

Summary of Readings

Day One: Ezra 1-2

Cyrus, the King of Persia, makes a proclamation throughout his newly conquered area saying that God [Yahweh] has instructed him to build a temple for God in Judah and invite any of “his people” to return to Jerusalem to assist in the rebuilding effort. Israelites from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and the Levites prepare for the return. Cyrus inventories the items that Nebudchadnezzar had removed from the Temple in order to return those as well. Chapter two includes a listing of the families that chose to return to Israel before setting the number at 42,360. Upon their arrival in Jerusalem they presented their offerings towards the rebuilding of the Temple.

Day Two: Ezra 3

The rebuilding process begins in chapter three after the Israelites had, “settled in their towns.” The first acts of the Priests included the reconstruction of the Altar, the presentation of the morning and evening burnt offerings and the celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles. Money is then distributed to the masons and carpenters, food is shared with the people of Sidon and Tyre in order to receive cedar logs, and the Priests appoint Levites to supervise the laying of the foundation. Praise and thanksgiving is offered by the priests during the laying of the foundation. When the foundation was completed, many lifted shouts of joy, but some were found weeping who had memories of the former temple.

Day Three: Ezra 4

“Enemies of Israel” discover that the Temple is being rebuilt and they come to Zerubbabel, the leader of the construction project. Dishonestly, they offer their support, but Zerubbabel refuses their involvement saying, “You have no part with us in building a Temple to our God.” The enemies then begin their work of seeking to discourage the Israelites. When their plans to frustrate the work do not succeed, the enemies draft a letter to King Artaxerxes saying that the Jews were rebuilding the walls of the city and that this act would lead to reduced tax revenue and an eventual rebellion by the Jews. Israel’s history as a “rebellious city” is presented to the King as proof of this threat. The King responds by affirming the rebellious history of Israel and ordering the work in Jerusalem to stop. Chapter four ends with the statement that, “thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius King of Persia.”

Day Four: Ezra 5-6

The Prophet and Haggai and Zechariah share the prophecy that the Jews should restart the work of rebuilding the Temple and Zerubbabel leads the people to do so. Tattenai, Governor of the Trans-Euphrates, confronts the workers to ask who had authorized the rebuilding efforts, and eventually sends a letter to King Darius to stop the work. In the letter, Tattenai, offers to Darius the workers reasoning for rebuilding the Temple in which they [the Jews] place their work under the authority of Cyrus’ decree that the Temple should be restored. Tattenai asks that a search of the royal archives be made to see if Cyrus did indeed offer such a decree. King Darius completes the search and finds the appropriate memorandum. In response to this news, Darius not only instructs Tattenai to allow the work to continue, but further directs him to use money from the royal treasury and other resources of the area to fund the effort so that, “the work will not stop.”

Under the guidance of Haggai and Zechariah, the temple is finally completed in the sixth year of Darius' reign. The people of Israel proceed to dedicate the house of the Lord with sacrifices and the installation of the Priesthood before participating in the Passover celebration.

Day Five: Ezra 7

After the completion of the Temple, during the reign of Artaxerxes, Ezra, a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses [perhaps a Rabbi] leads another group of Israelites home from Babylon. Ezra does this in response to a letter from the King instructing him to take whatever Jews wanted to join him as well as the gold and silver offered by the ruling powers to the God of Israel. Along the way, the treasurers of the Trans-Euphrates are instructed to provide funds as well at the discretion of Ezra up to a certain level. Ezra is further instructed to set up magistrates and justices to uphold the "Law of God" within Jerusalem.

Day Six: Ezra 8:15-36

Chapter eight shifts to a first person narration of the events of Ezra's life beginning with his assembly of the people returning to Jerusalem. When Ezra discovers that no Levites were present in his traveling party, he sends messengers to find individuals from the tribe of Levi. Eventually, 220 Levites join the group. The group fasts before beginning the journey for safe travel since they will not be traveling with any of the King's protection. Ezra was "ashamed" to ask for protection after proclaiming that God would provide for their security. Ezra then divides the offering he has received to be presented in Jerusalem among the Levites and declares that they, along with the offering, have been consecrated to the Lord. Upon their arrival, all the gold and silver was presented to God and burnt offerings were presented to the Lord as well.

Day Seven: Ezra 9:1-15; 10:1-17

At the beginning of chapter nine, Ezra is presented with the issue that the Israelites had intermarried with the neighboring people and had adopted their, "detestable practices." In response, Ezra, "tore his tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled." After the evening sacrifice, Ezra prays on behalf of the people. He begins by confessing Israel's sin before celebrating God's gracious act of allowing this remnant to return. The prayer finishes with Ezra's instruction that Israel is not to continue with the practice of intermarriage with the neighboring people.

