

# CBFVA BIBLE STUDIES

## 2021-2022



*Imagine the Post-Pandemic Church*  
**Lessons from Ezra**

# **Imagine the Post-Pandemic Church**

## ***Lessons from Ezra***

### **INTRODUCTION**

**by Megan Fullerton Strollo & Terry Maples**

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia is committed to resourcing clergy and congregations. One avenue of resourcing we offer is annual thematic Bible studies and lessons. Our 2021 Bible study series is especially contextual. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many of us to feel isolated in our homes. Physical distancing measures kept us apart and away from church buildings and community that shape our lives.

Pandemic, many deaths, much suffering, systemic racial injustice, and political unrest are causes for grief, lament, and reflection. What have we learned that must be carried forward and preserved? What must be left behind because it no longer serves us and can't take us where we need to go? Where is reform needed? What does recommitment to one another in faith communities look like? What type of leadership is required?

We have chosen the postexilic book of Ezra to assist us on our post-pandemic journey. Even though this story is about events occurring over 2500 years ago, the experiences of first exile and then return to Jerusalem, rebuilding the temple, and recommitting to God, contain insights for today's church. In our own 21st century contexts, how can we find fresh vision after life-altering situations?

### **Background**

Before we can enter into the account of Ezra, we have to recall what brought the people of God to the place of reform, renewal, and regrowth. It's a backstory that stretches several centuries, in fact. Around the time of the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel was split between his sons, Jeroboam I became king over ten northern tribal lands that retained the name "Israel", while his brother Rehoboam became king over two southern tribal lands that constituted "Judah" (1 Kings 11:29–12:17). For nearly two centuries, these two kingdoms saw socio-political conflicts give rise to theological divisions. A question began to form: what does it mean to be an Israelite and a worshipper of the one God?

Then, at the beginning of the 8th century BCE<sup>1</sup>, the empire of Assyria began to put pressure on the region of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 722 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel was overtaken by the military might of the Assyria Empire (2 Kings 17). The Assyrians exiled a segment of the population, and also "brought people from Babylon, Cuth, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, resettling them in the cities of

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<sup>1</sup> BCE stands for Before the Common Era, and is equivalent to the Dionysian notation of BC ("before Christ").

Samaria in place of the Israelites” (2 Kings 17:24).<sup>2</sup> These actions taken by the Assyrian Empire further destabilized the region political and socially, and disrupted the relationship between the two kingdoms by increasing religious tensions and divisions. The question posed above of what marks a “true” Israelite (i.e., a worshipper of Yahweh) became more complex.

At that time, the southern kingdom of Judah was spared the onslaught of the Assyrians. This would not be the case with the arrival of the Babylonians in the late 7th–early 6th century BCE. Not only did the military strength of the Babylonian Empire overpower the small southern kingdom, but misguided alliances with Egypt led to one of the most devastating events in Judah’s history: the destruction of the temple, the ransacking of Jerusalem, and the exile of many of its inhabitants. Between 597 and 586 BCE, the Babylonians deported thousands of the upper-class citizenry of the city, leaving a much-depleted region. While some biblical accounts give the impression that nothing and no one was left in the city (2 Chronicles 36:20–21), archaeological evidence does suggest that at least a small—likely poorer class—population still remained.<sup>3</sup>

As with the other empirical periods, the onset of the Persian Empire marked a new change for the people of God and for the kingdoms of Israel (Samaria) and Judah (Yehud<sup>4</sup>). Notably, the imperial policy held by the Babylonians of forced exile ended. Around 538 BCE Cyrus of Persia issued an edict granting permission for those who had been exiled to return to Jerusalem. During the subsequent decades, many Judeans did return to their homeland of Judah (Yehud), some with envoys led by Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 2:1–67; 7:1–9; Nehemiah 7:7–73).

The period between 538–515 BCE—the early years of the postexilic period—marked an important reorganization of the Judean community—including Nehemiah’s rebuilding projects (book of Nehemiah) and Ezra’s major religious reforms. The biblical accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah document parts of these early years of return, reform, and renewal.<sup>5</sup> Nehemiah established political statutes and administrative reform for the community by rebuilding the city wall. Following the dedication of the Second Temple, Ezra reformed the community’s spiritual life. As they worked to rebuild community, the question of identity remained at the forefront.

## **Spiritual Condition of the Judean Community**

The destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the ransacking of the city, and the exile of many of its inhabitants left the Judean people rattled, to say the least. The Bible

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<sup>2</sup> Samaria had been the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (1 Kgs 16:24). Following the Assyrian conquest, it became the name used by the Empire for the entire region.

<sup>3</sup> The account in 2 Kings also suggests that a “remnant” existed in Judah following the destruction and exile of the elite (e.g., 2 Kings 25:22–24).

<sup>4</sup> Yehud was the Persian name for the region of Judah.

<sup>5</sup> Ancient manuscripts of the Biblical books indicate that Ezra and Nehemiah were once considered one volume. Therefore, you can often find the books referenced together: Ezra-Nehemiah.

recounts those feelings of loss and confusion. Psalm 137 poignantly describes the pain experienced by those who had been exiled in Babylon:

*Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down,  
crying because we remembered Zion.  
We hung our lyres up in the trees there  
because that's where our captors asked us to sing;  
our tormentors requested songs of joy:  
'Sing us a song about Zion!' They said.  
But how could we possibly sing the song on foreign soil? (Psalm 137:1–4)*

Those left behind in the city, too, were devastated. The book of Lamentations describes in hauntingly vivid detail the destruction and the hardship of those who remained in the ruined city:

*Oh, no! She sits alone, the city that was once full of people. (Lam 1:1)*  
  
*All her people are groaning, seeking bread.  
They give up their most precious things for food to survive. (Lam 1:11)*  
  
*The baby's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth, thirsty.  
Children ask for bread, beg for it—but there is no bread. (Lam 4:4)*

Whether exiled into Babylon or left in the depleted region of Judah, questions about God's purpose and even whether God had abandoned them arose among the people. Their central and sacred temple, which housed the ark of the covenant—the very seat of God, had been destroyed; the assurance of God's favor provided by the kings of Judah was lost when they were exiled. Needless to say, what they had come to believe in and trust about God from the covenantal promises of their ancestors was found wanting. Finding answers to these questions, however, looked different depending on whether you were exiled or whether you remained in Judah. From this time on, the people were dispersed, what is called diaspora, and that physical dispersment affected their understanding of the world and God.

The perspective that shapes Ezra is that of the group that had been exiled and then were invited to return by the Persian king, Cyrus. During the period of exile, those who had been forced to live in Babylon had formed tight-knit communities, and they considered their very survival to have been God's will. Therefore, they viewed themselves as a “pure” remnant, a “true” remnant of Israel, one preserved for the purpose of restoring Jerusalem, its temple, and the people of God. Upon their return, they sought to rebuild the city and their community on *their* understanding of Torah. They clung to societal and theological traditions that they had known before exile—kingship, temple-worship, and Torah. When it came to rebuilding the city and the community, completion of the temple was top of the list—providing sacred space in many ways reestablished the status of the worshipping community.

The books of Ezra-Nehemiah partially document the attempts made to reestablish community in the postexilic period. While they are undoubtedly one-sided (see discussion above), we glimpse in these books a group of people seeking renewal, regrowth, and reform. For them, the postexilic world looks different, and the path forward is not without bumps. As we will see in our study of Ezra, the people faced numerous challenges: priests are offering sick and injured animals to God, Sabbath is neglected and turned over to business, tithes are not paid forcing Levites to abandon their temple duties in order to make a living, the poor are reduced to servitude, and marriage to Gentiles—a practice which in their view threatened the “purity” of the worshipping community—is happening with greater frequency throughout the culture. These problems are not insignificant and look back to the question of identity in a complex world. As we will see in our study, these issues are complex, and they illustrate for us how a community grapples with change and renewal after a difficult period of time.

Finally, our study focuses on Ezra, who came to Jerusalem sometime after the initial return (Ezra 1:1–2:70) in hopes of helping the community rebuild. Ezra is described as a priest and scribe especially skilled in the Instruction (Torah) of Moses (Ezra 7:6). After recognizing that the people of God had fallen into unacceptable practices (especially, in Ezra’s opinion, marriages to foreign women), Ezra declares Torah to be the authoritative guide for the community. Public readings of the Law encouraged the community (Nehemiah 7:73b–8:9) to affirm God’s covenant and conform their lives to Torah-living.

## **Reading the Old Testament Through a Christian Lens**

Before we begin our study of Ezra, it is important to write a word or two about how we as Christians ought to read and glean insight from these Old Testament texts.

The word “hermeneutic” comes from the Greek term meaning “interpretation, explanation, translation.” This word has been used to discuss how we read and understand scripture in its historical context then apply sound principles in order to clarify meaning in our current context. As we read these ancient texts dealing with a specific historical moment—exile and postexile, having a hermeneutic that helps us bridge between that time and our own context—pandemic and post-pandemic—is particularly important.

Baptists are fond of the statement regarding “Scripture” from the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message: *The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.* We understand this statement to mean “Jesus is the lens through which we interpret all scripture.” Examining how Jesus read, interpreted, and reinterpreted the sacred texts can be extremely helpful for our own reading. Jesus had two reference points for his teaching: the Hebrew scriptures and his vision of God and God’s Kingdom. In this way, he had much in common with the visionaries and prophets (for example, Micah and Amos) we find in the Old Testament. His vision of God’s Kingdom amplified a message pervasive in the Old Testament: God is abounding in steadfast love, mercy, and justice (Exodus 34: 6–7). At the same time, Jesus consistently challenged those in the

community who interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures in ways that did not uphold that message of love and justice.

A deep dive into Jesus's teachings reveals his hermeneutic: his is a hermeneutic of love—a way of reading scripture that places love and justice at the forefront. The Bible, in this case the Old Testament, is not homogenous, meaning the messages we read in the various books may differ or even contradict one another. Jesus knew that. So, what informed and shaped Jesus's hermeneutic—how did Jesus read and interpret scripture and tradition? Richard Rohr contends Jesus honored scripture that was *inclusive* (egalitarian, non-patriarchal, and non-violent) and rejected that which was *exclusionary* (imperialistic, ritualistic, patriarchal, and violent). This insight is evident in Jesus's experience and parables (enjoying table fellowship with outcasts; touching sick/dead people; redeeming “sinners” like tax collectors, prostitutes, and all despised by pious Jews; rejecting violence during his arrest). Jesus' vision is a transformed one, that is, no longer constrained by rigid adherence to laws that were used to judge and abuse. That's Jesus's prophetic vision of God's Kingdom.

As we read Ezra, we must keep this hermeneutic of love in mind. In the Introduction to his commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah, Dr. Paul Redditt says this about reading these books as Christians:

*What makes it Christian reading of the text is not that I find Jesus hidden in either Ezra or Nehemiah, whether by prediction, allusion, or “type,” and not that I think Ezra and Nehemiah were “Christians before Christ,” but that I measure the theology of the books and their heroes by the Christian gospel that God loved (and loves) all the people of the world.... (Ezra-Nehemiah, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, xvi)*

## Meet Our Writers

We are grateful for the collaborative efforts of the following gifted leaders who wrote this year's studies. We are especially thankful for Megan Strollo's keen biblical insights that shaped the process.

**Rev. Dr. Megan Fullerton Strollo** received both her Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy in biblical studies degrees from Union Presbyterian Seminary in 2012 and 2020, respectively, and has taught biblical languages at the school since 2016, including Hebrew and Greek. In 2012 she received the seminary's Patrick D. Miller Award for Excellence in the Study of Scripture.



Her primary research interests include biblical languages, biblical theology, intertextuality in the Bible, feminist biblical interpretation, and women in the Bible and biblical world. Her dissertation research explores the theological themes of divine activity and human agency in the books of Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther.

Dr. Strollo is an ordained minister affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and she served as CBFVA's Theologian in Residence this past year. Strollo has served in pastoral roles at various churches in Virginia and enjoys opportunities to bring her research interests to the church and other public forums. When she is not teaching, she enjoys spending time outdoors with her husband and two daughters, and serving in her local community of Fredericksburg, VA.

