

Study in Ezra 1-3

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- [0 : 0 0] I should like to begin a course of studies with you tonight in that section of Old Testament history covered by Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.
- And I want to focus attention this evening on the first two and a half chapters of the book of Ezra.
- And perhaps if you keep your Bibles open we will refer to one or two verses in these chapters.
- As you know the books of Joshua through to the second book of Chronicles cover the history of the Jewish nation after their settlement in Canaan.
- And we know from these books that after the death of Solomon Israel as a nation was split up into two kingdoms.
- [1 : 1 5] The kingdom comprised of the ten tribes known as Israel and the kingdom of Judah. And after repeated warnings from God through prophets such as Isaiah, Micah, Sephaniah, Habakkuk and Hosea.
- After repeated warnings from God through these prophets to both nations. They were brought ultimately into the captivity threatened because of their ungodliness and their idolatry.
- Israel into the captivity of Israel into the captivity of Israel. And Judah into the captivity of Babylon.
- And during that period of exile or perhaps just to put it in its context. Immediately prior to the exile, to that captivity you have the time of the prophet Jeremiah.
- And then in the time of the exile itself you have the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel.
- [2 : 3 7] Judah was taken captive into Babylon. And it was the policy of the Babylonian empire to deport those people conquered.
- By them to Babylon. And after 20 or 30 years the Babylonian empire itself was overthrown by the Persian empire.
- And one of the first acts of the king of Persia Cyrus. was to offer to expatriate the exiles.
- The exiled peoples in Babylon to their own countries. To reinstate them in their country so that they would reinstate their own national religion.
- And among those who benefited from this change of policy were the Jews. You have that.
- [3 : 5 4] And for those of you who are interested, the last two verses of 2 Chronicles. The first two verses of the book of Ezra.
- Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia. That the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom.
- And put it also in writing saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kings of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me. And he hath charged me to build a man house in Jerusalem which is in Judah.

Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him. And let him go up. Now from that time, The time that Cyrus king of Persia, Who had now, The nation that had now overthrown Babylon and had, And had the balance of power in their own hands in the then known world.

From the time that Cyrus made that decree, You have the period of history, The last period of Old Testament history, Covered by Ezra, Nehemiah, And Esther as the historical portions of that history.

[5 : 25] And the spiritual side of it, Covered by Haggai, Sechariah, And Malachi. And perhaps as a generalization might be said, That if you want to understand, The last three prophecies in the Old Testament, Haggai, Sechariah, And Malachi, Read them, Against the historical background, That you have in Ezra, Nehemiah particularly, And Esther.

Well, It is to that period, Of Old Testament history, That I would like to turn with you, And Wednesday nights now, Hopefully, Until the end of the year.

Now the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Describe the three stages, Of the return, Of the Jews, From the exile in Babylon, Which had now become Persia, Their return to Jerusalem.

The first six chapters of this book, Are taken up with the return of the main party, Under, Serubbabel, And Joshua, Serubbabel, The ecclesiastical leader, And Joshua, The priest, Both of whom are often referred to, In the book of the prophet, Sechariah.

And then, From chapter seven, To the end of this book, You have the, Account of the second, Party, Under, Ezra, Himself.

[7 : 07] This was about 50 years, After the return of the first party, Under, Serubbabel, And Joshua. And it was probably, In between these two periods, Sometime within that 50 year period, That you have the, History, That is referred to in the book of Esther.

It is probably within that, 50 year period, Between the return of the first main party, And the return of the second one, Under, Ezra. And then, About 20 years after that, Again, You have the return of the third, Main party, Under the leadership of, Nehemiah.

Now, I am going to look with you tonight, We are going to look together at the, Return of the first main party, As this is, Brought before us in the, First three chapters of this book.

And I want to look at, Two themes in particular, That this book, Indicates so very clearly, First of all, The unfolding, Purpose, Of God, And secondly, And more particularly, The way in which, These people went about, Rebuilding, The ruins, Of, Jerusalem.

