**BCM Bible Study – January 17/18, 2018**

**Ezra: Promises Kept (Ezra 1-3)**

Intro: *The book of Jeremiah ends with Jerusalem’s destruction and God’s promise of 70 years of exile (Jer. 25) becoming a reality. The people had disobeyed God and were reaping the fruit of their sin. The setting of Ezra 1 is the first year of Cyrus (538 B.C.), the Persian king under whom Babylon is captured and overtaken, as God had also promised (Jer. 50-51). By capturing Babylon, Persia is now the utmost world power of that time. In contrast to Babylon’s foreign policy strategy of ‘destroy and scatter,’ “Persians preferred to accommodate the interests of local peoples when that also best served their own purposes.”* (New Bible Commentary, hereafter NBC)

Cyrus’ Decree: **Read Ezra 1:1-11**

* Do you remember anything from Jeremiah that the author might have in mind in verse 1?
  + **Read Jeremiah 25:12-14, 50:9** also **Read Isaiah 45:1,4-5,12-13**
  + In both Cyrus’ decree and the reaction of the people, how to do see God’s sovereign hand at work?
* In the first 5 verses, we already see a major theme of Ezra: “*Although what happened might have appeared to be insignificant within the larger affairs of the mighty Persian empire, these events were in fact governed by the sovereign God of heaven, who used even pagan kings such as Cyrus and Darius to achieve his will for his people.”* (NBC)
  + After 70 years of waiting, why would it have been so hard to notice God at work?
  + What are things that you tend to explain away by rational means to the exclusion of God’s sovereign activity?
  + When has retrospect afforded you the opportunity to see God at work where you hadn’t noticed Him in the moment?
  + How do these verses change the way we ought to think about the events of life, especially in times of waiting or disappointment?
* In light of the vessels mentioned in verses 7-11, **Read Jeremiah 27:21-22**. *The vessels were means by which Israel worshipped God – they had likely become idols and means of ritualistic worship (cf. Jeremiah 7:4). Biblical scholars note that the returning of the vessels and other language in this passage alludes to the idea that the author viewed this return from exile as a sort of 2nd exodus.* (NBC) *In short, God had accomplished his purpose in exile, and was setting up the people to worship him more fully:* **Read Jeremiah 24:4-7**.
  + How do you see God’s faithfulness even in the details of Ezra 1:7-11?
  + It is important to realize that God sent them into exile ***so that*** they would learn to worship him with a genuine heart.
    - Think of a recent time of hardship, minor or major. When you experienced God’s faithfulness and emerged from that period of hardship, did you turn back in worship or simply move forward in life? Why or why not?
    - What is the danger in not pausing to worship when these trials conclude?

Note: Ezra 2 is largely comprised of genealogy and we will not be reading it. But this is not to say that genealogy is unimportant! It is often used to make critical historical connections like Jesus to David/Abraham (Matt. 1) or David to Boaz/Ruth/Judah (Ruth 4). In this case, the genealogy makes the connection between pre and post exilic Israel (NBC). This historical connection is critical for connecting the coming Messiah to the line of David.

Fear and Worship: **Read Ezra 3:1-7**

* *Two leaders are introduced here: Jeshua (high priest) and Zerubbabel (governor)*.
* **Read 1 Chron. 3:16-19, Haggai 2:20-23,** and **Matt. 1:12-16.** Note: A signet ring marked royal authority and ownership – like David himself and others in his line, Zerubbabel is marked as God’s representative. (ESV Study Bible) (If you love connections to Jeremiah, see Jer. 22:24-27!)
  + In light of these verses, why is it significant and amazing that Zerubbabel is made governor? How does this display God’s faithfulness?
  + According to Haggai and Matthew, what future hope does Zerubbabel foreshadow?
* Verse 3 notes that they feared the people of the land. This echoes Numbers 13-14 when Israel sent spies into the Promised Land (the very land in which Ezra is set) and wept because of the power and strength of the inhabitants. They disbelieved that God could overcome their enemies and fulfill his promise. **Read Numbers 14:1-4.**
  + How does Israel’s reaction in Ezra 3 differ from their reaction in Numbers?
  + What do these two stories teach us about facing fear while following God’s plans and trusting His promises?
  + Why is worship the perfect antithesis to fear? How does fear fight against worship?
* It is appropriate that they celebrated the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles, which was a celebration of God’s provision for Israel in the desert when they were fully dependent on him.
  + What are some instances of God’s provision that can serve as reminders for you to trust God and worship him? Be specific!

Disappointment and Hope: **Read Ezra 3:8-13**

* The temple was central to Israeli life because it was the place where God’s presence dwelt with his people. Solomon built the first temple – read about the finale to the original dedication ceremony: **Read 2 Chron. 7:1-3.**
  + Why were the elders disappointed?
* This is an odd anti-climax to the story. The temple rebuilding would continue, but the temple would not attain its former glory. In light of this, **Read Haggai 2:2-9**.
  + What encouragement did this offer to the Israelites?
  + What encouragement do these verses offer to us? **Read Rev. 21:22-26**.

Conclusion

* The disappointment of the temple will be partially overcome within the lifetime of the people in the passage. However, Haggai makes it clear that it ultimately points to the fact that a more complete fulfillment is coming.
  + What disappointments are you currently facing? What eternal promise of God brings hope to your disappointment?
* One of the major themes of Ezra is God’s faithfulness and his active effort to fulfill his promises.
  + How has today’s Bible study reminded you of God’s faithfulness to you?
  + Discuss the possibility of setting up a visual/tangible reminder of God’s faithfulness that you might live by faith rather than fear.
    - Examples: Make your desktop a favorite Bible verse, set up a picture on your desk that serves as a constant reminder, always keep your Bible on your desk, carry a symbolic item in your pocket (small cross, rock, etc.), use expo markers to write verses on your bathroom mirror, etc.