**Rev. Dr. Randy Shepley** became the Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Newport News, in March of 2015 after seven years as the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Tucker, Georgia. Randy received his BA in History and Christianity from Mercer University, his Masters of Divinity from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and his Doctor of Ministry from the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University. Randy is passionate about helping people who are disconnected from God begin or renew their spiritual journeys. He values getting followers of Jesus engaged in their neighborhoods and communities through authentic friendship and acts of service.



Randy currently serves on the Missions Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and loves participating in the Booster Club of the Menchville High School marching band. He enjoys writing articles and Bible studies, including his book, *Sessions with Ezra-Nehemiah*, that was published in the spring of 2016. Randy is married to Alice, a Spanish teacher at Menchville High School, and is the proud parent of James, Samuel, and Elizabeth.

Randy enjoys reading, working out, college football, family vacations, grilling pretty much anything, good sweet tea, and engaging conversations.

**Rev. Terry Maples** has served as Coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia since February 2016. In this role, he resources clergy and congregations as they form faith in Jesus for the sake of the world. Before assuming this position, Terry served 5 ½ years as Field Coordinator for Tennessee CBF and almost 20 years as Associate Pastor for Education/Discipleship for Huguenot Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. Terry graduated with a Master of Divinity degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an accounting degree from the University of Alabama. He is a published author: *Reclaiming and Re-Forming Baptist Identity—Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*.



Terry has been married to Joan for 41 years; they have two grown children. He enjoys reading, writing, hiking, carpentry, listening to music and podcasts, and college football.



# Session 1

## Return: Renewal and Commitment

### *Lessons from Ezra 1–3*

Megan Fullerton Strollo

#### **Focusing Our Vision**

*Can you recall a time when you had to wait a long time for something to happen? What was that waiting period like? Did you find it challenging to be patient? Did you bide your time doing something else? How did you feel when the wait was finally over?*

The people of God who had been living in exile after the Babylonian invasions had been waiting for a long time. The book of Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile would extend for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10–14; cf. 2 Chronicles 36:21; Daniel 9:2)!<sup>6</sup> During their time in exile, the people had been encouraged to settle and to make the most of their waiting (e.g., Jeremiah 29:4–7). Still, they longed to return to their homeland. They longed for a return to normalcy. When Cyrus the Great overtook the Babylonians, ushering in a new Persian empire, the people of God found that their wait was finally over!

But what would they do now? What would life look like postexile? What would be different? Would anything be the same? Was God still working in their lives?

#### **Listening to the Story**

##### ***Returning to the Land: Ezra 1:1–4***

While it seems definitive that Cyrus issued a decree of some kind, scholars do debate the authenticity of the decree as recorded in Ezra 1:2–4. (The decree recorded in 6:3–5, written in Persia’s language of Aramaic, is likely closer to the original.) It is true that, when he conquered the Babylonians, Cyrus issued many decrees in order to solidify his authority in the Persian Empire. He did so by allowing people groups to return to their homelands, from which they had been scattered by the Babylonians. This resettlement strategy gained Cyrus loyalty and thus a strengthened empire. One important piece of

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<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the seventy-year exile may be figurative—indicating a normal human life span—rather than literal. In any case, the period is lengthy and indicates a generational significance. One reason for favoring a figurative reading of this prophesy relates to timing: the time between invasion/exile and Cyrus’s decree to return to the land is only fifty years. Those who render the seventy years as literal argue that the prophesy relates more specifically to the rebuilding of the temple. Following this theory, the delay in building the temple (Ezra 4–6) explains the extra twenty years: the second temple was completed circa 515 BCE, approximately seventy years after the first had been destroyed (587/6 BCE).

evidence for the practice is the Cyrus Cylinder, a Persian document etched into a clay cylinder that proclaimed Cyrus as liberator of the Babylonians. The decrees issued by Cyrus became political legitimators—ways in which Cyrus and the Persians could assert their authority over their conquered lands and gain loyalty of the people in those lands by appealing to their culture(s) and religion(s). The Cyrus Cylinder, for example, proclaims that Cyrus's conquering of Babylon was ordained by Marduk, the Babylonian deity himself!

It is not far-fetched to believe that Cyrus would have issued a decree allowing the Judean people to return to their homeland of Judah and to rebuild their temple. The temple was not only a place of religious significance; it was an economic center as well. Taxes paid through the temple benefited the Persian empire. Moreover, granting permission for Judeans to rebuild the temple also strengthened their loyalty, and increased Persian loyalist presence in a central region of the empire. From a political standpoint, it was a win-win for Cyrus.

From a Judean point-of-view, returning and rebuilding was top of the to-do list. Although it is evident that many took Jeremiah's advice (29:4–7) and made a home in Babylon, the strong connection to the land and the temple continued and even gained ground as the people waited in exile.<sup>7</sup> While in Babylon, the tight-knit exilic communities leaned into the Instruction of Moses (the Torah) as the basis for their faith absent from the temple. They clung to the promises of the Sinaitic (Exodus 19–24), Abrahamic (Genesis 12:1–3), and Davidic (2 Samuel 7:1–17) covenants which promised prosperity, land, and kingship for the people of Judah.

At the same time, they harbored questions and needed reassurance that those covenants still stood. This is the purpose of Ezra 1:1–4. Capturing, at least in part, a real decree issued by Cyrus, the author of Ezra penned a statement that reminded the Judean people that God was still working among them.<sup>8</sup> The language used in Ezra 1:1–4 amplifies this notion. In verse 1, it states, “the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus.” The verb used here, “stirred up” (Hebrew, *'awar*) is used again in verse 5 in reference to the Judean people whose hearts had been “stirred up” by God to return. Both uses—v. 1 and v. 5—imply divine providence. In other words, the author says, “God is still working among us!—even in the heart of the Persian Cyrus!” Other historical accounts in the Bible use this same verb when describing how God acts in the flow of history (e.g., Isa 13:17; Jeremiah 50:9; 51:11; Ezekiel 23:22; Joel 3:7; 1 Chronicles 5:26; 2 Chronicles 36:22).

As it is written here, Cyrus invokes God's divine name, Yahweh, twice, and refers to the God of Israel no less than five more times! Although some might see this as an appeal

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<sup>7</sup> The books of Ezra-Nehemiah are best understood as “theologized narratives.” They have a loose historical framework, but are primarily concerned with the theological identity of the people of Judah. This is not to say that they are ahistorical, that they are not true accounts of the period, or that God is not part of that history (i.e., the reality). Rather, by “theologized narrative,” what we mean is that the author has placed primacy on the spiritual well-being of the people and set historical (and chronological) accuracy on the back burner.

for loyalty on the part of Cyrus (see discussion of Cyrus Cylinder above), it is significant that Cyrus points to God's work and not his own. Cyrus isn't name-dropping, and the author is clear to use words that again evoke divine providence. Consider verse 2: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has *given* me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has *charged* me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah." The second verb, *charged*, is a particularly significant term; in Hebrew, *paqad*, refers to God's attention and care, and is used in other postexilic literature when referring to the return of the Judean people (Jeremiah 29:10; Zechariah 10:3).

The author uses this language particularly because it reiterates to the people that God's beneficent care still extends to them. God is still at work among them. From the very outset of return and regrowth that we see in Ezra, the people are reminded that their story remains God's story.

### ***Rebuilding the Temple: Ezra 3:8–13***

Once the first wave of returnees had arrived in Jerusalem (2:1–67), the task of rebuilding the temple began. As noted already, the temple had taken on new significance for those in exile: not only as a place of worship, but as a symbol of wholeness, strength, Judean identity, and God's continued presence among them.

First, the Judean returnees rebuilt and rededicated the altar of Yahweh (Ezra 3:2–3). They were able to reestablish worship practices such as burnt offerings and celebrate festivals as prescribed in the Torah (3:4–6). Things were finally getting back to normal.

Next, the people start work on the temple by laying the foundation (3:8). They did this work "according to directions of King David of Israel" (3:10). Theirs was a literal understanding of "rebuilding," a building again of what had been. They sought stability and a return to what they had known *before* exile.

Just as we noted with the wording of the decree in Ezra 1:1–4, the songs they sang allude to the need for reassurance about God's providence. The doxology "He is good; his graciousness for Israel lasts forever" can be found in Psalms 106, 107, 118, and 136 (also, 1 Chronicles 16:34; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:3). These are all postexilic psalms that point toward return, and reaffirm God's providential care.

The reaction to this "rebuilding" is interesting. Consider verse 12: "But many of the older priests and Levites and heads of families, who had seen the first house, wept aloud when they saw the foundations of this house, although many others shouted loudly with joy." Why were they weeping? Some scholars suggest that this older generation, who had been in Jerusalem before exile, were disappointed in the new temple foundations, disheartened that it would never live up to the grandeur of the first. But there can be grief mixed with joy. In fact, joy is often more potently realized when marked by sadness. Verse 13 goes one to say, "no one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping." When it comes to renewal and regrowth after tragedy and trauma, joy and grief often go hand in hand.

## **Sharing Connections**

Over the past eighteen months or so, our world has experienced a type of exile. While certainly not to the same extent as the Judeans in the sixth century BCE, the COVID-19 pandemic has left us feeling sequestered at home, separated from loved ones, distanced from church buildings and community, and grieving loss of friends, family, time, and activity. Like the Judeans in exile, we grieved these losses, great and small, and have longed for a return—a return to church buildings, to work spaces, to school, to normalcy.

*In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic left you feeling in exile? What has been challenging for you? What are you grieving? What do you hope for as we “return” to church?*

The Judeans in exile clung to one another for community. They held fast to their faith and even found ways, while in Babylon, to adapt and “make the most” of their situation.

*How have you found yourself surviving or even thriving these days? In what ways have you remained connected to your faith community? What faith practices have sustained you during this time? Where have you seen God at work?*

## **Expressing Our Faith**

As vaccine rollout continues, and as we begin to see the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, I sense a great deal of nervous energy within our churches. People eager to return to “normal” come head-to-head with those who, while excited at the prospect, still have hesitancy about health safety. While some have found this past year and a half a wake-up for the priorities of life and have reveled in the “extra” time for home projects and from-scratch baking endeavors, others have faced the tragic reality of pandemic, grieving one or even more loved ones whose lives have been lost. Even as those in the US begin to see improvement in the status of pandemic, other parts of our world continue to be devastated by this deadly virus. Many are holding both of these feelings—joy and sadness—together at the same time.

As churches, we have tried to “make the most” of virtual worship, drive-thru and drive-by communion, outdoor Easter services, Zoom Sunday school classes. Some churches have found themselves not only surviving this pandemic, but thriving. Others have struggled to keep people connected. There has been both joy and sorrow. As restrictions are lifted and it becomes safer to gather in larger numbers, churches face questions about what stays and what goes—Do we continue live streaming worship? Do we bring back Wednesday night potluck meals? Can we continue worshipping on the lawn?

As we begin to “return,” we must remember that we’ve all had different experiences over the past eighteen months. A question to ask ourselves is: Will our rebuilding be the same as before? Or will it look a bit different—retaining some from before and adding

some new? Whatever the answer may be, let there be grace, understanding, and space for grief even as we rejoice. As we read in Ezra 3:12, “No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping.” There will be both sorrow and joy expressed as we come back together. There will be joy and sorrow as we begin to rebuild.

Finally, the reassurance that God still works among the Judeans even after exile is one that we need to hear as well today. Even in the midst of grief, sorrow, and trauma, God is at work for good. God’s goodness and graciousness last forever.

## **Session 2**

### **Persistence, Courage, and Resolve**

#### ***Lessons from Ezra 4-6***

Randy Shepley

#### **Focusing Our Vision**

Before the pandemic, our family took a trip to the Orange Bowl game in Miami, Florida. We got up before dawn and flew to Ft. Lauderdale on the day of the game. Our flight arrived on time, and we eagerly walked out of the airport into the Florida sunshine. We were so excited! We were going to see a couple of our favorite college football teams, we were in Miami (well, almost) and we were together as a family. It was time to get our adventure started.

