Lesson 2: Lessons from a List (Ezra 2:1-70)

Ezra 2 is the sort of passage that tempts expository preachers to skip. You might find here some unique ideas for naming your baby (“Gazzam” [2:48] has a certain ring to it!), but other than that, you wonder why God used space in the Bible for this long list of unpronounceable names. It’s doubly hard to understand because God put essentially the same list again in Nehemiah 7! These just aren’t the sort of chapters that you spend enjoyable hours on during your quiet time!

But since all Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16), we should not automatically skip these portions of God’s Word, but try to figure out why they’re in the Bible.

Why did Ezra include this list here? Perhaps there are several reasons (listed in Mervin Breneman, The New American Commentary [Broadman & Holman], p. 74). The list may legitimize land rights after the return from the exile. It may distinguish true Israelites from the Samaritans and show, in the face of Tattenai’s challenge (5:3-4) those who were authorized by Cyrus to return and rebuild the Temple. Also, “the author and his readers were concerned about the continuity of this community with the preexilic Jewish nation. It was important to show that this community, though small and weak, continued God’s plan for Israel” (p. 73).

Derek Kidner observes (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 36): This chapter, however uninviting it may seem, is a monument to God’s care and to Israel’s vitality. The thousands of returnees are not lumped together, but (in characteristic biblical fashion) related to those local and family circles which humanize a society and orientate an individual. … And for the people’s part, their tenacious memory of places and relationships, still strong after two generations in exile, showed a fine refusal to be robbed of either their past or their future.

He goes on to make the point that “the fundamental motive for this careful grouping was not social but religious.” In this new opportunity for Israel to live up to its calling, every priest must have his credentials, and every member too. The close of the chapter shows the restored nation, orderly, structured, and ready for its main purpose, namely, worship.

Bringing together the various strands of these themes, the lesson for us from this list is that...

God is faithful to His chosen people, to discipline them for their sins and to restore them, so that they might live faithfully to His covenant.

Before we look at the spiritual and practical lessons, let’s look briefly at the structure and some of the details of the list. In verse 2, there are 11 names in Ezra, whereas Nehemiah 7:7 has 12. Most scholars think that a scribal error left out a name in Ezra and that the number 12 is significant as representing the 12 tribes. The Nehemiah and Mordecai of these verses are not the more well-known men from the books of Nehemiah and Esther.
From 2:2-20 is a list of various families and their numbers. The many numerical differences between Ezra and Nehemiah are probably due to scribal errors. Hebrew numbers are difficult to transcribe. From 2:21-35 is a list of various towns and their population. This is followed by a list of the priests (2:36-39), Levites (those in the tribe of Levi who were not sons of Aaron), temple singers and gatekeepers (2:40-42). The temple servants (2:43-54) and the sons of Solomon’s servants (2:55-58) numbered 392 altogether, averaging only about 9 members per clan. Then comes a list of those who could not produce evidence of their tribal origin (2:59-60), including certain priests (2:61-63). The governor excluded them from serving as priests until a high priest could be authorized to use the Urim and Thummim, which were a means of determining God’s will.

Then the totals are given (2:64-67), plus the number of servants, singing men and women, and livestock. There is a problem in that when you add up the numbers in 2:3-60, you get 29,818, but verse 64 lists the total as 42,360, a difference of 12,540. Some say that the difference represents women and children, but this would be a small number for 30,000 men. Others suggest that the 30,000 were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, whereas the 12,000 are from the northern tribes. But the bottom line is, the text does not account for the difference, and so we do not know. When you add the servants and the singers to the 42,360, you get 49,897 who returned in this first movement back to the land.

The chapter ends by noting that one of the first things the various heads of households did upon arriving in Jerusalem was to give a sizeable amount toward the rebuilding of the Temple. This showed their commitment to the Lord and to proper worship. The final verse (70) reports that the people were resettled in their cities, with special mention of those responsible for worship.

