

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25)*

Blueprint For Reformation

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Ezra/Nehemiah

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Ezra chapter 1. If Ezra is not a book of the Bible you have visited frequently in the past, let me help you locate that; Ezra comes after 1 and 2 Chronicles and before Job. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are given to us as a unit because they collectively tell one story and my plan this morning is to give you an introduction that will help you make sense of all three of these books and then to draw out particularly from Ezra and Nehemiah a blueprint for reformation. Let me say a word about how we preach from the Old Testament narratives before we get into the specifics of this great story. To do that turn with me to 1 Corinthians 10:11. You can put a place holder at Ezra because we will be coming right back. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul tells a story from the Old Testament and then he says this:

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and **they were written for our admonition**, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:11)

Paul says that these stories of how God worked with his people in the Old Testament were written down because they instruct us and correct us. You see, God doesn't change. So if this is how he worked with his people then, then that is a really good indicator of how he will work with

us NOW. Theologians and Bible scholars refer to this as TYPOLOGY. That is a big word but I think you can handle it. Typology means that God works in patterns. God is a God of order and he is constantly communicating with us and one of the ways he communicates with us is through HISTORY, particularly the history of his people. So the idea is that an Old Testament story provides the general shape and pattern of who God is and how God behaves so that we can get in step with him and stay on the right side of his activities and align ourselves with his character. So when we read the Old Testament narratives, we aren't supposed to say: "Well that was then and this is now. Things are different today". No! We are supposed to say: "If that is how God did it then, and if God doesn't change, THEN this is how we should expect God to act with us TODAY!" That is what the Bible itself says about the relationship between these stories and us so that is how we will preach through these stories as we come to them. We will believe together that God is speaking to US, right now through these stories that occurred literally thousands of years ago.

Let me set up this particular story for you in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther and then over the next month we will pull out four specific episodes within it for further reflection. These three books of the Bible tell the story of how God rebuilt his people after a season of catastrophic collapse and heart breaking exile. The books of 1 Samuel – 2 Chronicles tell the story of the nation of Israel and her various kings. There were some really good kings like David and some really bad kings like Ahab or Manasseh but the general trajectory was downward into evil, rebelliousness, idolatry and cultural assimilation. The Jews gradually became no different than their pagan neighbours, in fact, the Bible says they became worse.

⁹So Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do **more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed** before the children of Israel. ¹⁰And the LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen. (2 Chronicles 33:9-10)

God began to punish and prune the people through a variety of fairly significant catastrophes and each one would produce a mini-revival but it was always short lived. The people would worship the Lord for a season and then they would fall back into the ways of their neighbours and they would worship idols, commit all kinds of adultery and moral transgression and finally God had had enough. In 587 B.C. he sent the Babylonians to Jerusalem and they literally wiped Israel off the map. They destroyed the city, burned the temple to the ground and sent the people into exile in chains. Israel ceased to exist. The most amazing thing about this is that God had prophets tell

the people that HE WAS DOING THIS, that it was for their ultimate good and that they were not to resist it. They were to embrace their captivity and await a new start.

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, **whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon:**

⁵Build houses and dwell *in them*; plant gardens and eat their fruit. ⁶Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. ⁷And seek the peace of the city where **I have caused you to be carried away captive**, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace... ¹⁰For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, **I will visit you** and perform My good word toward you, **and cause you to return** to this place. (Jeremiah 29:4-10)

So God has his prophet Jeremiah tell everyone: “God is going to cause the Babylonians to destroy our nation and send us into exile. Don’t fight it! This is God’s will. He is destroying us in order to rebuild us from the ground up. We are going to be destroyed and we are going to have to live in a long season of brokenness but when it is over GOD WILL REBUILD!!!!!!”

The story of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther is the story of how God kept that promise. Let me give you the big picture overview and then we will draw out a few general observations and applications.

Ezra – Nehemiah – Esther Overview:

In 587 God sent the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, burn the temple and to effectively end the political and social life of the nation of Israel. The Babylonian Empire then began to crumble from the inside under the weight of their own sin and folly and they were taken over in the Providence of God by the Persians in the year 539 B.C. God had prophesied this very thing in the Book of Daniel and we will talk about that when we come to it in future weeks. The Persians had a peculiar respect for the God of Israel. Secular historians who don’t love Jesus will comment on this but without providing any suggestions as to why this might be. For example, when the Persians took over Egypt they destroyed all of the Egyptian temples but left intact the Jewish worship centre and made no effort what so ever to disrupt the worship of the Jews who were living there. The secular historians say: “Hmm. Wonder why that is?” and move on. The Bible believers see the hand of God. God uses the machinery of empire to lift up AND throw down his people according to his purposes, we’ll say more about that in the weeks to come.