Now, We read here that, There were about, 42,000, Who returned, Initially, With, Serubbabel, And Joshua, To Jerusalem, When Cyrus, Issued, His, Decree.

[8 : 42] And, As you look at, The unfolding, Purpose of God, You cannot, But look at, This very important, Figure in the Old Testament. This man, Cyrus, King of, Persia.

He was the, Most important, Secular leader, Of his day. And he was raised up, By God, To break, The power of Babylon, And thereby, To change, The balance of power, In the, Known world, At that time.

And this may help, You to understand, Two very important, Chapters, In the prophecy of Isaiah. We haven't got time, To read them here tonight, I wish we had. You can read them, When you get home.

Chapters 44, And, 45, In the prophecy of Isaiah. And there again, You have God, Speaking, Many, Many years, Before this event.

Speaking through, His prophet Isaiah, And telling his people, That he was going to raise up Cyrus, Who would be his servant, His shepherd, To do his will, Towards, His own people.

[9 : 50] Now the great question arises this, How could a heathen king, Like Cyrus, Know, As he refers to it here, At the beginning of this book, If you read, Verse 2 of chapter 1, The Lord God of heaven, Hath given me all the kings of the earth, And he hath charged me, To build him a house in Jerusalem, Which is in Judah.

Who is there of you, Among you of all his people? Is God be with him, Let him go up to Jerusalem, Which is in Judah, And build the house of the Lord, God of Israel. He is the God, Which is in Jerusalem.

Now, How could a heathen king, Such as Cyrus, Come to know, The revealed will, Of the God, Of Israel.

Of course, We don't really know, The answer, To that question. But, There are one or two, Interesting points, That are made by many, And I just mentioned them, In the passing.

We cannot, For example, Forget, The life, The influence, Of a, The life, And the witness, And the prayers, Of men like, Dania, And Ezekiel, And many others, With them, During these years, Of captivity, Who were genuine, Believers, In the God of Israel, And who, Like the young maiden, In Naaman's household, Witnessed, To the power, And to the majesty, And to the glory, And to the grace, Of the God of Israel.

[11 : 37] We don't know, What place, Such a witness, Would have had, In the life, Of a man, Such as, Cyrus.

We don't know. And, In this connection, It might encourage, Each one of us, To witness, No matter where we are, Or no matter how feeble, How weak, We may feel our witness to be, There are many of us, Who, Feel our own, Hopeless inadequacy, In many situations, Perhaps, You feel your own, Uselessness, And your own, Hopelessness, And you wish, That you could witness better, You could say more, You could do more, Well, We are never to, Give up, Never to, Shirk our responsibilities, Nor are we to, Abandon the, Abandon the, Privileges, And the opportunities, That are given to us, Day by day, You never know, How God, May use, Your own, Feeble witness, To bless that, To, Somebody else, You never know,

But in connection, With Cyrus, The important thing, Is this, That this man, As the Bible tells us, As Isaiah tells us, Was, Anointed, By God, Refer to, As the shepherd, Of God, Now, You are not, Thereby warranted, To conclude, That Cyrus, Was a believer, God, Can anoint, And this is the very often, The many of the word, Anoint, In the Bible, God can, Use, Anybody, To fulfill, His purpose, For, God, Can employ, Anyone, As his shepherd, That is the person, Who is going to do, God's will, You see, You don't necessarily, Need to love, The will of God, Yourself, To do, The will of God, God can move you,

To do his will, And thereby, To fulfill, His purpose, And this is how God, Used Cyrus, He raised him up, He raised him up, So that by a, Mysterious, By the mysterious influence, Of his will, And his spirit, He would, Do all that was in accordance, With a purpose, And with the plan, Of God, And all this, Was within, The purpose, And the plan, Of God, The captivity, Of Israel, And of Judah, Was within the, Plan, And the purpose, Of God, The release, From captivity, Was within, The plan, And the purpose, Of God, God, Was behind, All this, And God, Was using, This man, In the unfolding, Of the history, Of the then known world, For this, For the fulfillment, Of his own, Of his own, Wonderful purpose,