Then, we stepped off the bus and saw the rental car line—it stretched for miles. I went to the front counter, hoping that since we already had a reservation, we would move to the front. . . no luck. Almost two hours later, we got to the front of the line and were able to receive a vehicle that accommodated our family of five. Many were not so fortunate. On that day, my children witnessed people completely losing their composure. Thankfully, it wasn't *their* parents. We experienced the euphoria of arrival, only to have our progress stopped cold.

The COVID-19 pandemic has felt like this on a much larger scale. We thought we had arrived at the tail end of the pandemic, only to face the delta variant. Once again, we had to consider masking, physical distancing, virtual large group meetings, and vaccine booster shots. Stymied starts and restarts are particularly unnerving.

In this session, we will discover that the people who returned to Jerusalem after the exile knew the pain of an aborted new beginning all too well.

#### **Listening to the Story**

##### ***A Dangerous Offer – Ezra 4:1-5, 24***

After the celebration at the conclusion of Ezra 3, the returned exiles started their next phase of temple construction. As they began, a delegation from the surrounding territories came and asked to join them in the work. Their reasoning was “we worship your God as you do” (Ezra 4:2). The assertion of this neighboring group, however, is only partially accurate. Who are these people? While there may have been some mixing and diversity among the surrounding people, the term “people of the land” elsewhere refers to Israelites. These may in fact have been Israelites who had not gone into exile. Ezra’s rhetoric is one-sided. He calls them “adversaries” but doesn’t give us a clear picture.

When the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, the Assyrian Empire deported most of the people of Israel, and moved other conquered peoples into Israel and Samaria, its capital (see Introduction above). The new residents of Israel and Samaria brought their gods with them. In addition, many added the worship of the local God of Israel to their pantheon of religious practice. So, the delegation that approached Zerubbabel and the people of Jerusalem spoke truthfully: they did worship God, but they did not worship only God.

This duplicitous offer marks a dangerous moment for Zerubbabel and the fledgling Jerusalem community. They were attempting a massive rebuilding project and could use additional assistance. But, at what cost? Would they, like their neighbors, move from worshipping God alone to worshipping God among many gods? Would they give in to syncretism? Would the people of God, instead of reestablishing their covenant community under God's leadership, be swept up in the intrigue, priorities, and agendas of their stronger neighbors?

Zerubbabel and the people refuse the offer of "help" from this delegation, not because they are resistant to connection, hospitality, and help. Instead, they discern the impure motives behind the entreaty, and they refuse an alliance which will distract them from the singular worship of God.

The people of Jerusalem paid a significant cost for their refusal. Ezra 4:4 tells the adjacent peoples did everything possible to discourage the people of Judah from continuing to rebuild. They bribed officials and stood in the way at every point of the venture. In the face of this opposition, the people of Jerusalem gave up and stopped working on the temple for almost twenty years (see verse 24). Standing up against opposition to God's mission always carries a cost.

### ***A Legacy of Opposition (Ezra 4:6-23)***

Ezra 4:6-23 offers a confusing interlude to the temple construction narrative. In this section, we read about opposition to the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem under the reigns of Xerxes I (called Ahasuerus in verse 6) and Artaxerxes. Xerxes I and Artaxerxes were both Kings of Persia well after Darius who is mentioned in Ezra 4:24! Ezra 4:6-23 is referring to events that happen well after the full temple rebuild is concluded.

At this point, I refer the reader to footnote 7 in session one above. The primary interest of the writer of Ezra-Nehemiah is not listing an accurate chronology of the postexilic period in Judah. Rather, the author focuses on how the people of God will define, reclaim, and renew God's covenant community in the postexilic world. In Ezra 4 where the chronology of the story flips between the early and later exilic periods, the author is making two points. First, at every era of history, God's people face opposition.

Second, the people of God embody a minority movement of love, justice, and holiness that stands alongside the majority culture. The Jerusalem exiles live in covenant community with God in spite of opposition. They do not seek to overwhelm their culture;

they serve as a prophetic witness of God's justice and love. Followers of Jesus must remember that we cannot insulate ourselves from suffering and opposition. In actuality, suffering and opposition provide opportunities for growth in endurance, compassion, forgiveness, and a desire for justice.

The author of Ezra-Nehemiah wants all readers to know that opposition to God's kingdom community is a recurring condition in all eras of history. Therefore, we must develop courage and resolve to pursue love and justice in the midst of opposition.

### ***Courage and Deliverance in the Face of Opposition (Ezra 5:1-6:15)***

Ezra 4:24 returns to the narrative of rebuilding the temple. The opposition had stalled the work for nearly twenty years when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah enter the story. Their prophetic words moved the hearts of the people, and under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the people of Jerusalem restarted the rebuilding effort.

Any pastor or church leader during the pandemic knows the challenge of encouraging people forward who have grown used to inertia. Under the prophetic pronouncements of Haggai and Zechariah, the Lord "stirred up the spirit" of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the whole remnant of the people, and they started again the work of rebuilding the temple (Haggai 1:14). Anyone who has ever had to move a group of people forward who have grown accustomed to stasis can recognize the miracle present in getting a whole people to move forward after nearly twenty years of opposition and idleness.

Speaking of opposition, as soon as the people of Jerusalem reengaged the temple rebuilding project, leaders from the neighboring areas approached them and demanded an explanation. The people, however, did not cower in fear or stop working. Instead, they recounted the commission given to them from King Cyrus twenty years earlier. Furthermore, they affirmed they would not quit until the worship of God was restored in the temple. The people who years before had cowered and succumbed to opposition were now standing firm in courage, in the face of opposition and significant threats. However, there was no going back: their spirits had been stirred by the power of God.

When Darius received word regarding the rebuilding of the temple, he ordered the royal archives searched to find corroborating evidence for the stance of the leaders in Jerusalem. Darius found the edict of Cyrus regarding the remnant of Jerusalem and discovered the people of Jerusalem had spoken truthfully. Therefore, Darius decreed the temple work would continue, and he guaranteed the provisions of Cyrus as well. Furthermore, Darius even issued a devastating edict that threatened anyone who stood in the way of implementing promises of Cyrus: this perpetrator would be impaled on a beam from their own house and the setting of their house would be turned into a dunghill (Ezra 6:11). Obviously, Darius meant business.

After the decree of Darius, the elders and people of Jerusalem redoubled their efforts and finished the temple. The resolve of the people, fueled by the deliverance of God led to a tremendous victory for God's minority people in a dangerous culture. However, the



victory does not conclude this portion of the book of Ezra. Experiencing God's power and protection leads to worship.

### ***Persistence in Worship (Ezra 6:16-22)***

Unlike at the dedication of the temple foundation in Ezra 3, there is no mention of weeping at the worship and dedication of the rebuilt temple. Joy, however, is mentioned throughout the passage. It is likely most of the people who remembered the grandeur of Solomon's temple are gone. Of course, experiencing the temple's completion after an especially extended wait certainly fueled the joy of the worshippers.

During the service of dedication, the orders of priests and Levites are reconstituted and set apart. Afterwards, the priests lead the people in the Passover celebration, the holiest celebration of worship in Judaism. Can you imagine what it was like to celebrate the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt after God had delivered the people from exile, with a newly rebuilt temple in the background? It was not lost on the people that God persisted in loving and delivering God's covenant community from slavery, exile, and sin in the past and present. It was not lost on them that their persistence in worshipping God was sporadic, but God's persistence in loving them was unfailing.

### **Sharing Connections**

The church understands what it is like to experience the exhilaration of victory, only to be stopped in our tracks by reality. After many churches returned to in-person worship, many experienced waning attendance, fewer volunteers, over-extended staff, and even ongoing opposition. Furthermore, the delta variant caused church members to return to virtual worship rather than entering the building. Many churches are considering new mask mandates and even returning to virtual only worship in the face of rising case numbers. Denominational groups have moved anticipated in-person annual gatherings to virtual platforms (again), and yes, in all of this, churches and church leaders face opposition. We know what it is like to feel progress screech to a halt.

We also know the impact and emotional anxiety brought on by persons inside and outside our congregations who deny the existence of the pandemic and who fuel irritation and animosity in church parking lots, church conferences, school board meetings, and on social media. The sad part is many persons who claim to worship God are in polar opposite places regarding vaccinations, mask-wearing, and politics as a whole. How do we build Christian community in these challenging days when persons who claim to follow Christ are at one another's throats? How can we build Christian community when we are thinking about our rights and preferences more than loving and serving our neighbor?

Finally, we know what it feels like to feel defeated, to live in a malaise of simply surviving the day. We know how it feels to be overwhelmed by grief and the constant press of heavy emotion. Some are overwhelmed by the gut-wrenching loss of family members, friends, and neighbors from COVID 19. Others have lost jobs, income, and nest eggs. Still others have lost the ability to hope for more than going through the

motions. Like the people of Jerusalem, the pressure of COVID 19 and the daily opposition has worn many of us down to a subsistence existence. We need hope. We need renewal. We need our spirits stirred up by God.

## **Expressing Our Faith**

Of course, we cannot stir up our own spirits. Spiritual renewal is not a fusion of self-help, motivation, and emotional fervor. Instead, God stirs up our spirits and develops perseverance in us. We place ourselves in the presence of God so God can remake us. God faithfully meets us in the midst of our crises. . . even a pandemic.

So, in this ongoing pandemic season, put yourself in God's presence through regular, persistent prayer. Remember, do more listening in these times of prayer than talking. Put yourself in God's presence by building community safely around small tables. Share food and stories of God's faithfulness with friends, in a way that is safe regarding the pandemic. Remember that for the people of Jerusalem, religious feasts were not only times of joy; they were times of reflection on God's deliverance. Make your meal and even coffee moments into safe places of joyful celebration and conversation about God.

Finally, tune out the noise, and tune your heart to the love of God. Put down social media, stop listening to your preferred media source, and cast aside any voice that tells you the answer to this crisis is to hate, criticize, judge, and belittle people who think, look, act, and speak differently than you. Do not allow yourself to get washed away by the torrents of venom from opposing, critical voices. Instead, take up the call to rebuild God's community, to set in place hearts and hands of love. Infuse your Sunday school class, small group, and church with a renewed passion for hearing the voice of God. Seek with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength to love God and your neighbor with every word and fiber of your being. After all, we, like the people of Jerusalem, are called to rebuild not a building, but a community of love for God and others. May no opposition, vitriol, or discouragement dissuade us from this call.

# **Session 3**

## **Effective Leadership for Renewal**

### ***Lessons from Ezra 7-8***

Terry Maples

#### **Focusing Our Vision**

We live in confusing times. People are hungry for leadership while simultaneously rejecting leaders. What's up with that? Systems expert Rabbi Edwin Friedman calls this the state of "leadership toxicity." Organizations, governments, and congregations desperately need leaders to guide them through essential change. These same systems often reject or fire leaders who risk tackling what's not working because people get anxious, even hostile, when things change.

In my role as CBFVA coordinator, I travel (when there isn't a pandemic) to churches around the state. Part of my responsibility is to be observant about overt and implicit lay and clergy leadership. For sure, leadership means very different things to different people. This is especially true in the church. A true story illustrates the point. I once visited a relatively new-to-his-congregation pastor. Not long into the conversation the pastor got real and shared how much trouble he was experiencing; the "honeymoon" was already over. What happened? Apparently, the search team described a church eager for change—ready to make a difference in the broader community—a church desirous of a leader who would help it do just that. Believing what was communicated to him, the pastor started building relationships in the community and identified opportunities for partnership and service. Before long the new pastor was summoned to a called meeting of the deacons and told in no uncertain terms, "That's not how we do church. We offer worship services, Sunday school, and deacon ministry. Our ministry is here inside the building."