Now let’s focus on the spiritual lessons here:

1. God is faithful to His chosen people, to discipline them for their sins and to restore them in His time.

As Kidner says (p. 36), “This chapter is a monument to God’s care....” He had led the sinful nation into captivity and now He leads them back to the land, just as He had promised through His prophets (Jer. 29:10-14). During the siege of Jerusalem, God had told Jeremiah to redeem his family ancestral property in Anathoth as a witness that “houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land” (Jer. 32:6-15). Ezra’s list records 128 men from the village of Anathoth (2:23) returning to the land. So this list underscores what we saw in lesson 1, that the return to the land came about because the Lord stirred up the heart of the pagan king Cyrus to fulfill His word through Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1-4). God’s faithfulness is the main banner to write above this list. There are three things to spell out in more detail:
A. God has a Chosen People.

God chose Israel (those descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to be His people. As Moses told the Israelites, “The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6). He goes on to tell them that it was not because of anything special in them, but rather because of God’s sovereign oath to their forefathers. Then he says, “Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them” (Deut. 7:9-10a).

Those verses are foundational to understanding why we have this list of names in Ezra 2. Ancestry was essential to being a Jew and being a Jew was essential to being a part of the covenant nation. The temple servants (2:43-54) and the sons of Solomon’s servants (2:55-58) were probably not native Jews, but foreigners who were brought in to do the more menial tasks. By accepting the covenant of circumcision, they could be included in Israel (Exod. 12:48). But the point still stands, that ancestry was important. The 652 who could not prove their ancestry are singled out (2:59-60) and were apparently given the same standing as circumcised foreigners. But they lacked legitimate grounds for claiming their tribal lands, as parceled out by Joshua.

By the time we get to the New Testament, the Jews had taken their ancestry too far. It led them into pride regarding the Gentiles and to the false notion that a birth pedigree was sufficient for right standing with God. But John the baptizer confronted them: “Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8).

As Jesus told Nicodemus, the important birth is not being born a Jew physically but being born again spiritually through repentance and faith in Christ (John 3:1-21). Paul makes the same point, that it is those who are of the faith of Abraham who are his true children (Rom. 4:13-16; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:29). Thus, the evidence that we are God’s chosen people is not our physical birth, but rather the evidence of the new birth which is through faith in Christ. For this reason, Peter (2 Pet. 1:5-10) gives us a list of moral qualities that we need to add to our faith and concludes, “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you.” Thus, this registry of Jewish ancestry was a type of the registry that really matters, the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 20:12). Make sure that your name is written there!

B. God Is Faithful to Discipline His Chosen People.

The Babylonian captivity was God’s faithful discipline of His erring people. He had warned them that He would scatter them among the nations if they persisted in their disobedience (Deut. 28:64). God used the wicked Babylonians to discipline His people (Hab. 1) and to show them the emptiness of idolatry. Israel had not faithfully kept the sabbath, and so
God expelled them from the land for 70 years of sabbaths (2 Chron. 36:21) to teach them the importance of obedience to His Word.

Hebrews 12:8 tells us, “If you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” of God. In other words, if you claim to be a Christian and you live in deliberate disobedience to God without any negative consequences, you’re in bigger trouble than you realize! You may not be a true Christian at all. One mark of a true child of God is that when he sins, God faithfully disciplines him.

But—and this point is crucial—God does not discipline us to make us pay for our sins. Christ paid for our sins on the cross. Rather, He disciplines us that we might share His holiness (Heb. 12:10). In other words, restoration is the goal of God’s discipline of His true children.

C. GOD IS FAITHFUL TO RESTORE HIS CHOSEN PEOPLE IN HIS TIME.

When the 70 years were up, God restored His people to the promised land. This chapter is a specific, detailed record of God’s faithfulness to His covenant people. He knows how long His people need to be under His rod of discipline and He is able to restore them when the time is right.