Anyway shortly after the Persians take over the Babylonian Empire, the story of Ezra and Nehemiah begins. The Ezra – Esther – Nehemiah narrative covers about 100 years beginning with the Persian ascendancy and it takes place in three major sections.

1. The rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and Joshua the High priest.

They were assisted by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and this stage covers roughly 538 – 516 BC. During this time the temple was rebuilt. It wasn't nearly as spectacular as the Solomonic Temple but it served its purpose. This is the time period covered by Ezra 1 -6 (except the excursus in 4:6-23) and also in the books of Haggai and Zechariah.

Then after that we have a 60 years break in the narrative during which the Book of Esther happens under Xerxes 1st. If you are a history buff this is also the time when the Battle of Thermopylae happened between the Persians and the Spartans. I had to translate that from the Histories of Herodotus for my third year Attic Greek reading exam and it still gives me nightmares. They later made it into a movie called “300” after the 300 Spartans who held the pass but unfortunately that did not come out in time for me and I had to translate the story without the help of Gerard Butler and his animated abs.

2. Ezra the Scribe comes to enforce the Law of Moses

After the 60 year break Artaxerxes the new King of the Persians desires to have the Jewish people not just in the land with a place of worship, but actually following the Laws of Moses and so he sends them a man called Ezra the Scribe. Ezra was a Bible Geek of the first order. This is what the Bible says about him:

⁶this 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...

¹⁰For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:6-10)

Bible geeks are useful, that's the take away there. What is interesting is that Ezra credits this decision of the king – A PAGAN KING – to send him to bring the Law of God to the people – he credits this decision to the Sovereignty of God. Look at what Ezra himself declares in 7:27:

²⁷Blessed *be* the LORD God of our fathers, who has put *such a thing* as this in the king's heart (Ezra 7:27)

This took place in 458 B.C. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem and he found the people in complete and utter disarray spiritually speaking. They had the form of worship but had drifted horribly from the Word of the Lord. When Ezra saw how far the people of God had drifted the Bible says he lay down ASTONISHED and he wept.

³So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. ⁴Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. ⁵At 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. ⁶And 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. ... ⁹For 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. ¹⁰And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments... ¹³And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this, ¹⁴should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people *committing* these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed *us*, so that *there would be* no remnant or survivor? ¹⁵O LORD God of Israel, You *are* righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as *it is* this day. Here we *are* before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!" (Ezra 9:3-15)

Ezra identifies with the sin of the people, he confesses it and then he sets out to correct it with the help of a few men who tremble before the Word of God. Ezra, as a lot of Bible geeks are, is perceptive enough to identify the sin; he's prophetic enough to declare their sin, but he needs encouragement to deal with it on the one to one, personal level. God surrounds him with some courageous elders who will not let him shy away. Look at what they say to him:

⁴Arise, for *this matter is your responsibility*. We also *are* with you. Be of good courage, and do *it*." (Ezra 10:4)

They say: "Listen Bible Geek, we need a pastor, this is your job. Don't shy away from this. Kick our butts and show us the way home. You have to do it!" What is amazing about this episode is that these elders themselves were among the sinners who had departed from God's ways. They come to Ezra and they confess that they have been part of the problem. In verse 2 they say:

"We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land... (Ezra 10:2)

It takes more than a Bible Geek to turn a church around it takes a group of elders who say to that Geek: “Kick our butts with the Word of God! We are sinners, we need this, we won’t like it, but we want it. You must do it. And we’re with you and we’ve got your back”. And so Ezra and the Elders taught the people the Word of God and they moved the people in the direction of holiness and righteousness and they turned that revival into a reformation and it was good.

3. Nehemiah the builder comes to raise the walls and establish the city

Once the people have set up the temple and once the people have been pastored and purified and the Word of God reigns among the people now the attention focuses on building, fortifying and defending. Nehemiah comes and he rebuilds the walls, defends the flock and establishes the city. Nehemiah is a BUILDER but he is no less spiritual than Ezra the Scribe. Listen church, Nehemiah teaches us that BUILDING IS SPIRITUAL and it must be done by spiritual people. The book of Nehemiah rings out with this truth. It shows Nehemiah saying things like:

“Do not be afraid of them. **Remember the Lord**, great and awesome, **and fight** for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.” (Nehemiah 4:14)

Remember the Lord AND FIGHT! We prayed AND SET A GUARD, we had shovels in over hand and SWORDS IN THE OTHER. Nehemiah took these holy people, living by the Word of God and he showed them how to build a city and protect a movement! That’s the final stage in the journey of reformation.