And gracious purpose, Towards his own, People, Towards his own, Old testament church, In the same way, Exactly, As the history, Of this world, Today, Unfolds, For two, Great reasons, First and foremost, For the glory of God, And secondly, For the good, Of God's church, In the world, You and I, May not see it like that, We don't see it like that, Probably, We never think, In terms of, The fulfillment, Of God's purpose, As world events, Unfold, Before our eyes, On the television screen, Every day of life, We don't think, Of our world leaders, Reagan, And Gorbachev, We don't think, Of the readers, Of the western world, And of the eastern bloc, As being, In the hand of God, And being used, By God, We don't know, Who's being raised up, By God, At any particular time, To fulfill his will,

[15 : 54] To do his purpose, With reference, To the Christian church, And I'm sure, That you would agree with me, That it is seldom, That you think, Of the unfolding, Of world affairs, Current affairs, It is seldom, That you think, Of their unfolding, With reference, To God's, Purpose, For yourself, As a member, Of the Christian church, And with reference, To God's purpose, For the church, As a whole, In the world, Well, Here you have, Another indication, Of the way in which, The purpose of God, Unfolds, He brought this church, The Old Testament church, Into captivity, So that by the captivity, Her life, And her witness, By the chastisement, Of that captivity, Her life, And her witness, Would be purged, And in the interest,

Of that church, Without her recognizing it, He was working, As we were behind the scenes, Raising up, A nation like Persia, And a king like Cyrus, To overthrow, Babylon, So that he would, Issue a decree, Within the first two years, Of his reign, By which, These people, Were sent, By him, And with his approval, And with his blessing, And enriched, By him materially, Sent back, To rebuild, Their land, Their temple, And their city, And all within, The purpose, Of God, Secondly, Look now at, The work to which, They were called, Now, You will notice here, That, The children of Israel, These Jews, Did not go back, Empty handed,

Whosoever, Remaineth in any place, Where he sojourneth, Verse 4, Let the men of his place, Help him with silver, With gold, With goods, And with beasts, And so on, Now, If you know your Old Testament history, You will notice, That there is a parallel to this, You remember, There is a parallel to this, In the book of Exodus, When the people of Israel, When they, Left, Egypt, To go back, To Canaan, They were not allowed, To go, Empty handed, In chapter 12, In the book of Exodus, We read, That the children visited, According to the word of Moses, And they borrowed of the Egyptians, Jewels of silver, And jewels of gold, And raiment, And the Lord, Gave the people favor, In the sight of the Egyptians, And this was, Fulfillment of what God, Had said to Moses, In Exodus chapter 3, Your people, He says, The people go out of Egypt, And they will go out, Enriched, By the Egyptians, And much of what went towards,

The building of the tabernacle, In the wilderness, Was stuff, That the children of Israel, Had received from the Egyptians, Before they ever left Egypt, Similarly here, Much of what went towards, The rebuilding of the altar, And of the temple, And ultimately of the city walls, Much of it, Was what the Jews, Received, From the, Persian, King, And from the people, Of the country, That had become known, As, Persian, And I think that this is, Interesting because, You see, I know, And I hope that there's, If there's anyone present, Of this religious persuasion, I hope that you'll forgive me, For, Raising this, But, And if I'm wrong, Perhaps you'll correct me afterwards, I think it is true to say, That there are,

People, Religious persuasion, Such as, The brethren, That, Believe that, The, Cause of the Lord, Should only, Be supported, For example, Financially, By the people of the Lord, There are some people, Perhaps in their own church, Who feel that, The only people, Should subscribe, To church funds, Are those who love the Lord, Well of course, That is not, A biblical principle, The church, In the Old Testament, Was supported, By people, Who were not only, Outside it, But who were the veritable, Enemies of the church, As I mentioned, Look at what happened, When the Jews left Egypt, Here look at what happened, When they left, Persia, And it is a principle, In the Bible that, God, Will use, People, Who are not his at all, To support, His own cause, And,

