

Pursuing God: Hope and Holiness – a study of Ezra

Ezra 1:1- ; Jeremiah 29:10-14

MPS God sends forth His Word to lead His people in pursuing Him for His glory as He accomplishes His will on the earth.

OBJ Every person should pursue God in faith because of Six Lesson.

INTRO *When was the last time you went on a journey? What marked the journey for you?* Several months ago I shared one of my recent journeys, fishing and hiking in the Colorado mountains. There are many aspects I could share; scenery, funny instances, experiencing the scenery, etc. But for me, three aspects really serve to ‘mark the trip’; first, the place, typically more remote with less people, but few guarantees of convenience, second, the people I shared the journey with, and third, and most important, the lessons I learn about myself, people, life, and God. Those lesson return to me daily to fill my heart with gratitude, laughter, love, and joy. *Journeys are so enriching for life, but even more so defining and maturing.*

TRANS Today we begin a journey of pursuing God, to see the great work and the great story of God’s redemption among His people through the book of Ezra.

Pursuing God Series

Pursuing is not about searching for something we do not know nor know where it is located. Pursuing God is about following the One we know and following Him to where He is leading and in the work in which He leads. I want to make clear from the beginning what I mean by “pursue”. “Pursue” means that we hear and heed the Word of God by faith to trust and follow Him in daily life that our lives might bring glory to Him on the earth, and serve as a faithful witness to all peoples, calling them to faith in God by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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READ Ezra 1:1

*In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: **Ezra 1:1***

Historical Context

Ezra and Nehemiah are considered the continuation from the historical record of II Chronicles, which concludes with Ezra’s opening words, II Chronicles 36:22-23. I begin by providing historical context for this study, because so much understanding, meaning, and application come from the context.

The Jews were scattered when they were overthrown by the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar finally demolished Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and a large portion of the most important Jews, especially artisans and craftsmen, were carried to Babylon.¹ Jeremiah, who was prophesying at the time, was left behind in Palestine.² Approximately 50 years later, through political upheaval in the Babylonian kingdom, a young Persian King, modern-day Iran, partnered with the Medes to overthrow the Babylonians. Cyrus became King in 539 B.C. The Persian strategy was to allow peoples to remain in their home nation, as a way to build peace with the nations he conquered. As Ezra 1:1 records, Cyrus made a proclamation and recorded it on his cylinder to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and city wall. This historical timeline helps us understand why this is so important. Cambyses, Cyrus’s son, became king in 529 B.C. He mysteriously died in 522, which left the kingdom in some disarray during which many warring factions arose and destabilized Persian rule. But one of Cambyses’s officers, Darius, proved to be a competent general and rose to power in 519 B.C. Darius brought great stability

¹Fensham, F. Charles. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. New International Commentary of the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 9. Fensham writes, “When Nebuchadnezzar finally demolished Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (or 587 according to some scholars), a large portion of the most important Jews, especially artisans and craftsmen, were carried to Babylon.”

²Fensham, F. Charles. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 9. Fensham explains, “Jeremiah, belonging to a group who had warned the Jews not to rebel against the Babylonians, was left behind in Palestine.”



as he secured the Persian kingdom and stabilized it. The Biblical prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered in this time, inspiring the Jews to start work on the temple immediately. Xerxes, Darius' son, arose to the throne in 486 B.C. Then, Artaxerxes came to the throne in 465 B.C. and ruled until 424 B.C. He was king during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah.³

This historical context is critical because we cannot understand the message if we do not know the times from which it came. But as of equal importance is how we understand to apply it. We tend to read the Bible in a vacuum. This feeds our propensity to define God in our image and impose our demands on Him now, and to lose sight of His hand working out His will in human history. There is much for us to glean from Ezra because God's people were living in the middle of very familiar times, political unrest, economic hardship, and civil division. We must understand the context to hear His message.

TRANS Once we understand the historical context, it is important to consider Jeremiah's prophetic cry that, according to Ezra, is being fulfilled. Around 550 BC, thirty years after the Babylonian exile began and twelve years before Cyrus' decree and the first wave would return from Babylon led by Zerubbabel, Jeremiah wrote these words to God's people.

READ Jeremiah 29:10-14

*For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. **Jeremiah 29:10-14***

Pursuing God begins by the proclamation of His Word^{Ezra1:1}. We will follow a generation and consider what it means to "Pursue God"; addressing issues such as the critical role of God's Word, God's leading, the kind of people that follow, the priority of worship, inevitable and unrelenting opposition, God's authority and hand at work, as well as the role of prayer, repentance, spiritual preparation, and obedience.

OBJ Today, we begin with **six lessons in pursuing God from Jeremiah 29 that compel and motivate us.**

#1: When you pursue God, you experience His faithfulness and learn to trust him. Jer 29.10

¹⁰"I will visit you...fulfill my promise to you...bring you back..."