Tensions similar to the ones described above play out in every church because how people understand leadership varies. Here are some actual statements I've heard from lay leaders in churches followed by an interpretation of what is actually meant by their words:

- We need a strong leader (meaning, we value a leader who takes charge and tells us what to do).
- We need a humble leader who listens to us and meets our needs (translated, we like a leader we can control).
- We need a charismatic leader who can inspire and bring more people into the church (interpreted, we are willing to abdicate our roles as lay leaders and hold one person responsible for the "success" of the church).
- We need a pastor who preaches well (assumption, the pastor's theology will affirm what I already believe).

Is it any wonder the need for effective leadership has spawned a massive industry? I have an entire row of books on leadership—each one touting new theories about what leadership is and what it isn't. Contrary to many best-selling books that assert leadership is about power and authority, church leadership is not about coercion or force. As Christian leaders, we take our cues from a Galilean peasant who said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Let political leaders and corporate gurus be "strong and authoritarian" if they must, but know that the best leadership theories today value other qualities like listening, collaborating (spreading leadership around), and discerning vision and direction together. Those who are called to the church must demonstrate servant leadership.

Ezra's understanding of leadership was spot on for his day. When we focus on Ezra's leadership qualities, we find they are still helpful now. Leadership as a concept and a practice has been thoroughly studied and researched to inform our understanding. To frame our listening to the story, hear these definitions of leadership from Lorraine Matusak in "Finding Your Voice: Learning to Lead...Anywhere You Want to Make a Difference."

*...initiating and guiding and working with a group to accomplish change*

*...a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change  
or make a difference to benefit the common good*

I'm convinced the health and vitality of local congregations are dependent on sound principles of leading and following. A church without vision and effective leadership won't be able to sustain forward momentum. Let's explore Ezra's good leadership.

## **Listening to the Story**

Finally, six chapters into the book of Ezra we meet the man for whom the book is named. Likely the book carries Ezra's name because the content describes many of his personal experiences. In the two chapters we consider today, we learn more about Ezra, his charge, and his journey.

### **Ezra 7:1-10**

With little notice, the narrator of the book of Ezra jumps forward in time from 515 BCE to the reign of Artaxerxes. Some sixty years have passed between the events of chapters six and seven.

We see immediately Ezra possesses the unique qualities needed for this time and these tasks; his credentials are impressive. Ezra traces his priestly line all the way back to the original temple and to Aaron. Because of his influence and use of scripture, some regarded Ezra second only to Moses. Ezra was much more than a scribe who copied the scriptures, he was a scholar who was prepared to instruct his people regarding the demands of the Law.

To describe Ezra as a “scribe” connotes he is a literate man who reads and writes and supports himself doing so. We are unsure of literacy rates in ancient Yehud in Ezra’s day. Somewhat later in the Greco-Roman world, literacy among free males was estimated to be around 20-30%, with a much lower rate for women, slaves, and those in castes below. This context explains why gathering to hear the Law read and interpreted was important to the people. They could not read and interpret for themselves; they needed a helper.

Ezra must have been an effective communicator. While we are not privy to details about his conversations with Artaxerxes, we are told Ezra is granted everything he requests. That’s impressive.

Verses 7-10 give us a quick overview of those who accompanied Ezra to Jerusalem. We are told how long the trip took, and we are assured the trip was overseen by God, with God’s gracious hand guiding the travelers. No dangers threatened those journeying toward Jerusalem.

Verse 10 is crucial to understanding the work of Ezra. His heart, his very character, was set on studying, doing, and teaching the Law. These three tasks inspired his passion and his leadership.

### **Ezra 7:11-26**

This section gives us an intriguing glimpse into politics of the day. We hear Artaxerxes’ decree to Ezra through a second letter and discover the incredible power extended to Ezra for his journey. In today’s language, we would say the Persian government gave Ezra “a blank check.”

The decree from Artaxerxes allowed any of the people, including priests and Levites still in Babylon, to accompany Ezra. The only stipulation was people could not be coerced; their participation had to be voluntary. Ironically, the decree directed that those returning with Ezra would have the same rights of access to the temple as those who returned and rebuilt it in 520-515.

In the context of this lesson, we notice Ezra’s access to power and influence. Nowhere do we read Ezra used or abused any of this power. In fact, Ezra appears to be rather unassuming and humble. No doubt this perspective was shaped and formed by his commitment to studying and applying the Law, including keeping material goods in proper perspective.

### **Ezra 7:27-28**

Now we hear directly from Ezra about his understanding of the mission. Some call it a Doxology. Ezra blesses God and acknowledges it was God who stirred the heart of the king. Ezra knows this mission isn’t possible in his own human strength. Seeing God’s presence at work in the king and his counselors inspires courage and emboldens Ezra for the journey.

**Ezra 8:15-23**

This passage gives insight into Ezra's organizational skills. He delayed the group's departure by three days because there were details that needed attention. While reviewing personnel, Ezra discovered no descendants of Levi had been included. Levites come from a long line of priests and temple personnel. Ezra knew these folks would be necessary for performing temple responsibilities upon the group's arrival in Jerusalem.

Ezra himself chooses wise leaders to form the delegation tasked with recruiting Levites for the journey to Jerusalem. He gives clear instructions regarding the kind of Levites needed. The search was fruitful. The search team found Sherebiah (along with his 18 sons plus other relatives), a man of character and integrity, and Merari (and his relatives including 20 sons) who answered Ezra's call to return to Jerusalem.

True to his priorities, Ezra declared a time of fasting and prayer. Again, Ezra recognizes dependence upon God for protection and guidance. Ezra could have rushed to begin the journey, but he knew taking time to give thanks and dedicate all to God's purposes was not a waste of time but grounding and wise.

**Ezra 8:24-30**

While Ezra's trust was in God, he made provisions to protect the valuables—gold, silver, and vessels—taken on the journey. Twelve of the leading priests were given responsibility to guard the treasure Artaxerxes provided for the temple. Ezra consecrated the men given this important responsibility, reminding them of this sacred trust.

**Ezra 8:31-36**

After the inventory of people and possessions was complete, the journey toward Jerusalem began. Note the stark contrast in the book between the preparation and departure details and how little is written about the journey itself. Perhaps the author is communicating by his scant reporting that nothing delayed God's mission once it was underway.

The trip to Jerusalem took four months. The pilgrims needed three days to unpack, rest, and get organized in order to deliver the treasure to the temple. Notice once again evidence of Ezra's organizational skills. The group also made preparations for an elaborate time of worship. After many years of separation from temple worship, the people's dreams were realized.

**Sharing Connections**

We notice excellent examples of effective leadership as we listen to the story. As a way to share our connections, let's unpack the story of Ezra as we articulate Ezra's demonstrations of effective leadership that we can emulate today.

In today's passage, I observe these good leadership characteristics exhibited by Ezra:

- **Character.** Ezra's resolute commitment to set his heart on studying, doing, and teaching the law enabled him to embody the essence of the law. Ezra's commitment was apparent and reassuring to those around him.
- **Effective Communication.** The fact Ezra was granted all he asked of Artaxerxes indicates he possessed effective communication skills. Ezra was passionate about his mission, clearly articulated his vision, and knew how to approach the emperor.
- **Dependence on God.** While Ezra was humanly prepared for this important work, he knew it was God who blessed and empowered it. His trust in God's provision and protection are evident throughout the passage. The call to fasting and prayer confirms Ezra's trust in God and prompts others to trust, too.
- **Referent Power.** Ezra seems to be a textbook study in referent power which is defined as "a leader's ability to influence a follower because of the follower's respect, admiration, and personal identification with the leader." Ezra does not misuse or abuse the people's willingness to follow him. He remains humble and keeps his eyes on the ultimate goal. Ezra resists any tendency to garner special favor from the people.
- **Organizational Skills.** Ezra's attention to detail brought his failure to invite a cohort of Levites to journey with him to light, prompted him to create a plan to preserve the treasure, and empowered proper preparation for worship in the temple.

As we examine Ezra further, other leadership characteristics stand out:

First, Ezra invested time in preparing himself—setting his heart on what was most important (Ezra 7:10). Ezra needed to make sure he was ready and fully committed to the task he was asked to do. He knew leadership would be hard especially when he met with opposition. Because of his extensive preparation, Ezra remained true to himself and provided effective leadership. God needs leaders who spend necessary time and effort on spiritual as well as practical preparation.

Second, Ezra understood and had great clarity about his purpose or mission. Ezra's goal to reinvigorate people's respect for God's Law compelled him (Ezra 9, 10). The physical temple had already been reconstructed; now Ezra focuses on the call to restore a spiritual temple, i.e., the hearts of the people. After arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra took time to assess the situation and identify the issues of unfaithfulness and unholiness (based on his study and interpretation of the law) then prepared a plan to restore the people and the nation before God.

Third, Ezra did not get distracted from his purpose even when he faced opposition. His opposers schemed and lied. They asked (disingenuously) to join his efforts, but Ezra was not fooled. Leaders need spiritual discernment to anticipate potential outcomes.

Fourth, Ezra knew when to celebrate. Two celebrations are described. The first is found in Ezra 3:10-13 when the people of Israel began to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The second is described in Ezra 6:16-22 after the people of Israel completed temple construction. From these two examples we learn when to celebrate, how to celebrate, and why we celebrate.

- Celebration provides opportunity for God's people to praise God.
- Celebration is visible so it becomes a community event (Ezra 6:19-22).
- All Israelites participated, not just priests and leaders, and celebrated with great joy (Ezra 6:19-20).
- Focus on celebration is to honor and praise God for provision and accomplishment of milestones.
- Celebrations provide opportunities for people to remember that obstacles were overcome, accomplishments were achieved, and progress was made.
- Celebration prompts gratitude for God and for the faithful who allow God to work in and through them.

## **Expressing Our Faith**

I see many parallels between Ezra's story and our current context. Didn't physical distancing and the inability to gather in corporate worship during the pandemic feel like a form of exile? Like Ezra and his fellow travelers, congregations have been on a long, complicated journey. Like Ezra, today's leaders must be prepared and must possess great clarity about their callings.

We do well to simply embody the leadership qualities of Ezra. Which of his qualities do you lack, and how can you build capacity to enrich leadership?

Perhaps you desire to tap into current understandings of effective leadership. If so, we offer a helpful metaphor and two options to consider. Which option(s) speak best to your current context?

### **Leadership Metaphor**

As we think about leadership into the future following a difficult and dangerous pandemic season, a contemporary metaphor may prove helpful. Max De Pree uses the metaphor of a jazz musician to illustrate leadership:

*Jazz-band leaders must choose the music, find the right musicians, and perform—in public. But the effect of the performance depends on many things—the environment, the (volunteer) instrumentalists in the band, the need for everybody to perform as individuals and as a group, the absolute dependence of the leader on the members of the band, the expectation of the leader that the followers will play well.*

De Pree's jazz metaphor is powerful because it illustrates inclusiveness, valuing individuality, importance of the public good, and empowering people to animate their gifts and talents.



**For your reflection:** How might the jazz band metaphor inform or challenge current understandings of leadership in your congregation? What are the implications of shared leadership and interdependence?

**OPTION 1:**  
**Leadership for Getting Extraordinary Things Done**

No doubt, every congregation seeks to accomplish great things for God's kingdom. In "The Leadership Challenge," James Kouzes and Barry Posner outline five principles or practices for doing extraordinary things.

1. **Effective leaders *challenge the process*.** They risk, analyze the system, and question normal procedures. They experiment, innovate, and learn. They are not satisfied with the status quo.
2. **Effective leaders *inspire a shared vision*.** They animate hopes and dreams of others and enable them to see exciting possibilities for the future. Leaders encourage others to buy-in to a common purpose. They understand people's needs and have people's interests at heart.
3. **Leaders who accomplish extraordinary things *enable others to act*.** They enlist the support of all who are necessary to the process. Their role is to encourage collaboration and teamwork. The test for this is the use of the word "we."
4. **Good leaders *model the way; they lead by example*.** Their behaviors, attitudes, and actions are congruent with stated beliefs and purposes. They have clarity about their beliefs and understand respect is earned by acting consistently in alignment with those beliefs. In other words, they practice what they preach.
5. **Effective leaders *encourage the heart*.** The journey is often difficult and exhausting. Giving up is tempting. Leaders encourage their followers to carry on. They understand what it takes to sustain commitment and action, and they assure others success is possible.