Note that God did not wipe out the consequences of the nation’s sins, even when He restored them. They did not come back to beautiful cities and homes or to cultivated fields waiting to be harvested. They came back to piles of rubble and to fields overgrown with weeds. It required a lot of time and work to rebuild the devastated cities and to get the farmlands back into shape.

When God forgives our sin and restores us spiritually, He does not usually remove the consequences of what we did to incur His discipline. If you destroyed your family through your sinful anger, you may not get your family back when God restores you to a right relationship with Him. If you ran up huge debts because of your impulsive spending, repentance doesn’t mean that God will make all your creditors evaporate. You may have to work many years to pay your debts.

Also, note that those returning to the land were the children and grandchildren of those who brought on the captivity by their sins. The ones returning could have bitterly complained, “It’s not fair that we should have to rebuild what was destroyed because of our sinful parents!” But that kind of attitude reflects a rebellious heart towards the Lord. Our attitude should always be submission to the Lord in all of His dealings with us and gratitude that He doesn’t give us what we really deserve. If He should count iniquities, who could stand (Ps. 130:3)?

Thus, God’s faithfulness is the banner over this long list of those returning to the land. But the other factor is the people’s response to God’s faithfulness:
2. Our response to God’s faithfulness should be to live faithfully to His covenant.

When God graciously gives us the opportunity to begin again as His covenant children after we’ve sinned, His grace should motivate us to obedience. This list implies three aspects of covenant faithfulness:

A. Living Faithfully to God’s Covenant Implies Continuity.

One reason this list is here is to demonstrate to the current generation of Jews their historical continuity with the pre-exilic Jewish community that God had chosen (Breneman, pp. 50). “It was important to show that this community, though small and weak, continued God’s plan for Israel” (ibid., p. 73). They were now to carry on God’s purposes and to hand off to their children and grandchildren a vision for those purposes and for their identity as His people. The very fact that a person could say, “I am the son of so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, etc.,” back for many generations, and that he was dwelling on the family inheritance, was a graphic picture of God’s covenant faithfulness.

I’m afraid that continuity is a rather strange concept for most of us today. Unlike many of our grandparents who grew up and lived the rest of their lives in the home they were born in, we change homes and geographic locations frequently. Family ties don’t usually have much effect on those decisions. The Jews could trace their ancestry back for centuries. One modern traveler to the Middle East said that on one occasion, while he was in an Arab encampment, an Arab got up and related the history of his forebears back to 40 generations, and that others there obviously could have done the same thing (in Edwin Yamauchi, Expositors Bible Commentary [Zondervan], 4:617). Most of us could not name our eight (or more, due to divorce) great-grandparents. I have first cousins that I would not recognize if they walked in the room, in that I haven’t seen them since childhood. It’s a rare thing in America to have two or three generations where families have not been fragmented by divorce, often several times over.

The only person that I’ve heard say much about the importance of continuity is Edith Schaeffer (see Common Sense Christian Living [Thomas Nelson], chapters 3 & 4). She makes the point that there is great value in the effort required to preserve continuity in life, both through committed relationships and through handing down items that have meaning, and memories attached to them. This could include a grandmother’s quilts and a grandfather’s well-worn Bible. Of course, the continuity that she is emphasizing is based on God’s Word. We should hand off His truth and work to preserve it in our families from generation to generation.

B. Living Faithfully to God’s Covenant Implies Community.

These Jews did not return to the land as so many individuals, to erect their fences and gated communities where they could come and go for years without even knowing their neighbors. They had a sense of community built on their common ancestry and faith. While they all lived in their respective cities and homes, Jerusalem was the center (3:1) where they
went up at least three times each year to worship God together. They had more of a cooperative society, rather than the competitive society that we live in.