God is faithful and fulfills his promises. We are continually reminded of this throughout scripture. Ezra shows God's faithfulness to his Word by connecting us to Jeremiah 29.10-14 where God reminds His people that He will save. We are also reminded that Isaiah 44.28-45.4 calls Cyrus by name 200 years prior to identify him as the one God would use to help his people to pursue him. And all this to fulfill God promises to hear and save his people from Deuteronomy 4.29. **Pursuing God reveals His 'thread' of faithfulness: the promise of His Word, the peace of His presence, the power of His hand, and the glory of His purpose for your life.**

Experiencing God's faithfulness is how one learns to trust Him. Trusting God's faithfulness changes the way you hope in, think about, and obey Him, because you come to know Him, not just about Him. Faith makes the difference; trusting God, pressing in to know, hope, believe, obey and follow. **Knowledge of God's character / nature become our 'conviction that establishes every belief' and moves you from 'knowledge about' to 'knowing God'.**

Learning to trust God changes the way you understand His work FOR your life. Faith is the essence of relationship with God. Once we learn to trust God IN life, we must learn to trust Him FOR our life. This means we learn to live in such a way that pursues God by faith, not simply gives in to trust. Pursuing God means we trust Him in every situation that arises and for the very direction in which He leads. **God leads us in hard times to reveal His continued faithfulness and greater power to trust Him more.**

³Fensham, F. Charles. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, 14.



Nothing is as valuable as the lessons that teach you to trust God. You will never really know what you have in God until God has your while life. Pursuing God brings moments that test and threaten, and each one an experience of His great faithfulness to trust Him more!

#2: We can trust His plan and purpose for life, even though we may not understand His path to fulfill it. Jer 29:11

¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

I begin this lesson with questions: **Is it enough for you for God to know His plan for you, or must you demand He show it to you before you pursue Him in it?**

Is your life a series of unplanned, circumstantial, random happenstances strung together by your decisions? In this day with the plethora of people ready to “coach” in “what” and “how-to”, probably not. But before you answer, “Absolutely not! I’m intentional! I plan my days strategically,”...blah, blah, blah, wait. Here is what I am asking: **Where is God in your daily life, watching as you walk your own way, or with you, leading toward His purpose for you?** Essential to Christian discipleship is “die to self” (Luke 9:23), which means you die not only in each situation or decision, but in the big vision picture for your life too. **Trusting God’s plan for you is NOT simply a matter of “because it works”, but because He purposes your life by His will, to be led by His presence through Holy Spirit.**

One major point of “die to self” begins with our death to self-centeredness. “You” in Jeremiah 29:11 is plural. It includes you, Christian, but it is not solely about you. Jeremiah 29:11 is about God glory and His Will for His people. If you make “you” all about you, you miss the point. Your life is to be lived inextricably joined in fellowship and community with other Christians, without which you will never fully understand God’s plan. **God designed His will to be made known among His people. All of us need the local Church MUCH MORE than most of us know we need her.**

You can trust God’s plan because you can trust God. He is good and He is faithful. He will transform your life thru His plan, not just expend it to accomplish it. **Pursuing God is not simply what we do IN life but FOR our whole life.**

#3: When we pursue God, we respond to what He initiates. Jer 29:12

¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

God’s pursuit of us enable us to pursue him. Verse Twelve comes after verses 10-11; “Then you...”. Our pursuit of God is a response to his initiation in pursuing us. When we pursue God, He is waits and promises to hear from us. We are learning God’s faithfulness. You MAY be here today because you are pursuing God. (I cannot say for sure.) But I can promise you this, God is pursuing you today. **God’s Word proclaimed today is His invitation for you to respond in faith. Will you respond?**

#4: When we pursue God, He brings us to a place to meet him. Jer 29:13-14a

¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you, declares the LORD, God brought his people back to Jerusalem because that is where He would meet them as ‘Messiah’. God is always leading us to the place where we meet with Jesus. **One great challenge to your spiritual growth is that you believe you want to know God more than He cares to know you.** Know this, God is drawing you to himself today. But He’s not interested in being added to your laundry list of everything else, nor just decorating a life that you’ve created. There’s no hope in that. **Pursuing God begins with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the glorious news that God has made a way for us to hear, believe, and by faith come to Him.**

Will you pursue God today not along with everything else, but with your whole heart? God is waiting to meet you.

#5: ‘Finding God’ is the prize of pursuing God. Jer 29:14b

¹⁴and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.



God is our great reward. When you pursue him with all your heart, you enjoy the bounty of his blessing. Every person who has ever pursued God with their whole heart finds Him, every one, every time, 100%.

He is our great reward, not something He gives. It is His presence that satisfies our soul's longing, not his presents. Until you pursue above all the things of this world that vye for your affections and adorations, you may look but you will not find Him. Pursuing God 'with all your heart' is to abandon every other affection for everything else that competes with God, to find that He alone is worthy.

#6: No matter where you are or have been, you are never beyond where God can reach you to bring you back. **Jer 29:14** This is the simplest and shortest, but most hopeful lesson of all. No one knows this more fully than those who are pursuing God, that we are all separated from God! Some are not farther than others. We are all hopelessly and helplessly lost in sin. To hear His Word is to His call to come to Him in faith.

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CLOSE This series will challenge each of us to pursue God; to understand, trust, serve, and even sacrifice. Pursuing God will be a study that both leads you to look IN your life to see God's faithfulness, but also to look AT your life and be overwhelmed by His great faithfulness! God wants to show you how faithful He IS by remembering how faithful He HAS BEEN so you will be strengthened and compelled by greater faith in what He is calling / leading you to trust Him as He leads us forward in mission. **And where is the place He meets us?** Exile. God always uses the 'places of exile' and 'seasons in the wilderness' to prepare us by working in us for greater work that He wants to do through us.

Where do you need to know him more today? How do you need to trust him more today?