**For your reflection:** How did Ezra embody these principles/practices? Engage in a period of self-observation. Which of these principles/practices need attention so extraordinary things can be done in and through your congregation?

**OPTION 2:**  
**Leadership Qualities for Today's Complexities**

We live in a culture of cruelty and cynicism. Congregational leaders are not immune to cruel treatment and abuse; leadership is not for the faint of heart. Brene' Brown says organizations trying to navigate the complexities of today's environment are looking for leaders who:

- Stay brave and constructive in the midst of hard conversations
- Give and receive meaningful feedback
- Build trust in their leadership teams
- Take more smart risks
- Share bold ideas with confidence
- Reset after setbacks
- Deal with conflict rather than avoiding it
- Facilitate accountability rather than resorting to blame
- Lead through uncertainty
- Put values into practice
- Develop processes that are both thoughtful and decisive

**For your reflection:**

- Reflect on Ezra's leadership. How do his leadership gifts align with the list above?
- Reflect on congregational leadership you observed during the pandemic. Which of the above were practiced consistently? How might the traits not exhibited lately be learned and influence your congregation in the future?

## **Session 4**

### **Recommitment: Conflict Resolution and Reform**

### ***Lessons from Ezra 9–10***

Megan Fullerton Strollo

#### **Focusing Our Vision**

*Can you recall a lesson you learned from a failure rather than a success? Was the mistake or failure your own or someone else's?*

The inventor Thomas Edison was once asked by a reporter how he felt about his many failures in pursuit of innovation. His response went something like this: I have not failed 1,000 times—I've found 1,000 ways that will not work. Edison considered each failure an opportunity. He didn't set out to make mistakes or to fail, but he embraced them, and he learned and grew from each of them.

Ezra's community was very much in a season of growth and learning. There had been so much change, and their world looked different than it had before exile. There were new neighbors, new rulers; there were also a lot of *renewed* things—a rebuilt temple and altar to God, a recommitment to God's Instruction, or *Torah*, and a renewed sense of God's calling.

With all of this growth and learning, mistakes are bound to happen. Our study has already presented us with moments in which the postexilic community faced opposition and challenge. Now, our study challenges *us* to learn from the missteps of others. As one commentator, Paul Redditt, puts it: "there is an important lesson here for careful readers of the Bible ... just because religious folks, whether today or important people in the Bible, think and say they are doing the will of God is no guarantee that they are."<sup>9</sup>

As we focus our vision and prepare to glean important lessons about faith and community from Ezra 9–10, we should be mindful that both positive and negative learning (i.e., learning what NOT to do) can be powerful and transformative. Both are present in our story.

#### **Listening to the Story**

##### ***Setting Ezra 9–10 in Perspective***

For what it's worth, Ezra was late to the game. Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem came *after* the first wave of returnees from exile and *after* the temple had been rebuilt. He was not party to the conflicts we read in Ezra 4–6. So, when he arrived in Jerusalem with

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<sup>9</sup> Paul L. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014), 193.

thousands more returnees, he came not with a mindset to rebuild, but to reform (Ezra 7:10). His actions were thus centered on ensuring that the people of God remain faithful to the Instruction (Torah) of God.

Two points are necessary to make here. The first regards Ezra's understanding of the "people of Israel." Those who had been exiled in Babylon—including Ezra—developed a particular and *exclusive* viewpoint on who represented the "true" or "pure" Israel. While they believed that their exile was a consequence for their disobedience, they also held fast to the belief that God's mercy and faithfulness had saved them from a worse fate. In other words, those who had been exiled and had now returned were marked in a special way: a "holy seed" (Heb. *zarah haqodesh*) (9:2; cf. Isaiah 6:13). Because they had been spared, they were the "true" or "pure" Israel who alone could restore Jerusalem, God's temple, and God's reign.

Readers today may (quite rightfully) cringe at language such as "pure" when it comes to a discussion of a particular people group. Ezra's designation of "holy seed", however, is not primarily a racial designation, but a religious and cultural one. To this point, anyone *not* among the returned exiles was considered "foreign" (i.e., "the neighboring peoples" in 4:4; 9:1) to Ezra, whether or not they came from outside Judea, whether or not they worshipped Yahweh.

The second point that should be made before going further is this: just as Ezra's perspective on the community was his own, so too was his perspective on God's Torah. What we see in Ezra 9–10 is one perspective on reading and interpreting Torah.

The community that had returned from Babylon believed they had been spared so that they could restore Israel. They also believed that grave mistakes had been made that had led to their exile in the first place. They lived within the tension of feeling responsible as well as blessed. This tension is important to call out as we read the account in Ezra 9–10.

### ***Remaining "Faithful": Ezra 9***

In terms of historical timeline, scholars generally agree that Ezra 9–10 comes on the heels of Ezra's reading and interpretation of the Torah, which is recounted in Nehemiah 7:73–8:18. There, Ezra stands in front of the Water Gate in Jerusalem and reads aloud to all who are gathered. Of note are the Levites who "helped the people to understand the Instruction" (8:7). Verse 8 continues, "They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard." For a renewed and reforming community, fostering an understanding of the Instruction was just as important as merely listening to it—if not more so. Indeed, it was their belief that unfaithfulness had led to the circumstances of invasion and exile; understanding the Torah, therefore, gave the community a better chance at remaining faithful and avoiding any repeat offenses.

Nehemiah 8 continues by providing an example of the people's faithfulness to God's Torah. For the first time in a long time (since the days of Joshua; 8:17), the community

celebrates the Festival of Booths (cf. Deuteronomy 31:10–13), a festival which commemorates in part the Israelites' journey in the wilderness, when they dwelled in temporary huts (i.e., booths) and dreamed of a promised—and permanent—land. The returned community, seeing themselves as living through a sort of second Exodus, believed that they had a chance at a fresh start and viewed reconnection and recommitment to God's Torah as an essential part of living faithfully into the future.

When we shift to Ezra 9, then, we see another example of an attempt by the community to live—as they understand it—faithfully. Here, the people come to Ezra for guidance regarding a “problem” drawn from their understanding of Scripture.

The specific problem that the officials bring to Ezra concerns marriage: “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites haven't kept themselves separate from the peoples of neighboring lands with their detestable practices” (9:1a). The issue is complicated to be sure (see comments above regarding Ezra's perspective on “community”), and we can hardly ignore the harmful xenophobic undertones that the text conveys. What is at stake for the community is not only religious identity (i.e., who constitutes our community), but there are also economic (i.e., property and inheritance rights) and political factors to consider as well.<sup>10</sup>

The list of “neighboring lands” is reminiscent of lists found in Deuteronomy (e.g., 7:1–14; 23:3, 7–8). In Deuteronomy, these “mixed” unions were seen as a source of idolatry.<sup>11</sup> By this point in the postexilic world, many of the groups listed here no longer existed as autonomous nations (Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, and Jebusites), evincing even more that the problem is primarily a theological one.

Indeed, the heart of this specific problem is faithful living, marked throughout the text by references to “unfaithfulness” (9:2, 4; 10: 2, 6, 10). The Hebrew word *ma'al* refers in many postexilic texts to the violation of religious law or as a conscious act of treachery. The term is an explicitly theological term because the victim of acts of *ma'al* is nearly always God. The concern of the community in bringing this issue to Ezra is thus one of faithfulness. As one commentator puts it, “it is the seriousness, rather than the particular kinds, of sin that the word connotes.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For more discussion on the complexities of postexilic Judea, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “The Lives of Women in the Postexilic Era,” in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed.

<sup>11</sup> The inclusion of Egyptians in the list in Ezra 9:1 is problematic, however. Deuteronomy 23:7–8 specifically excludes Egypt from the prohibition against marriage. It is possible that the inclusion of Egyptians in the Ezra list point to contemporary political or economic factors within the community. If this is the case, not only was faithfulness to Torah meant to ensure the exclusivity of the community; the maintenance of land holding and property was of concern as well.

<sup>12</sup> J. Gordon McConville, *I & II Chronicles*, The Daily Bible Study Series (Westminster John Knox, 1984), 17.

Ezra's prayer throughout the rest of the chapter confirms this. His prayer of intercession (9:6–15) addresses the issue through specific references to Scripture (e.g., Leviticus 18:25; 20:22) which not only demonstrates his knowledge of Torah but also his authority as an interpreter for the community. His prayer, though, goes beyond the issue of marriage itself. His prayer accentuates for the community how precarious they might have felt in terms of their relationship with God. Consider v. 8: "But now, *for a brief while* the LORD our God has shown favor in leaving us as survivors and in giving us a stake in his holy place..." (emphasis added). As Ezra sees it, the community has little time to waste when it comes to living faithfully.

Similarly, Ezra reminds them that it is through God's grace that they have been given this chance to rebuild and restore: "After all that has happened to us because of our evil deeds and our great guilt—although you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserve and have allowed us to survive as we do—will we once again break your commandments...?" (vv. 13–14). In the end, Ezra's prayer of confession and intercession becomes a sermon, urging them not to make the same mistakes of "unfaithfulness" again.

Understanding that the underlying issue at stake in Ezra 9–10 is faithfulness to God—how the community rebuilds following disobedience and tragedy—ultimately does not diminish the harmful rhetoric against "mixed" marriage that we read here. It does, however, give us a broader context for meaning-making, and allow us to find positive value in reading this specific episode in one postexilic community (see Sharing Connections and Expressing Our Faith below).

### ***Resolution in the Community: Ezra 10***

From the perspective of the community, Ezra's prayer in chapter 9 proves effective. While he had prayed, a large crowd had gathered, and had joined in lamenting and confessing (10:2). After their lament, the people propose a solution: renew the covenant with God. Lay leadership plays a more prominent role in the community in the postexilic period. Speaking generally, this democratization within the community is significant.

This particular community-led decision, however, poses difficulty for any reader who upholds the Bible as a source for love and compassion. In Ezra 10: 3, Shechaniah suggests that they "send away all the wives and their children," and the people assent in v. 5.

The actions taken by the community as a "resolution" may be seen as reprehensible and overly harsh. Indeed, the Hebrew term used here to "separate" (Heb. *badaʿ*) the women and children from the community is not the typical term used for divorce, and highlights the physical separation occurring among the families. The text also doesn't indicate any provisions provided to the women and children, a fact that many suggest may intimate disinterest or even maltreatment.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It is also possible that the text fails to note provisions provided because it is primarily concerned with other—theological—matters.

What is more, the text ends fairly abruptly. This quick ending may be an attempt to put a “nice bow” on an otherwise tragic and revolting text, indicating either general agreement or an attempt to cover up deeper controversy. Indeed, a close reading of the text may suggest that this “resolution” was not as undisputed as it would seem. The fact that the investigations took three months (vv. 16–17) hints that there may have been some resistance to these decisions. Moreover, the same *problem* arises again decades later when Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13), so a complete resolution clearly didn’t happen during Ezra’s time. Finally, other biblical texts illustrate a more inclusive perspective on the postexilic community, giving credence to the notion that Ezra’s perspective was not widespread or even the dominant one. The book of Ruth, for example, in which a woman of Moabite origin is welcomed generously into the community of Israel, is perhaps a direct contradiction to the perspectives of Ezra-Nehemiah.

In the end, the actions taken in Ezra 10 are perhaps even more difficult to swallow than the accusations in Ezra 9. The positive affirmation of lay leadership is nearly lost amidst a harsh and exclusive “resolution” from a community seeking to live faithfully with God.

What then can we glean and learn (both positively and negatively) from this episode in Ezra 9–10?

### **Sharing Connections**

Many said over the past eighteen months that we are living in a *kairos* moment. The Greek word *kairos* generally means “time,” referring to specific periods or seasons. More than that, *kairos* suggests a “time” that is laden with historical importance, a season in which a seismic shift occurs in the fabric of society, and a period of significant change and growth.