As Americans, we are individualistic and competitive. You can see it in our driving habits. We speed up when someone wants to pass us. In Poland, they move over to the side and drive three abreast on two-lane roads! They cooperate; we compete! When it comes to our spiritual lives, we tend to read the Bible in individualistic terms, not in corporate terms. For example, when we read in Ephesians and Colossians about “the new man,” we think of each person’s new identity in Christ. In fact, the NASB translates it, “the new self.” But in the context, Paul is talking about the church as the one new man (see Col. 3:9-14). And while there is a legitimate sense in which our individual bodies are temples of God (1 Cor. 6:19), there is another sense in which the entire church is God’s temple, and we are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:21-22). To live faithfully to God’s covenant, we need to recover the biblical sense of community with other believers.

C. Living Faithfully to God’s Covenant Implies Commitment.

To give up your comfortable and familiar surroundings, pack up and move across 1,000 miles of hostile desert to a land that had been devastated by war took commitment! It wasn’t convenient, but those who made the move could not sing the Lord’s songs in Babylon (Psalm 137). They longed for Jerusalem and the Temple, where God’s glory had been known. And so they were willing to do whatever was required to see God enthroned among His people in His holy place. Their commitment can be seen in three strands:

1. **Commitment to Worship.**

   This whole chapter centers on the return of the priest, Levites, singers, and doorkeepers of the Temple. It shows how Israel was organized for the purpose of worship. While there is a proper place for spontaneity in worship, there is also the need for proper order and planning. Our aim in worship is not to evoke a feeling, but to meet with the living God and to show forth His glory.

   Also, the fact that the priests who could not confirm their ancestry were considered unclean and prevented from serving shows that holiness is an essential factor in proper worship. To be living as the world lives all week and then pop into church for a few minutes of worship is an abomination to God. All week long our lives should bring glory to God through holy thoughts, words, and deeds. Then our public worship on Sunday is an overflow of our gratitude and obedience to Him.

2. **Commitment to Service.**

   The list shows us the variety of service, with the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, and temple servants, each having their duty to perform for the smooth functioning of the whole. Some were more visible and up front. Others were more behind the scenes, but no less
important. Even so, in the church, every member has been given a spiritual gift to exercise in serving the Lord for His glory (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

(3) Commitment to Giving.

The first thing these people did upon returning, as far as the text records, was to go to the place where the house of the Lord had been and offer their gifts willingly to see it restored (2:68-69). The record of the animals (2:66-67) tells us that some of the returning people were fairly comfortable, in that the horse (736 of them) was like the Cadillac of that day. Many more (6,720) had donkeys, but among the 50,000, there were many who didn’t own any animals. They gave “according to their ability,” which implies that the wealthier people gave more, but the poor also gave as they could. Even so, Paul instructs us to put aside and give as the Lord has prospered us (1 Cor. 16:1-2). He commends the Macedonians who gave not only according to their ability, but even beyond their ability, of their own accord, begging Paul for the privilege of giving (2 Cor. 8:3-4).

Conclusion

Can God use a commonplace list of unknown names to spur us on to growth in godliness? Since it is in His Word which He promised will not return void unto Him (Isa. 55:11), I trust so.

First, are you one of His chosen ones? Make sure of it! I had someone ask me recently, “How can a person know that he is one of God’s elect?” My answer was, “That’s very simple. Answer this question: Have you truly put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ by obeying His commandments and is there any evidence of that fact in your life?”

Second, are you experiencing and submitting to God’s faithful discipline in your life? This could be just the minor hassles that we all experience every day, or it could be a major trial. All these things are to train you to share His holiness as you submit joyfully to Him.

Third, are you seeking to live faithfully to His New Testament covenant? Covenant faithfulness will show itself in continuity, community, and commitment to worship, service, and giving. This chapter is a witness to God’s enduring faithfulness to His people. Our response to His faithfulness should be to live faithfully to His covenant.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important practically to know that you are one of God’s chosen people? Will this lead to pride? Why/why not?

2. Is God’s discipline always directly related to our sin? How is discipline different than punishment?

3. What are some practical implications of the idea of continuity?
4. Is competition an unbiblical concept? Where is the proper balance between competition and cooperation?