**BCM Bible Study – January 31 and February 1, 2018**

**Ezra: The Hand of the LORD (Ezra 7-10)**

Intro: *These chapters focus on the book’s namesake – Ezra. Artaxerxes is the king of Persia, so the narrative has skipped forward about 57 years. Note that Ezra 4:7-23 looks forward to this time, so we know that it marked by opposition from Artaxerxes himself to rebuilding the city of Jerusalem in fear that great Jewish kings like David and Solomon would rise again and threaten peace in the empire. That part of the story will resume in Nehemiah, who is his cupbearer. Also note that Artaxerxes is the step-son of Esther.*

Ezra’s Journey: **Read Ezra 7:1-28; 8:15-23, 31-36** (This is a lot of reading, but have multiple people read, take it slowly, and it will only take you about 7-8 minutes)

* What is Ezra sent to accomplish in Jerusalem?
* As you read, what did you see as an overarching theme?
  + Note: If they don’t see the theme of God’s sovereign activity/the hand of God, have them look at these verses: 7:6, 9, 27-28; 8:18, 21-23, 31.
  + Aside from these direct references, how else to do see God’s hand? (Especially in Artaxerxes over-the-top provisions)
  + How have you seen God’s hand of provision/protection in your life over the last day, week, month or year?
* According to 7:10, why did God grant such favor to Ezra?
  + We often ask for God’s good hand to be active in our efforts and in our lives. Like Ezra, we want things to go well for us in our endeavors. In fact, we are called to ask the Father for such blessings: **Read Matthew 7:7-11** and **John 14:12-14**.
  + What does the posture of Ezra teach us about asking God for things and whether or not he obliges our requests and blesses our efforts?
  + **Read Proverbs 3:1-12.** According to these verses, what is the way to attain “straight paths?” What do we learn about the way God directs our lives and shapes our desires to walk these paths?
  + Think of a time when you didn’t feel like the “good hand of the LORD” was on you. Describe that time to the group – how did you wrestle with that disappointment? Have you seen God redeem that experience? How did he shape you through it?
  + Note: *The intent of this section is not to say that God is a slot machine; we cannot simply clean up our behavior and get what we want. Rather, God’s hand has on Ezra because his will was aligned with God’s . When we treasure his Word and commandments, our hearts are transformed to love what God loves. It this way, our intentions and paths, which are crooked, and made straight. Also note that Ezra experienced trouble on his journey; when we face hardships, that doesn’t necessarily mean that we are not pursuing God’s will. Because of the prevalence of sin, Jesus promised trouble in this world. In short, God’s favor is* ***not fundamentally about us****, it is about accomplishing his purposes.*
* Look again at 8:21-23
  + What is Ezra’s concern in this section? How do his actions glorify God?
  + What are the safety structures in your life? How do we determine whether or not those are good (i.e. being good stewards) or display a mistrust of God?
    - Note: *I believe it to be really about the heart. Are you creating safety nets out of a sense of fear or are you joyfully caring for what God has given you? Romans 14 talks about how everything is clean to eat, but a person sins if they eats with a guilty conscience.* Consider **Romans 14:23** Time permitting, discuss what this verse means in its own context and how it may apply to the situation at hand.
  + How can/have your safety structures impede your witness? Do you need to change anything about the way you live?

Preserving the Faith

* To understand the next section of Ezra, first **Read Deuteronomy 7:1-8.**
  + Why does God ban intermarriage with the foreigner?
  + For what purpose did God choose Israel to be his holy people? Why was holiness important?
    - For insight, see **Gen. 12:1-3, Deut. 4:4-8.**
* Now, **Read Ezra 9:1-10:5, 10:9-12, 16-17**
  + Given what you have previously read, why did Ezra make these demands?
    - Note: *See Ezra 6:21 - God is accepting of foreigners who separate themselves from worldly ways. In fact, God would cast out impure Israelites. This is not a passage about race; it is about pure faith. There was great danger of “syncretism” – the mixing of religious ideals.*
    - Note: *This passage is hard to understand for a few reasons, one of which is the fact that the New Testament bans divorce. This is a longer conversation, but the short answer is that this is a special situation for a special time. If this is a major struggle for anyone, point them to a staff member.*
  + In the Old Testament, faith was more tied to ethnicity. To be a non-Israelite almost always meant that the person did not worship God. While this direct application of ethnic purity is no longer applicable (and again note that God-worshipping foreigners were welcome), we are still called to purity as a community and as individuals. **Read 1 Peter 1:13-16, 2:9-10**.
    - Why is living a godly life important today? In what way is it similar and dissimilar to the Israelites?
    - What does godly living look like today?
    - The focus on this passage is syncretism – not wanting to intermingle with “the world” such that faith becomes tarnished. What are some ways that you have seen people syncretize the faith? (i.e. “all roads lead to heaven” or “I can still do \_\_\_\_ and be a Christian”)
    - While we must be aware of not being influenced by un-godly things and ideas, we are also called to be in the world and interact with it constructively. What does this balance look like? How can you be in the world while not being too influenced by it?
* Describe Ezra’s attitude in this passage. What is his focus in his prayers and actions?
  + Ezra was truly devastated over sin. Do you feel this way about sin? Why do you become numb to the seriousness of sin?
  + How did Ezra’s attitude help him maintain his posture of seriousness towards sin?
  + In the context of not commanding Christians not to judge others, Paul reminds the Romans that they too are sinners who have been shown mercy. Then, in Romans 2:4 he tells us that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.”
    - Wrap up by talking about how you have experienced God’s kindness and why you feel that it is undeserved.