The pandemic, climate change and global warming, political and social unrest and reckoning—among other things as well, these events and realities contribute to the notion that we are living in a *kairos* moment. Living in a *kairos* moment calls us to slow down and take stock—to reconsider, recommit, and even reform.

*In what ways do you think we—as a community of faith, as a nation, as global citizens—are living in a kairos moment?*

The community in Ezra’s narrative were also living in a *kairos* moment. They recognized the need to redefine, reshape, and recommit to God and to one another. In their recommitment to God, they sought guidance from God’s Instruction. The community came together, being led by one another, in an effort to understand better how God was calling them to live faithfully.

*How have you seen your community coming together to care for one another? What are ways that you discern God’s calling in your life? In your view, what does “living faithfully” look like?*

And yet, like the community in postexilic Judea, we make mistakes. We often call them “growing edges,” places in our learning and living that need reshaping, refining, even rewiring.

*What are some of your “growing edges”? Recall the question asked at the outset (Focusing Our Vision)—what lessons have you learned from mistakes?*

## **Expressing Our Faith**

Should we choose to accept it, Ezra 9–10 presents us with a rare opportunity when reading Scripture. For all the positive learning we receive from the text—the renewed commitment to seek a better understanding of God’s instruction, the positive portrayal of lay leadership, we cannot bypass the negative aspects of the text.

Despite their admirable efforts, the returned exiles forgot that love, hospitality, and grace are paramount in Scripture. As one commentator notes, “Just because people act for God does not guarantee that they will be God-like in their actions.”<sup>14</sup> The returned exiles chose to cling to specifics—themselves, historically binding and prescriptive—rather than to adhere to the “spirit” of God’s Instruction, one that repeatedly advocates concern for others (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:12–22; Deuteronomy 24:17–22; Micah 6:8). One need only recall God’s concern for Hagar and Ishmael in the desert (Genesis 21:17–21) or for the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10) to understand that there are far more stories in Scripture that place love, grace, and hospitality for those “outside” the community at the forefront.

The point to be learned here is this: even those with the best intentions can make mistakes. Ezra 9–10 provides us with a glimpse at a community, seeking to do what they thought was right, but coming up short. As noted, the abrupt ending, the repeat “offenses” in Nehemiah 13, and the contemporary examples of a very different—and more inclusive—perspective (e.g., Ruth, Esther) guide us in understanding that we need not read Ezra’s account as binding or prescriptive ourselves. Indeed, the text is an example of negative learning, of what *not* to do.

As we work in and through this *kairos* moment, as we rebuild, grow, and recommit from the experiences of the last eighteen months, let us learn from the mistakes of others. God calls us to include—to live with open hearts, minds, and homes. We need not do as others have done if we see that their decisions and actions go against God’s call for love and grace, justice and mercy. Ezra 9–10 shows us one way that community can respond in a *kairos* moment. The question for us is: will we follow their example, or will we choose a different path?

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<sup>14</sup> Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 204.



## **Session 5**

### **Imagine the Post-Pandemic Church**

Terry Maples

Session 5 is designed to tap into the imaginations of clergy and congregations. Our objective is to build on lessons learned from scripture in Sessions 1-4, speak truth to our current congregational contexts, and offer creative options for engaging the future. We encourage you to allow insights from Session 5 to aid you on your congregational journey.

Ezra sensed a clear calling from God to lead Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem. He knew God was with him all the way, all the time, but he didn't have a manual telling him how to get permission, secure provisions, organize, and enlist travelers for the long trip. Of course, Ezra made decisions based on his character and understanding of what God desires, but he still needed good judgment and wisdom to ensure a successful journey to Jerusalem.

No doubt, navigating this post-pandemic season will require much from lay and clergy leadership. Old patterns for being and doing church must be examined. We need Spirit's guidance, and we need leaders to exercise spiritual discernment and courage as they guide congregations on their way. Our prayer is this session will help folks dream new dreams and imagine new possibilities!

### **Part 1:**

### **How These Sessions Inform the Path Forward**

As a review and to remind us of previous discussions, we highlight insight and wisdom gleaned from our study of Ezra. Note: Thoughts arising from the text are in regular type; contextual thoughts for reflection today are in italics. For each session, determine which point(s) need more attention in your unique congregational context.

#### **Session 1 – Renewal and Commitment**

- God stirred the heart of King Cyrus, and God stirred the hearts of the Judean people to return. *God desires to “stir the hearts” of Christ-followers today. For what is your heart stirred?*
- After living in exile, Ezra called the people to a time of recommitment to God. *During isolation, commitment to fellow Christ-followers and the mission of God's church may have waned. After being away from each other during the pandemic, congregations now need a time of recommitment to one another and to*

*community. What rituals of recommitment and renewal help you reconnect and re-energize?*

- Displaced Judeans grieved not being able to worship in the temple. *Believers today grieve not being able to worship together in person, not to mention deep sadness for those who have died and for lost opportunities.*
- When people returned to Jerusalem, notice the urgency to worship, give thanks, and present offerings. *Post-pandemic, how do we cultivate a similar sense of urgency to worship God and express gratitude?*
- Upon re-entering the temple, reactions were mixed. Older people who had seen the grandeur of Solomon's temple, for example, were disappointed. *Similarly, restrictions like wearing masks, not singing in public, and missing those who choose not to return in person, are causing great disappointment for many in our churches.*
- Those returning needed assurance God was still at work among them and reassurance of God's providential care. *We, too, need reassurance God works among us, even in the midst of challenges, and to be reminded, our story is God's story.*

## **Session 2 – Persistence, Courage, & Resolve**

- Babylonian captivity was over and King Cyrus gave permission to rebuild the temple. *We pray the pandemic is over soon and people can safely return to church buildings and other public gathering spaces that facilitate re-connecting with each other.*
- Those with faith in God faced barriers that might have robbed them of their vision and joy. *We face barriers as we return because nothing can ever be “normal” again; we need fresh vision and joy for the journey forward.*
- There was sabotage in the rebuilding effort; adversaries sought to infiltrate and prevent the rebuild. *Some inside the church with less than genuine motives mistakenly seek to block change and renewal today.*
- The people showed courage—acting with conviction as they moved forward against conventional wisdom regarding the project. *Courage of conviction is needed in order to go against cultural norms. How comfortable are you being “counter-cultural”?*
- Those rebuilding the temple showed great perseverance because the goal seemed unattainable. *Coming back to church after so many months apart, we must formulate fresh and seemingly unattainable goals, and we need the perseverance to address and act upon them.*
- Rebuilding the temple disrupted the system that was in place; it's easy to become discouraged when everything around you is changing. *Many church members feel the same way and believe we've lost our moorings. How do you encourage and welcome change both personally and corporately?*
- Remembering the struggle in rebuilding the temple provides a foundation for hope during troubled times. *Like the Judeans, we must act with resolve to live out our commitments to love mercy and justice as we rise above fear in order to live out God's vision. Read Micah 6:8.*

### Session 3 – Leadership Lessons

- The rebuilding of the temple required effective leadership. *Finding the way forward after a pandemic will require effective leadership in churches.*
- Ezra is an exemplary leader. His heart—his very character—was set on studying, doing, and teaching the Law. *Today’s challenges demand congregational leaders who are spiritually mature and focused on discerning God’s vision for the church.*
- Though Ezra appears to have had unlimited access to power, he was an unassuming leader; he was not focused on material wealth or earthly power. *Leaders today must model the humility of Jesus as they “seek first the kingdom.” Read Matthew 6:33.*
- Ezra recognized all was in place for the trip except Levites who would be needed for Temple responsibilities in Jerusalem; Ezra was clear about the qualities needed by these leaders and got “the right leaders on the bus.” *The post-pandemic church must be wise as it enlists and trains leaders committed to the Jesus Way.*
- Before heading to Jerusalem, Ezra called for a time of prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving to God, i.e., put the big rocks in the priority bucket first. *The returning church can learn much from this example of prioritizing what is most important.*
- Ezra not only knew the Law, the Law formed his character, integrity, and values; Ezra embodied characteristics of servant leadership. *How do we find leaders who possess servant qualities? Do you agree leadership is about servanthood rather than power?*

### Session 4 – Conflict Resolution & Reform

- The focus of this session was the effect of spiritual renewal on people. Relational challenges, conflicts, or crises often lead to spiritual renewal and a group’s rededication to God’s purposes. *Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr calls this process order-disorder-reorder. Can you identify these three “buckets” in your current context? Where are renewal and reform (re-order) needed?*
- When many things change, and as hoped-for learning occurs, mistakes happen (Example: Ezra’s insistence on faithfulness included sending away foreign wives and children). *We can learn from the mistakes of others and place love and justice over legalism. Are you able to prioritize people over perceived religious purity?*
- For renewal and reform to happen, the people had to understand God’s instruction (Torah). *How important is proper understanding of scripture in shaping reform needed today? If we truly desire to become followers of the Way, we recognize God’s best instruction comes from Jesus – his words and his actions.*
- Of their own accord, those who had chosen to forsake the Law came to Ezra and asked him to lead them in the way they should go. Their confession was an affirmation of hope God would renew them. Ezra called for public re-commitment and return to the Law. The focus on fidelity to God is commendable, however we can’t ignore the injustice done toward those Ezra sent away. *In what ways does your church need to correct bad theology in order to “live justly and walk humbly*

*with God”? How aware are you of your local church’s history of just and merciful behavior?*

- Lay leadership played a prominent role in Ezra’s renewal efforts. *How can lay leaders in our churches step into this Kairos moment (crisis and opportunity for action or transformation), participate in taking stock (self-observation), and recommit to reform?*
- Most reform happens when a group of people realizes its way of living is not in alignment with God’s ideal. *In what ways is your congregation holding up Jesus’ life and teachings to reveal the gap between our Model and our reality?*
- If God used people of faith to rebuild the temple, *God can reform faith and rebuild community following this season of disruption and isolation.*

## **Part 2:**

### **Learning from Previous Pandemics**

We often hear these words, “History repeats itself.” As we move out of the COVID-19 crisis, can we look back at previous pandemics and their impact on Christianity and find hope for the future? In “Moral Malpractice & the Future of Faith,” Diana Butler Bass recounts the Antonine Plague that began in 166 C.E. and lasted 23 years. We aren’t certain about the cause of this plague that presented symptoms similar to smallpox. Historians estimate the plague killed 7-10% of the population (13-15% in densely populated cities).

How did this plague impact Christ followers? Bass reports:

*Indeed, historians of Christianity have suggested that this plague — and the subsequent Plague of Cyprian in the next century — was the context for the rapid spread of the Christian faith in the centuries following Jesus’ death. Christians didn’t flee the plague. Of course, many of them were poor and couldn’t. But they demonstrated rare courage caring for the sick and risking their own lives for the sake of their neighbors.*

Valor was prized in the ancient world and Christians demonstrated it well during a devastating time of fear, suffering, and loss. Their care of the sick dramatically reduced death rates. Christian involvement in the lives of sick and dying people convinced many Romans to embrace the Way of Jesus. The compassion of Christians caused Christianity to grow in numbers and influence.

Will Christianity experience a period of numerical growth and greater visibility following the current pandemic? No one knows for sure. The coronavirus injected fear into all of us. The church was strategically positioned to be a beacon of hope in the midst of the storm; many did find ways to show compassion, minister in new and creative ways, and stay connected while physically distanced. Not enough of those stories have been told!

Bass suggests the Romans had one distinct advantage over us—they didn't have to contend with Facebook or Instagram spreading false stories about the disease! In addition to much untruthful information shared on social media during our pandemic, some church leaders insisted on gathering in person without masks—resulting in super spreader events; some contributed to anxiety about vaccinations that could have saved lives; and some refused to wear masks and condemned those who commended the practice for the common good. As a result, the credibility of the church and her witness were damaged. We don't know the long-term implications of these actions for Christian churches.

