

Finding Your Story in HIStory:
What Will You Do with Your Second Chance?
Selected Passages from Ezra

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Text Introduction: Since the beginning of this year, we have worked our way through the major movements of the Old Testament. Our goal has been to see systematically the story of God throughout history. We have come to the final story of the Old Testament this morning. Last week, we said that because of the ongoing rebellion of Israel, God brought them into a 70 year period of exile. This morning, we want to consider what happens after the exile.

Text: Ezra 1:5¹ In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, the word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah was fulfilled. The LORD put it into the mind of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and to put it in writing:

² This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build Him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Whoever is among His people, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ Let every survivor, wherever he lives, be assisted by the men of that region with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

⁵ So the family leaders of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—everyone God had motivated—prepared to go up and rebuild the LORD’s house in Jerusalem.

Introduction: Second Chronicles 29 through Nehemiah 2 presents an interesting period in the life of Israel. This portion of Scripture covers the final collapse of the Kingdom of Judah, the period of exile, and the subsequent return of a remnant to the land of Israel. The fall of Judah which brought about the exile happened about 587 B.C. During the period of the exile, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. King Cyrus of Persia allowed for the return in about 538 B.C. The text seems to indicate that there are at least three different periods of return. First, there is the return under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6). Then, there is the homecoming under the leadership of Ezra (Ezra 7-10). As noted in the *Daily Walk* introduction for Ezra, a 58-year gap exists between these two homecomings. Finally, there is the return under the leadership of Nehemiah. So, all total, the events recorded from the end of 2 Chronicles through Nehemiah cover well over 100 years.

Remember that we have learned that God seeks relationship with us. We have rebelled against that relationship. One of the lessons that we have learned is that God is a God who loves to give a second chance. In fact the way we said it a few weeks ago was: It does not matter who you are or what you have done, because of God’s grace and by His grace, you can begin again.

I want to extend that principle today. You get the chance to begin again. You get the chance for a second chance. What are you going to do with your second chance? The period after the exile of Israel helps us with the question.

Will you live in the present or live in the past? (Ezra 3:10-13)

When the exiles return, they initially get busy rebuilding the Temple. Hear what the text says about that beginning.

¹⁰ When the builders had laid the foundation of the LORD's temple, the priests, dressed in their robes and holding trumpets, and the Levites descended from Asaph, holding cymbals, took their positions to praise the LORD, as King David of Israel had instructed. ¹¹ They sang with praise and thanksgiving to the LORD: "For He is good; His faithful love to Israel endures forever." Then all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD because the foundation of the LORD's house had been laid.

¹² But many of the older priests, Levites, and family leaders, who had seen the first temple, wept loudly when they saw the foundation of this house, but many others shouted joyfully. ¹³ The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shouting from that of the weeping, because the people were shouting so loudly. And the sound was heard far away.

We will always be tempted to live in the past. We want to relive the past, rehash the past, and regret the past. God wants us more often than not to forget the past—especially in relationship to that which is negative. Remember Paul's example as recorded in Philippians 3—"forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead."

Remembering the past for purposes of instruction can be helpful, but almost all other attachments to the past will be hurtful.

I think here is the lesson. If you really want to make the most of the second chance that God gives, you are going to have to come to a place to "let some things go!"

Will you take advantage of God's grace or take advantage of God's grace? (Ezra 4:24-5:2)

I'm confused, how about you? That statement sounds like I'm saying the same thing. I am using the same words, just two different interpretations. Let me see if I can illustrate. Suppose I have an assignment with a deadline and then I'm offered two weeks more to complete the assignment. I can take advantage of the extra two weeks by doing more and doing the job more correctly or I can take advantage of the grace of the extra two weeks by doing nothing.

When the exiles returned after 70 years, work began on the temple. However, apathy and opposition caused work to cease on the temple for sixteen years. Not until God used the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to exhort the people to complete the work did they begin again. The reason for the delay? In part, they got busy with their own lives instead of interest in the work of God. Here's the text:

²⁴ Now the construction of God's house in Jerusalem had stopped and remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

¹ But when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them, ² Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak began to rebuild God's house in Jerusalem. The prophets of God were with them, helping them.

Do not delay obedience. Delayed obedience like partial obedience is disobedience.

Will you return with worship or return to your old ways? (Ezra 10:1-4)

Upon Ezra's return, he realized that the people of God were doing the same things that they were doing before the exile. Specifically, they had not separated themselves as a people.

¹ While Ezra prayed and confessed, weeping and falling facedown before the house of God, an extremely large assembly of Israelite men, women, and children gathered around him. The people also wept bitterly. ² Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, an Elamite, responded to Ezra: "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the surrounding peoples, but there is still hope for Israel in spite of this. ³ Let us therefore make a covenant before our God to send away all the foreign wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the command of our God. Let it be done according to the law. ⁴ Get up, for this matter is your responsibility, and we support you. Be strong and take action!"

This text screams out at us, "Things have to be different." Things cannot be business as usual. True worship always involves obedience.

In his book, *In the Heavens*, Dr. Harry Ironside tells the story of an attempted assassination of Queen Elizabeth I. The woman who sought to do so dressed as a male page and secreted herself in the queen's chamber awaiting the convenient moment to stab the queen to death. She did not realize that the queen's attendants would be very careful to search the rooms before Her Majesty was permitted to retire. They found the woman hidden among the gowns and brought her into the presence of the queen. She realized that humanly speaking, her case was hopeless. She threw herself down on her knees and pleaded and begged the queen as a woman to have compassion on her, a woman, and to show her grace. Queen Elizabeth looked at her coldly and quietly said, "If I show you grace, what promise will you make for the future?" The woman looked up and said, "Grace that hath conditions, grace that is fettered by precautions, is not grace at all." Queen Elizabeth caught it in a moment and said, "You are right. I pardon you out of my grace." And they led her away, a free woman. It is said that from that moment Queen Elizabeth had no more faithful, devoted servant than that woman who had intended to take her life. That is exactly the way the grace of God works in the life of an individual--he or she becomes a faithful servant of God.

God loves to give a second, but Scripture is clear that the window for repentance is not unlimited. Need proof? It is in Romans 1. Please, by the mercies of God receive His forgiveness, repent of sin, and return to God with commitment.