Ezra's prayer of confession leads other to confess their sins before God and renew their covenant before God by sending away the women and children from these mixed marriages. Ezra makes the people confirm this oath and shortly thereafter all of Israel is assembled to deal with the dissolution of the marriages with foreign wives.

I want to be whole... October 15, 2005 – 8:41 pm

Friday night, Steph, Anna and I went to Red Oak to watch my sister's band perform at halftime of the Red Oak/Corsicana HS football game. Since leaving Red Oak in 1992, I have only returned on a few occasions. One of the most memorable was during college when the pastor at FUMC invited me to preach one Sunday. It wasn't my first sermon, but one I will never forget. I can't begin to express how much it humbled me to speak to that community that had nurtured me as a child and had loved my father so much.

After we left the game, I drove Steph around Red Oak. (It didn't take too long) I showed her the old church on Methodist which is now vacant. The bushes in the front yard, where I had my first fight in 2nd grade, are now overgrown. We drove past Red Oak elementary, our old house, "dead man's curve," the building that used to house the baseball card shop that my friends and I visited everyday one summer, the baseball fields (where my baseball career began and soon ended), and the field behind Jason's house where we used to play war, and in the summer, we would take his riding lawnmower out and mow a baseball diamond. (I know it sounds very "Field of Dreams"). As we drove down our street, I told her, "Andrew lived there after Colby moved (I thought of those hot summer days when we would beg Colby to go swimming in his above ground pool and the first time I saw a Nintendo and we played Duck Hunt at Colby's house), David and Derek lived there (I remember the time I shot an air-ball and hit David's dad in the face while he was carrying around an open can of paint. It wasn't pretty. And the half-pipe that his Dad built in the backyard with a roll-in and everything), and Bobby lived there (Bobbie was the nerdy kid on the street who nobody liked, but he had a nintendo with a turbo joystick. That was pretty cool. I remember that his Dad always wore his Vietnam veterans hat, and never said a word). We saw my intermediate school (where I kissed a girl for the first time), my Junior High, and finally as we were leaving town, the church that Dad built. That's how I describe it at least... because as a kid... that's how I saw it. Dad built that church.

It was great to share these places with my wife, but I couldn't help but feel like these were memories from a different life. Time plays a funny trick on the memory when we disconnect ourselves from the places of our childhood. I have often said that the memories of my life are divided into chapters. The chapters run parallel with the places that we lived, but once we left, that chapter was closed, and I have a hard time returning. Experiences like Friday make me wish I had a home. Watching the game, something in me wanted to cheer for Red Oak. They were selling "Red Oak Hawks" hoodies at the game. I almost bought one, because I wanted to claim this place again. I wanted to believe that this place was still home, but it's not. There were very few familiar faces in the stands on Friday. Nobody remembers me. To them, I've long since left. And the same is true for Granbury, College Station, Cleburne, and on and on. And I have to admit, sometimes that makes me sad.

Tomorrow night at Breakaway and Monday at Mosaic, I am talking about how all of us carry around so much baggage that shapes us in ways that we don't even know. Things that happened to us when we were 8 years old have impacted us in ways that we often don't recognize. Driving around Red Oak made me think about my baggage. It made me wonder how I am different because of my lack of connection with my childhood. I don't know the answer, but I think it is something that I need to think about. I love my family. I love my parents, and I pray that God will give me the strength to be as good a father as my Dad has been for me. I pray that I will bless my kids in the way my mom has blessed me, but part of my journey has required me to stop blaming them for not having a home.... stop blaming the church for taking my childhood memories away... for making me feel sad because my memories seem too surreal. Maybe this is just part of growing up... I don't know. All I know is that this is part of my story. It's part of my journey, and if I want to be whole, I have to accept that it's part of who I am today.

When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

Psalms 126

Introduction to Ezra & Nehemiah

Important Dates...

- 586 BC :

- 539 BC :

- 516 BC :

- 458 BC :

- 445 BC :

Kings of Persia	Dates of Reign
Cyrus the Great	559-530
Cambyses	530-522
Darius I the Great	522-486
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	486-465
Artaxerxes I	465-424
Darius II	423-404

Characters worth remembering...

Nebudchadnezzar

Cyrus

Sheshbazzar

Zerubbabel & Jeshua

“Enemies of Israel”

Artaxerxes

Darius

Haggai & Zechariah

Tattenai

Ezra

Nehemiah

Returning Home

Ezra 3:10-13

Consecrating future gifts

Ezra 8:21-35

Shrinking God's dreams

Ezra 9:5-13

Heart Check

- In what ways do you find yourself on the journey of “returning home?”
- Along that journey, how have you experienced opposition?
- What are the practices/disciplines that have allowed you to stay faithful when the work slows to a halt?
- In what tangible ways are you trusting your future to God?
- How might God be calling you to take a step forward in faithfulness in this area?
- Right now, how would you describe the scope of God's dreams for your life?
- What in your life threatens God's dreams for you coming true?