**For your reflection:**

During the pandemic, how was your church perceived by the community around it? What are some short-term and long-term consequences of actions taken (or not taken) by your congregation during the pandemic?

### **Part 3: Honest Reflection about Clergy Fatigue**

Before we consider possible options for navigating a post-pandemic season in the life of congregations, we do well to acknowledge our current context. Carrying out ministry during the protracted months of the pandemic has been exhausting for clergy and lay leaders alike. As I speak with clergy, whether in person or via Zoom, stress and exhaustion are palpable. During a recent Zoom meeting, one pastor acknowledged: "I know I need to be thinking about the future of the church, but I just don't have the bandwidth for it. We are still focused on how to provide childcare during worship. For now, all I can do is lament what has been lost and help our folks celebrate the fact we are still here." Another pastor said it this way, "I have no more gas in my emotional tank."

Comprehending the impact of this season of uncertainty and challenge is essential before we start feeling pressure to *do* anything! Weathering the pandemic demanded incredible flexibility, creativity, and nimbleness. Preparing meaningful worship virtually for months required much more time, energy, and out-of-the-box thinking. Preaching to a computer screen or camera didn't compare to preaching in person. So many more decisions had to be made...and every decision was destined to displease some. The list of pandemic pressures is long. Suffice it to say, emotional, spiritual, and physical resources of our clergy are spent. Rest and renewal are needed.

Please keep all this in mind as your congregational leaders make plans for the coming year. Take time to grieve and lament the loss of life, family separations especially from the elderly and hospitalized, medical personnel and front-line workers stretched to the max, cancellations of all kinds, congregants not allowed to gather because of physical distancing requirements, ...the list is long. As you lament, also celebrate God's presence in the midst of the storm, and praise God for signs of goodness in spite of COVID-19.

Churches do well to consider offering a mini-sabbatical for clergy. I've read reports from those who greatly benefited from down time to re-charge. Running on empty for too long has emotional, mental, and spiritual implications for clergy. I'm sad to report a number of ministers have spent time in hospitals for physical symptoms brought on by exhaustion and conflict. Protracted pandemic stress will have long-term consequences for clergy and the congregations they serve.

Calling attention to ways in which clergy are stretched to the max in no way diminishes the reality most of society is also stretched and stressed. Church congregants are stressed because of fears over COVID-19, unwelcome change, toxic politics, chaos in their families and around the globe. Trying to manage that level of dis-ease for so long is debilitating, and, unfortunately, bleeds over into congregational relationships. Experts say many congregations are experiencing some level of conflict coming out of the pandemic. Be aware congregants carry the weight of trauma back into the church building. This trauma causes strained relationships inside the family of faith further exacerbating clergy stress.

## **Part 4**

### **The Path Forward: Possible Options for Reform Today**

The post-pandemic journey for each congregation will be unique, so it is a mistake to offer a singular "prescription" we falsely assume will work for every faith community. We believe each congregation is responsible and capable of discerning its best path forward; we want to aid your journey.

When our children were young, they enjoyed the "Choose Your Own Adventure" books that offered readers choices in determining the character's actions and the plot's outcome. This approach engages the imagination of the child. I think churches today need to "put their thinking caps on" in light of today's challenges. Old patterns of being and doing church have run their courses. Now is the time to engage your imagination. Find release from ineffective programs and ministries and allow new approaches that are authentic and speak to today's context to emerge.

Below are four options you might consider for your church's post-pandemic journey. It goes without saying, myriad options could be considered. I offer these four to jump-start your thinking, spur your imagination, and call out your creativity. And remember, choices we make today determine the vitality of our churches now and in the future.

## Option 1 – Let's return to normal ASAP.

We human beings don't like disruptions, and we detest change—especially when it is forced upon us. The pandemic disrupted everything about our personal and congregational lives. Some church people ask, “Can't we just go back to normal?” which most often means they desire a return to homeostasis or balance. They are really saying, “I liked things the way they were before COVID-19. Now that the worst of the pandemic is over, let's resume our previous routine.”

Consider these truths about this option before automatically assuming it is the best choice:

- 1) Global pandemic changed us. No matter how much churches desire “our normal routine,” the people who return are not the same. Everything changed; there is no way to re-establish what existed prior to COVID-19. Humanity has been fundamentally altered. Whether we acknowledge it or not, our psyches, emotions, and relationships have been wounded. By returning to “business as usual” churches unintentionally send the message they are oblivious to the universal fear, trauma, and loss Covid-19 unleashed on the world.
- 2) Churches showed capacity to adjust in the midst of crisis; our choices and decisions changed us. We honed an ability to respond methodically, deliberately to COVID-19 challenges. New callings came to light because of the pandemic. Now we must discover how to integrate what we learned as we craft a new normal.
- 3) The desire to return to the way things were before pandemic communicates our (mistaken) belief previous patterns of being and doing church were sufficient. Many cling to a false assumption all was well. Anyone who studies the evidence and observes statistical patterns knows people get nervous when church pews are empty. Most churches are aging and declining in attendance and giving. Congregational attempts to address the decline prior to the pandemic were not working; the previous path some wish would return is not sustainable for very long. Self-observation reveals the truth: We must be open to different ways of being and doing church.

We can assume many congregations will choose Option 1 because they desire the simplicity of resuming former, “normal” functioning over the hard work of self-observation and transformation. Said another way, the perceived pain involved in making substantive change is greater than the pain of staying the same. This option requires little imagination. While striving to “return to normal” is easier in the short-term, long-term consequences are (likely) dire. Of course, attempting to recreate something that resembles what we had previously may be the only viable option if churches have no energy or bandwidth to think about or invest significant time and attention to moving forward.

**For your reflection:**

- What do you believe to be positive about this option?
- What are some possible long-term consequences of maintaining old patterns of thinking and serving?

## **Option 2 - Nobody knows the future, so let's focus on the present.**

DURING the pandemic, we were much focused on the present—what do we do now that all life has been unhinged. In this current “coming out of pandemic, but not quite yet” time, we’re struggling with the past and future, and not paying attention to the present changes around us. It’s the difference between being in survival mode for so long, and now being able to see the horizon and move further.

In our world of distractions, being and staying present in the now is challenging. For example, think about how widespread use of cell phones has dramatically impacted the ability of people to be present to and fully listen to one another. Given the incivility and division plaguing our country, learning to be present to each other in the church is a powerful way to counter unhealthy cultural trends, build strong relationship systems (what church is intended to be), and embody the Way of Jesus.

According to Amy Cuddy, author of *Presence*, there is universal yearning for presence which she defines as, “the state of being attuned to and able to comfortably express our true thoughts, feelings, values, and potential.” Maria Popova adds, presence is “the ability to go through life with crystalline awareness and fully inhabit our experiences.” For sure, being fully aware and present to our current experiences is hard work under normal circumstances—and is even more difficult following isolation during a world-wide crisis. Being attentive to the here and now naturally leads to good reflection—bringing faith into conversation with all of life.

Imagine the potential positive impact of learning to become present to God, self, and one another. How easy it is to stay focused on the past (or perceived “glory days”) rather than choose to dream about the future and miss out on the here and now. Staying present holds great promise for spiritual growth and nurturing stronger relationships.

Many churches feel they are “failures” if they are not super busy and don’t have a wide variety of activities on the church calendar. Busyness is a major impediment to living in the present; it’s not the answer for the church during this unsettled season.

A powerful option for your congregation is to focus on helping folks become more present to God and one another. This pathway necessitates learning to listen, suspending judgment, and letting go of what we think we know (our biases). Our ability to listen deeply inspires others to listen to us. When we learn to listen attentively to one



another, we build strong relationships and greater capacity for hard conversations. Might this option be an antidote to the current division and disunity in our churches and the world?

I love the simplicity of this option—even though I fully understand how difficult it is to be and stay present. You don't need a long-term strategic plan—in fact, congregations do not find long-term planning very useful during times of incredible instability. Instead, you learn to listen and discern Spirit direction together—here and now. You stay faithful *today* to where you sense God leading your congregation *right now*, and you define faithfulness by taking baby steps in that direction. You surrender old score cards of “an effective church” (bodies, bucks, buildings) to being present to God, self, and others. This option could yield emotionally healthier congregants (forming soul friendships and addressing oppressive loneliness evident in our culture) and healthy community where respect and deep relationships are valued.

In a post from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Beatrice Bruteau shared the following:

*Jesus gathers people into communities in which . . . each person does the same thing Jesus originally did: loving another person on the level beyond any description, beaming full attention (with all one's heart, soul, mind, strength) of positive regard. This can awaken the sense of selfhood in one who has not yet known it, and in this way the community expands...[In the community] all people are absolutely equal and each is absolutely unique. The sharing within the community is thus richly textured and very creative. Being unified, loving, and creative, the community is the “outreach” of God, the very Presence of God as world.*

In an excellent article, “From the Age of Association to Authenticity,” Dwight Zscheile gives us language to understand why churches are struggling today—we function as if the church still resides in the *Age of Association* when in reality a major shift has occurred. The church must now learn to function in an *Age of Authenticity*. This quote beautifully captures what I see as the strength of this option:

*Imagine if your work as a leader was simply to join people where life is being lived in today's world, form relationships, listen to their longings and losses, cultivate community, and draw deeply on the rich traditions of Christian theology and practice to help them make spiritual meaning. Imagine if this spiritual work was the primary work of ministry—not administering and staffing programs, managing a non-profit, securing volunteers, running annual fundraising campaigns, worrying about decaying buildings. Consider how much energy is being spent on maintaining Age of Association institutions, where the primary focus ends up being on the institution itself, not its spiritual purpose. Let's be honest—many congregations function predominantly as social and cultural rather than spiritual and theological institutions.*

### For your reflection:

- In your opinion, what is the primary benefit of focusing on the present?
- What changes would be necessary for the church's primary function to shift from maintenance to helping people be present to themselves, to God, and to one another?
- What does it mean for the church to become the outreach of God?
- What becomes the primary function of leadership if the church's purpose is to help people make meaning of their lives?

## Option 3 – Our leaders are ready to risk vulnerability and courage.

In Session 3 we examined Ezra's leadership qualities that wisely inform leaders today. Option 3 taps into contemporary research about what is necessary for effective leadership today.

Dr. Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston where she holds the Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair. For the past two decades Dr. Brown has studied courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. She is the author of five #1 *New York Times* bestsellers, and she hosts the weekly podcasts *Unlocking Us* and *Dare to Lead*. Dr. Brown believes you have to walk through vulnerability to get to courage; her motto is "Courage over comfort."

Dr. Brown's most recent research reveals courage is a collection of four skill sets—**vulnerability, clarity of values, trust, and rising skills**—that can be taught, developed, learned, and measured. Learning these skills requires commitment, curiosity, and a willingness to challenge ourselves if our goal is to turn courage into actual behaviors. This approach becomes powerful, even transformative, when you train and develop a goodly number of brave leaders in a congregation. Research has proven an organization's collective courage is the best predictor of how successful it will be at putting values into practice in the real world.

After following Dr. Brown's groundbreaking work for some time, I believe the principles unearthed by her research offer insight for church leaders during this pivotal post-pandemic season. Let's explore the four pillars of courage.

### 1. Rumbling with Vulnerability

If we want to develop "daring leaders" who are committed to forward momentum, we must create environments in which leaders and teams can be vulnerable. Brown defines vulnerability as, "the emotion we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." All innovation involves some uncertainty and risk. Brown writes, "If we want people to fully show up, to bring their whole selves including their unarmored, whole hearts – so we can innovate, solve problems, and serve people – we have to be

vigilant about creating a culture in which people feel safe, seen, heard, and respected.” Our churches must never reward armoring behaviors like blaming, shaming, cynicism, perfectionism, and emotional stoicism (enduring pain without showing feelings). According to Brown, it’s time to take the armor off so teams can thrive and do groundbreaking work together.