The Blueprint of Reformation:

Let me just take a minute and highlight for you the blueprint we have uncovered as we have fast walked through these three books of the Bible. Reformation begins with returning people to the House of the Lord. Now remember 1Corinthians 10 and the principle of typology. These stories in the OT set out the general pattern of who God is and how God works. But as they go forward, particularly on the other side of the cross THEY RAMP UP and they coalesce around the person and work of Jesus Christ. The NT is a HOW MUCH MORE covenant, it takes these themes AND RAMPS THEM UP and brings them into perfect focus through the lens of Jesus Christ. So we would look at this and we would say that in the Old Testament people met with God in a holy

place, the temple. In the New Testament they meet with God, not in a holy place, but in a HOLY PERSON, Jesus Christ. Do you remember what Jesus said in John 2?

¹⁹Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” ²¹But He was speaking of the temple of His body. (John 2:19-21)

Jesus was standing in the temple that was first rebuilt by Zerubbabel the Governor and Joshua the high priest way back in Ezra 1-6. It had been a smaller temple than the Solomonic Temple and so under Herod the Great it was greatly expanded to become by the time of Jesus one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus stands in that temple, still under construction and he says: “Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days”. Now was he saying that when the Romans destroyed the temple in AD 70 that he would come back and rebuild it in 3 days? No. He was saying that when he died on the cross and rose again he would effectively DESTROY the temple and replace it with his body. My friends, the most significant difference between the OT and the NT is that in the OT people met God in the temple in the NT we meet with God in JESUS CHRIST! If you have seen Christ you have seen GOD! No man can see the Father except by JESUS CHRIST, amen? Amen. So step 1 in the process of reformation is returning people to intimacy with God through Jesus Christ and we do that by preaching the Gospel.

Every Reformation begins with a Gospel Revival. The Protestant Reformation began when Martin Luther rediscovered the Gospel by being appointed to teach the New Testament. Luther had never even read the Bible when he was asked to teach it. He learned the Gospel by teaching Galatians and Psalms and Romans – books he was reading for the first time! It was Luther who returned the pure, sweet Gospel to the church after 500 years of confusion, neglect and drift into idolatry. Like a flash of lightning he spoke words we hadn’t heard in a very long time. Words like *sola fide* or grace alone. Words like *sola scriptura* or authority in Scripture alone. Luther said that our works were not a means of salvation, but rather that we are saved by grace and we work by grace. It is all of grace. He said that it is not the church that invents truth, rather it is God who speaks truth through the Scripture and it is the job of the church to protect and to preach that truth. Those words shook the world and a great season of Evangelism burst forth that saved Europe from darkness. Every Reformation begins with a revival of the Gospel and an intense outpouring of Evangelistic favour such that people are returned to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The second stage in the journey of Reformation is the return of the Word of God to God's people. It is not enough to save people, people must be taught how to walk in accordance with God's Word. That is why the Apostle Peter says:

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, **in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience** and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. (1 Peter 1:1-2)

He says literally that we were saved for or UNTO OBEDIENCE. God doesn't just want to be with you, he wants to be with you in holiness, according to how he originally created you, so saving people is not the end of the process! Peter goes on in this same chapter to say:

¹³Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ¹⁴**as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance;** ¹⁵but as He who called you *is* holy, **you also be holy in all your conduct,** ¹⁶because it is written, "*Be holy, for I am holy.*" (1 Peter 1:1-16)

Peter is as EZRA! Peter says: "It is wonderful that you have been returned to God through Jesus Christ, truly it is, but now we must press on INTO HOLINESS AND OBEDIENCE IN ALL OUR CONDUCT! That is what Ezra said and that is the second stage in reformation. Historically that is what John Calvin did in the Protestant Reformation. Luther was the prophet of the Gospel, Calvin was Ezra; he brought the Word and he pastored the people into holiness. It was Calvin who introduced church discipline. B.B. Warfield, a Protestant scholar of the Reformation actually implied that Luther simply let fly the thunder of the Gospel and then sat back and drank German beer in his garden until Calvin made a holy church out of his newly saved horde of converts. That may be too simple a view point but he's on the right track. Calvin, by the grace of God, taught saved people how to walk in God's way. He was undeniably the greatest Bible teacher in the history of God's people since the close of the canon. After the Gospel comes the Geek.

And after the Geek must come a season of building. Building is not UNHOLY!! God is a creator, God is a builder. Now we can and too often do build things that are not God's will and in line with his character but when the work of revival has led to the work of holiness then we must follow that with the work of building. It is not less holy than Evangelism or preaching. Jesus said: I will BUILD MY CHURCH. God sent Nehemiah the Builder no less than he sent

Joshua the Priest and Ezra the Scribe. The reformation isn't over until you've built a city and transformed a culture.

Now before we look quickly at a few general observations from this narrative let me just attempt to locate us within this process. This is what we are supposed to do by the way. This time period is established in the Bible as a paradigm of reformation. In Revelation 11 for example, God uses the imagery of the two Olive Trees from Zechariah – the prophet who worked alongside Zerubbabel and Joshua in stage 1 of this story, to explain the process by which God will be perpetually building his church throughout the entire dispensation between the ascension of Jesus and his return. He literally says in Revelation 11 that during the entire time between the ascension of Jesus into heaven and his return he will be ever building his church in just this way, according to the pattern set out in this story. There will be a call to intimate meeting in Jesus Christ, there will be BOLD BIBLE PREACHING and the call to holiness and faithfulness and there will be building and culture until the people of God are established and the purpose of God fulfilled. So this is the general pattern of things and we should be able to locate ourselves within this pattern fairly easily.

