

## **God's Glory in His Relationship with Us**

Ezra 1-2

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Today we begin a series on Ezra and Nehemiah. They are about the restoration of God's people Israel, and by application can be extended to our restoration to God through Jesus. The main point is that God demonstrates His glory in relationship with us. This relationship is like that of a king and his subjects, a teacher and his students, a father and his children, and a husband and his wife. Related to this main point, there are 3 theological themes that show up in today's passage.

The first theme, seen in Ezra 1:1, is that God demonstrates His glory through His faithfulness to His people. Faithfulness means honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness. It means keeping one's promises. In Genesis God promised to make Abraham the father of the nation of Israel, through whom all nations would be blessed. After Israel grew up as slaves in Egypt, God delivered them through Moses and gave them the Law at Sinai, which detailed blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. This was a conditional contract, which Israel wasn't able to keep. Israel persisted in disobedience. The kingdom split into the northern kingdom of Israel, which was more disobedient and fell first to the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom of Judah, which later fell to the Babylonians. This exile was a direct result of breaking the Law. But God spoke through Jeremiah saying that He would restore Judah after 70 years of exile (Jeremiah 29:10). And in Ezra 1 God fulfills His promise to restore His people. Chapter 2 provides proof of God's faithfulness, demonstrating the continuity of Israel after the exile by numbering the returning men from the priesthood and lineages. Through this restoration, He also is faithful to the unconditional promise He made to Abraham, which is before and supersedes the Mosaic Covenant whose violation brought about the exile. God's faithfulness is displayed even when His people aren't faithful. This is also seen in Hosea, where God loves His wife Israel even though she is an adulteress. And also for us, God is faithful even though we are unfaithful. Whenever we sin against Him, our relationship with God through Jesus, though not experienced to its fullest, won't be severed. This is our promise from God, which He will keep.

The second theme is God's sovereignty. In 1:1 we see that God moved the heart of Cyrus. God didn't necessarily talk directly to Cyrus, nor did Cyrus necessarily have to acknowledge Yahweh as the one true God. Yet God moved Cyrus' heart, changing his thinking

so that he would do His will. This resulted in Cyrus' unique approach to conquest. Rather than using the conquest to prove that his god was better than Israel's God, Cyrus used it to show that Israel's God gave Israel over to Cyrus, which meant Israel could still return and worship God as long as they paid the tribute as acknowledgement of the authority God gave to Cyrus. We see in v. 5 that God also moved the hearts of the Israelites in exile to give up their lives in Babylon and return to the desolate land of Israel to participate in the laborious rebuilding effort. Only those who God moved returned, the remnant of Judah whose eyes were opened to the true worth of citizenship in God's kingdom, and to the fact that Babylon wasn't their home. God moves hearts by changing perspectives, so people see the value of the things of God over that of the things of this world. And God also moved our hearts so we could see that this world isn't our home. He makes us realize that nothing here can satisfy and only God can provide what we long for. This is why we sought God through Jesus. God changes hearts of stone to hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). His sovereignty works in our salvation and sanctification. His power transformed our spirits and continually transforms our hearts and lives to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. Don't try to change yourself by your own effort, and don't despair when you sin. But ask God for His strength and He will answer.

Finally, God demonstrates His glory through redemption. This is seen not only in Israel's return, but in the rebuilding of the Temple, the symbol of God's presence and relationship with Israel. So when the Temple was destroyed, it meant that they were no longer with God. But upon repentance, God brought them back and dwelled among them again. They were delivered so they could worship God and have a relationship with Him, which the Temple symbolized. Even back in Exodus 4:22-23, deliverance has always been for the purpose of relationship and worship. And also for us, our deliverance is for a relationship with God through Jesus. We were redeemed to God, to be in His presence and worship Him. But do you enjoy this relationship fully? It's not just about what you can get from God, but about how much you enjoy His presence and value Him. Do you prioritize Him in your life above all else? Worship God by living lives that bring Him glory. Put God first in your heart and allow Him to work in you. And give thanks that your relationship is secured by Jesus' blood, that nothing can separate you from the love of God. You are His people and He is your God.