## 2. Living into Our Values

Our congregations need clarity about their values, and leaders must intentionally define their values, too. Brown suggests avoiding the temptation to articulate too many values. Instead, focus on *two* if you hope values will become behaviors. Research shows only about 10% of organizations ever translate their values into teachable and observable behaviors that are then used to train leaders and hold them accountable. Imagine how significant the impact on our churches if a majority of leaders fully embraced and lived into two life-changing core values. Certainly, there is great value in doing the hard work of discerning and prioritizing what is most important.

## 3. Braving Trust

Without trust, connection is weak and questionable. If we can’t connect, vulnerability is impossible. Brown articulates seven elements of trust she calls The BRAVING Inventory.

- **Boundaries:** Setting boundaries is essential and healthy in all relationships; respecting each other’s boundaries is a must.
- **Reliability:** You do what you say you’ll do.
- **Accountability:** You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.
- **Vault:** You don’t share information or experiences that are not yours to share.
- **Integrity:** You choose courage over comfort.
- **Nonjudgment:** We feel free to talk about how we feel and ask for help without judgment.
- **Generosity:** You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others.

## 4. Learning to Rise

Brown’s *Learning to Rise* process includes three steps: *Reckoning*, *Rumbling*, and *Revolution*. *Reckoning* involves walking into our story by paying attention to our emotions and getting curious about them rather than numbing or ignoring the discomfort. *Rumbling* involves owning our story by getting clear about the stories we’ve made up about the situation, other people, and ourselves and being willing to wholeheartedly check these stories to see if we can come to more accurate versions of what happened. *Revolution* involves writing a new, more courageous ending to the story by learning from our failures and getting back out there to apply that learning.

### For your reflection:

- Brown defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Leaders exhibit courageous leadership when they are willing to be vulnerable. These leaders are “all in” even though it means they may fail, get hurt, or be misunderstood. Contrary to popular opinion, vulnerable leadership isn’t soft or

weak. Brown says vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness. **Reflect: What must happen in your congregation for leaders (clergy and lay) to be invited to become more vulnerable?**

- Brown says we must get clear about what we believe and check to be certain our intentions, words, thoughts and behaviors align with our beliefs. **Reflect: What would you name as your church's two most important values? Identify core behaviors that represent how you could more faithfully live into those values. How will you know if you are off course?**
- Brown contends courageous leaders who live their values instead of just talk about them are never silent about hard things. Leaders must realize when to act and know sometimes you must act in difficult situations. It takes courage to recognize these opportunities for leadership and to set an example for your team. Making decisions that honor your values will be tough because doing the right thing is rarely easy. **Reflect: How are leaders (clergy and lay) showing capacity to lead in difficult situations? How is courageous leadership rewarded or punished in your context?**
- Trust is the heart of true courageous and vulnerable relationships. Trust is built through intentional use of specific behaviors; people can be taught to be better trust builders. Trust is built through small moments of vulnerability in a relationship experienced over time and comes from choosing courage over comfort. **Reflect: Where does trust need to be built in your congregational system? Where have you seen leaders choosing courage over comfort? Be specific.**
- It matters how leaders respond when things go wrong. Brown says looking for fault shows a fixed mindset; learning to become better the next time shows a growth mindset. The most important aspect of courageous leadership is choosing how we respond to fear. Do we go on autopilot and protect and control or people please and appease? **Reflect: How did congregational leaders respond to widespread floating fear during the pandemic? Moving forward, what will "courageous leadership" look like?**

## **Option 4 – We're ready for transformation.**

A beautiful thing happened during the pandemic—churches were forced to let go of their assumptions about what it means to be and do church. Crises have a way of forcing us to consider new ways of doing things. We had to loosen our moorings which invited us to see differently and prompted us to embrace new approaches if we were willing.

The convergence of three crises in our country – the pandemic, an ugly campaign season and divisiveness following the 2020 presidential election, and another rise in racial tensions after the killing of black citizens by police officers – presented opportunities for us to wake-up to our current reality and see the need for change and transformation. In the normal ebb and flow of congregational life, dealing with *one* of

these issues would be extremely difficult. Dealing with all three simultaneously was/is almost paralyzing.

Waking up and opening ourselves to transformation is hard! Why? The easy answer (as stated previously) is we don't like change—even though we know the essence of the Gospel is *change* (“once I was blind, now I see”). The more difficult answer lies in our inability to “get it.” I’ve been listening to an excellent podcast by Brian McLaren called “Learning to See.” In this series, McLaren outlines 13 biases that keep us from seeing differently, i.e., block our ability to mature and grow. He contends the first bias—confirmation bias—is the most important. McLaren describes it this way:

*We judge new ideas based on the ease with which they fit in with and confirm the only standard we have: old ideas, old information, and trusted authorities. As a result, our framing story, belief system, or paradigm excludes whatever doesn't fit.*

Confirmation bias explains why we don't/can't/won't change very much. We automatically exclude anything that doesn't fit with our way of seeing. This is insightful for understanding why the Christian education enterprise in our churches is not very effectual. If you define our objective as *forming faith in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world* and “forming” connotes we stay open and pliable—constantly saying “yes” to the faith-shaping forces of the Master Potter – it is a struggle (maybe impossible) to say “yes” to Spirit when everything in our culture declares the opposite of what Jesus taught and lived. It's difficult to give up control and allow Spirit to blow us in new directions. We choose staying stuck with the same old—same old patterns and programs rather than engaging in the hard work of discernment, discovery, action, and reflection.

We're told the number of gym memberships rises exponentially every January as people make New Year's commitments to get into shape. Then, guess what? Most stop showing up after a month or two. Those who are actually successful at improving their health are those who stick with it over time—they show up and do the hard work day after day. They possess determination and commitment to their goals.

Because of the ways in which we get stuck in myopic seeing, a church can't just make the decision one day to become more loving, more compassionate, more inclusive, more compelled to work for justice, etc. There may be a precipitating event or experience that compels a congregation to open itself to seeing differently (through the eyes of Jesus), but more often, capacity to be self-observant and open to transformation is built over time by engaging in spiritual practices that allow us to give up control and consent to the Way of Jesus. It's going to take deconstruction (disorder) for reform (re-order) to take hold. Some examples:

I know of churches that place a sign in front of their church buildings that says, “All welcome,” but then people inside that building stand in the doorway and say, “You can't come in. We don't welcome *your kind!*” My question is: *What will be*

*required for churches to move from a phrase they rendered meaningless to actually embodying God's all-inclusive hospitality with no exceptions?*

Unfortunately, many define Christianity by a set of propositional truths about God. *How does a congregation wake up to the truth Christian faith is about nurturing a relationship with the Divine—then seek to live the Way of Jesus?*

Many sitting in church pews are content to believe church is about “us.” Energy and resources are invested in those who are considered “members” or potential members. Some might contend that’s what Ezra did, too. *How do congregations wake up to the reality the church exists not for itself but for God’s mission in the world?*

Many congregations are content to focus on specific, unacceptable “personal” sins as defined by my tribe. This list of “sins” determines who is “in” and who is “out.” *How does a congregation wake up to and identify evil systems that divide, sow discord, and hurt God’s children?*

We love singing, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world,” then refuse to believe and live the truth God loves all equally. *How does a congregation wake up to and address systemic injustice around race, immigration, sexual orientation, poverty, etc. How do we learn to treat the marginalized with compassion and empathy as beloved children of God?*

For churches whose primary focus is on heaven, there is little concern for what happens in the here and now—including creation care. *Does your congregation take seriously the call of God to steward all of creation?*

In other words, the process of learning to see through the eyes of God’s unconditional love is a struggle and demands something from us (including turning loose of previous ways of seeing and cultural expectations). Choosing Option 4 takes incredible courage. It means we must confront ways in which long-standing cultural practices blind us to God’s intent for the world. As we begin to see with God’s eyes, we will be challenged to read scripture differently and to re-form our theology and practice to bring them into alignment with the heartbeat of God. Only then are we capable of fully entering the “flow of God” which leads to Beloved Community.

### **For your reflection:**

- Honest observation: Option 4 is not a viable choice for a congregation that is operating at Stage 1 or 2 of faith development. To better understand the stages of faith development, I have chosen to share Brian McLaren’s **Four Stages of Faith Development** because they are easy to summarize and illustrate my observation.
- **Stage 1 - Simplicity** — You’re either for us or against us. It’s all or nothing. Value being right and obeying authority figures.

- **Stage 2 - Complexity** — There's more than one way to do things. Value freedom, succeeding, and achieving goals.
- **Stage 3 - Perplexity** — Everyone has an opinion. Who knows who is right? Value being fair, acknowledging bias and mistakes, and facing inconvenient truths.
- **Stage 4 - Harmony/Humility** — Seek first God's Kingdom...love God, love neighbors...in essentials unity...focus on a few grand essentials. Value being compassionate and seeking the common good.

Most folks who show up on our church campuses on Sunday morning are very comfortable with certitude found in Stages 1 or 2 (no judgment intended). Strain on the congregational system is inevitable as different members transition from one stage to the next. Questions with which we are willing to wrestle become much more complex as we move to Stages 3 and 4. This threatens black and white and either/or thinking; it also challenges literal interpretations of scripture that limit how much a congregational system can grow and evolve. Can you imagine the impact of a congregation that regularly practices empathy and compassion and works for the common good? That's transformation!

#### **Reflect:**

- **With which stage of faith development do you think most members of your congregation identify? Do you see uncomfortable tensions related to stages of faith playing out in the life of your congregation? Give concrete examples.**
- **Identify ways in which you see “confirmation bias” blocking the ability of your congregation to see through the compassionate eyes of God.**
- **What changes would need to take place in order to build capacity of a congregation to more fully embrace the unconditional love and justice of God?**
- **Is your congregation compelled to address a specific social justice issue as its next step of bold faithfulness? In your particular context, what baby steps will be required to help the congregational system imagine “a more excellent way”?**

## Epilogue

Hopefully, you have experienced uncanny parallels between the return of the exiles to Jerusalem and our return from the exile imposed on us by the pandemic. As we navigate the way forward, we have challenging issues to resolve and important choices to make.

What is God's wisdom and insight in the midst of our trials? Is God trustworthy? In our human frailty, we wrestle with the question of "where is God" when any tragedy strikes. We hear from within the ancient community the confidence that God has not abandoned them—that God was with them each step of their journey. Though the pandemic disrupted everything about our lives, we are assured God is where God always is—right in the middle of our hurt and suffering.

The community grappled with its changing context and wrestled with what it meant to renew covenant with God after a difficult season. Their journey included acknowledging ways the people had neglected sabbath, offered sick animals for sacrifice to God, reduced the poor to servitude, and much more. Our post-pandemic journey naturally confronts us with ways in which we as Christ-followers and congregations fail to live up to our commitments—ways in which we fail to be the presence of Christ in our communities.

The temptation to "go back to normal" is powerful. In the case of the exiles, that meant clinging to societal and theological traditions established before exile. We see this reflected in Ezra's understanding of Torah, i.e., we must do it this way lest we fail God again and have to suffer the consequences. This approach, while commendable, was short-sighted and emboldened a great miscarriage of justice. In our race to get back to normal, we must not cling to pre-COVID practices, cultural expectations, or biblical interpretations that no longer serve God's kingdom purposes.

The exiles saw the need for renewal and reform in addition to repentance for past mistakes or lack of faith. Likewise, we need to approach this post-pandemic season with genuine openness to be transformed by God. It's time to abandon institutional think—patterned ways of being and doing church—and re-imagining what a faithful band of Christ followers looks like today. I hope and pray the church will be prepared to bring healing and usher people into this reimagined body. Whatever the next iteration of church is, may we be compelled to love justice, do mercy, and walk humbly with God. That's the way we mirror the unconditional love, grace, and mercy of God to a hurting world!



## Benediction

God's richest blessings on all clergy, lay leaders, and congregations as you carefully consider steps you choose to take during this post-pandemic season. May Spirit provide the courage and convictions needed for bold action as you do kingdom work and live Christ in the world.

## Resources

### General Resources:

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### For More Historical Background:

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Coogan, Michael D. *Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Magness, Jodi. *The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

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