Let me suggest that we are somewhere in the Ezra section heading towards Nehemiah. We went through a season of intense Gospel revival a couple of years ago didn't we? We had people getting saved all over the place! It was wonderful and even a little addictive. "Why can't it be like this forever?" people asked and wondered. Because revival HAS to lead to depth and holiness or it fades to nothing! We were slow as it was to make the turn and too many people made professions of faith only to wander into error, compromise and worldliness. Too many hands in the air failed to become feet on the path. So God sent the Word! God sent a hunger and a passion and a commitment to THE WORD OF GOD sweeping through our church. Our appetite for the Bible went through the roof as we entered the Ezra stage. I believe that this "Walk Through The Bible" journey is the maturity of our Ezra stage. And I believe that on the other side of it we will be building.

I want to take a risk and share something with you. I had a dream a few weeks ago. I don't share this as an authoritative word, it has had NO INFLUENCE on our decision making as a Board, in fact it came to me long after we had laid out our preaching calendar for the winter, but it has

stayed with me and I want to share it with you. On December 13th at 1:11 a.m. I had this dream and recorded these words in my journal:

“I had a dream and woke up remembering the meaning, but none of the details. The meaning was this: God was telling me: ‘In addition to your eagerness in preaching and hearing the Word, you must become skilled builders’. I felt God affirming our courage in preaching and hearing His Word, but felt encouragement to become a determined builder.”

I think God is telling us that we are right on track with this Walk Through The Bible program. This is our Ezra stage but just like the Evangelism Revival, it is not the be all and end all. We need to build. We need to build a city and establish a culture and create a community and institutions that will protect this grace of God and establish it for generations to come. I believe that, not because I had a dream, I believe it because it is the very pattern that was given to us in the precious Word of God.

Anticipations For The Journey Ahead

Now real quickly before we go I want to just lay out in shopping list fashion a few things to watch for as you begin reading through these books of the Bible over the next month. Some of these we will reflect on at length in our weekly messages, others we won't and so I want you to note them ahead of time so that you can reflect on them as you meet them.

1. It takes a variety of leaders and leadership gifts to sustain a reformation.

It took leaders and organizers like Zerubbabel, it took priests and intercessors like Joshua, it took prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, it took women like Esther and counsellors like Mordecai. It took Bible Geeks like Ezra and a whole host of courageous elders who supported him and it took builders like Nehemiah. In the days of the Protestant Reformation it took men like Luther, who were prophets of the Gospel and powerful Evangelists and then it took men like Calvin who brought the Word and who instituted discipline and form and then it took the great builders of the next generation who built institutions on top of that form. Men like the Wesleys, men like Charles Spurgeon who built up our clan, the Reformed Baptist clan, and men like John Knox who built up our Presbyterian cousins. These were makers of culture and builders of institutions that

preserved the power of the reformation and gave it shape and gave it legs. It takes a BROAD VARIETY of leaders and leadership gifts to sustain a reformation. Notice that as you read along.

2. There will be seasons when the civil government supports us and seasons when they resist us.

In Ezra and Nehemiah we see times when tax revenue went to assist in their efforts and then times when the government opposed them and restrained them. In Esther we see the government trying literally to exterminate them but being thwarted by God and being able to. And so we learn that we are not to fear the government nor to expect their continual favour. We need to hear this church. Presently in Canada we have the favour of the government. We get tax receipts for our tithes, our property is tax free; this is a wonderful season for building! And yet we are not to expect it to last. The same government that subsidized Zerubbabel then tried to EXTERMINATE ESTHER. We get tax receipts today and maybe jail time tomorrow. Either way, we walk, we work and we build.

3. It is the purpose of the Lord to bring it to pass.

As you read these stories church, watch for the phrase “the hand of the Lord”. It is all throughout these books. God stirs the heart of a king, hardens the heart of another, causes this to be done and causes that to be done. In Zechariah this is pictured in terms of horsemen and chariots. God sets the table for his purpose by manipulating affairs in the political realm and then he executes the clinching moves upon the board and establishes his sovereign will. Watch for that.

4. God works through people who are willing to partner.

There is no “let go and let God” in these stories. God establishes his purpose through the people who are willing to pray and set a guard, remember the Lord and FIGHT, hold a shovel and hold a sword.

This is how God builds his house, this is how God REFORMS his people and I find myself very eager to be a part of it. And all God’s people said, amen. Jody will you come and lead us?