise that God can use us to demonstrate his power to others and through us use them to further his kingdom. We should also continue to pray for those in positions of power in our country and around the world that their hearts may be moved by God in the same way that King Artaxerxes was so that they may help and support God's people to continue to further his Kingdom.

As I mentioned earlier, the first group of exiles to return to Jerusalem had rebuilt the temple so by the time that Ezra's group arrive, the temple has been standing for many years but when they arrive they find that the Israelites are disobeying the laws that God set down for them. In chapter 9 we read his response to their sin. Our next reading comes from Ezra 9:5-9

Here we read Ezra's prayer which is a prayer of confession, confessing the sins of his people. Notice he doesn't refer to their sins or their guilt – he talks about our sins and our guilt. He has seen the sins that his fellow Israelites have committed but also recognises that he has sinned. It is sometimes easy for us to see the sins of others but we don't see the ways that we ourselves fall short – as Matthew wrote in his gospel "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Ezra's response to the Israelite's sin is to turn to God in prayer, expressing shame for the sin and later in the chapter fear of the consequences and a desire for the Israelites to repent for their sins and return to living by the law that God has given them. Again he sets an example for us to follow, we should bring our sins before God in prayer and repent for the ways that we have failed to live in the way that he calls us to. You might be sitting here thinking "My sins are too big or too bad for God to be able to forgive" but there is no sin that God cannot forgive, because the punishment for our sin has already been paid – Jesus Christ came to Earth to live amongst us and the only pure and sinless person who ever walked the Earth was crucified on a Cross, taking our place and receiving the punishment for our sins so that we all may be saved. So whatever sin that we have committed we can bring it before God in prayer and repent for what we have done in the knowledge that God through his grace has forgiven us and through our repentance we accept that grace and recommit ourselves to do his will.

We see this at the start of chapter 10 we see that Ezra's prayer caused a large crowd of Israelites to weep and many to confess their sins. They also recognise that true repentance requires more than words, that in true repentance God calls us to take action to return to the path that he has set out for us. The Israelites look for direction in restoring their relationship with God and the people follow Ezra's leadership to move away from their sinful way of living, back to the way God set down in his law.

I mentioned earlier that the book of Ezra covers two different time periods with the first 6 chapters covering the first exiles returning and rebuilding the temple. The second part that we looked at here shows the influence that Ezra has and how God uses him to rebuild his people. We saw the influence that he has with the King who sees how powerful God is through Ezra's faith and as a result the second group of exiles are able to return to Jerusalem and then through Ezra's devotion to the God's word as set down in his laws, God is able to use Ezra to restore the Israelites in Jerusalem to him and his law.

Ezra's story doesn't end at the end of the book which bears his name – we read more about Ezra and the restoration of Jerusalem in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah also led a third group of exiles to Jerusalem a few years after Ezra to encourage the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall. We looked at the story of the rebuilding of the walls in January of this year, the recording of which is still available on the Church YouTube channel for anyone who is interested.

Whilst Nehemiah became the political leader or Governor, Ezra was the religious leader and thus we read in Nehemiah that Ezra is the one who is asked to read from God's law and to teach the Israelites what it means. Our final reading this morning comes from the book of Nehemiah 8:13-18.

We see here throughout chapter 8 that following the completion of the walls, Nehemiah wanted to focus on the spiritual renewal of the returned Israelites and as a result Ezra brought out the Book of the Law, which probably included what are now the first 5 books of the Old Testament. As well as reading from it, we read in v6 that he also explained the meaning so that the people listening could understand what was being read. Ezra recognises that for the people to follow God's law they needed to understand it and then live it in their lives. In the passage that we read from we see that Ezra read from the book of Leviticus which tells about the Festival of Tabernacles during which the

Israelites were to live in temporary booths made of branches. This was to remind them of their rescue from Egypt and the time spent in shelters in the desert. So the Israelites didn't just listen to the words but they understood them and made the required preparations and then celebrated the festival as the Law instructed, something that hadn't happened since the days of Joshua.

When we hear God's word, we should be always asking ourselves "What should I do with this knowledge?" God speaks to us through his word and it requires a response. We see that Ezra responds to God's word throughout his story and his example shows some of the ways that we may be called to respond whether that be repenting for where we have fallen short or to living our lives so that people come to know Christ and his power.

Although the storyline of Ezra is strongly connected to the storyline of Nehemiah, it is more often Nehemiah who is the better known but from studying Ezra, we see that he was equally influential on the exiled Israelites as they returned and that there are several lessons that we can learn from his story that show that he is still influential today. We see in Ezra that there is no-one that God cannot use for the furtherance of his Kingdom and that includes us – he was able to use Ezra to rebuild his people but he also used Ezra to show King Artaxerxes the power of God so that he supported the Israelite's return.

We also see the importance of repentance – we need to recognise the ways that we fall short and bring them before God in prayer to repent, not to earn God's forgiveness because that has already been bought with Christ's blood but to accept God's grace and recommit ourselves to him.

Finally, Ezra shows us the importance of studying and understanding God's word and put it into practice in the way that we live our lives.

God had promised his people that they would return to their land after their exile and he had kept his promise. He used several people to make that happen and some of them may be better known than Ezra – he didn't rebuild the temple, he didn't rebuild the walls – but this humble and obedient servant of God did something more important – he rebuilt God's people, bringing them back to God and teaching them his word. Ezra influenced the Israelites then and continues to influence today because everything he did came from the same starting point – God's word. We should allow ourselves to be influenced by Ezra's example because it is a great model of how to live for God.