[21 : 03] Indeed, God expects, People who are not his at all, To support, His own cause, In the world, That is the first point, To be made up, And the other point, To notice is this, In this first chapter, That everyone, The decree was, Extended to, The offer was extended, To all the Jews, To go back, To Jerusalem, Now many of them, Did not, Avail themselves, Of the opportunity, Similar, The situation, That you have today, And you have had it for years, Since 1948, Wasn't it, That Israel was made, A nation, And the privilege given, The opportunity given, To every Jew, To return to Israel, And many, Many, Jews, Go back to Israel, But many, Many, Do not go back, For their own, Particular reasons, Politically, They do not go back, They stay in Britain, In the States, In South Africa, And many places, They don't avail themselves, Of the opportunity today, As the Jews then, Didn't avail themselves, Of the opportunity, Only, Forty odd thousand of them, Went back, At that time, But,

There is something else, To notice, In connection with that, Perhaps, There is an application, To be made about it, Spiritually, That, And perhaps, In the next few weeks, You yourselves, Maybe put on the spot, In connection with this, That, When the offer, Is extended, To, The Christian church, To a, Help in particular directions, It's amazing, How few people, Take up the offer, I may, Inundated, From times, If I may use the word, With people, Who criticize, Me, And my life, For not doing this, And not doing that, And not doing the next thing, And yet, I don't know, There is anything, That is more depressing, Upon the human spirit, Than the attempts, That we try to do, To, Try to make, To do certain things, And you receive, So little, In the way of encouragement,

There is that, Spiritual application, To be made of it, God, Has a work, And, A, A, A role, For each one of us, In, In the unfolding, Of his own purpose, Within the church, In the world, And he lays his finger, On each single one of us, And there are many of us, Who opt out, Who refuse, To accept, The invitation, Addressed to us, It is not an invitation, It is a command, It is an invitation, From Cyrus, But many of them, Refuse, To take it, And there is that, Spiritual application, That could be made, I think, With some force, And purpose, Perhaps even in your own life, Tonight, Well, For those 42,000, Who went back, They set to work, And they did two things, And these are the only things, I am going to mention tonight, The two things, That chapter 2 tells us, That they did, First of all,

They built the altar, Of burnt offering, And then they observed, The feast, Of tabernacles, Now, This was, Let me put it, Let me show you, Just, Tell you the three stages, That you have in, Ezra and Nehemiah, When they began to rebuild Jerusalem, The first thing they rebuilt, Was the altar of burnt offering, Then they went on, To rebuild the rest, The rest of the temple furniture, Together with the temple itself, When all that was finished, Under Nehemiah, They built, The city walls, To protect, The temple, Now then, Here is the question, Why begin with the altar of burnt offering, Why begin there, Well for this reason, That you must begin, At the most important point of all, And the altar of burnt offering, Was the central point of importance, In the worship,

Of Israel, In the worship of the Jew, Worship, Temple worship was meaningless, Without the altar of burnt offering, It was at the very heart, At the very center, Of their religious life, So, They begin, At the very center, They begin with the most important thing of all, They begin within, And then they begin as to work, To work from within, Outwards, Outwards, And this is what it is, With the Christian church, This is how it is, You must begin within, And you must begin with yourself, And you must begin in the inner man, Inside yourself, In your soul, In your own relationship with God, You begin there, And from there, It emanates out, To the rest, That's how it begins, And that's where it begins, It's the same with revival, In the church,

[26 : 10] It begins, Within the church, And works its way out, From the church, And this is why, You even know, There may be people here, Who will disagree with me on this, This is why, One has to for example, Speak about, The evangelistic service, We hold here in Lewis, Year after year, That's what is known as, What is known as, The Ordin picker, These service, Which were, Which were, Born, As it were, From within, The Christian church, In a time of, Rich spiritual, Blessing, And revival, They were the product, Of the church, From within, And went to those without, And the church, I believe, A, Has not benefited, Over the years, By, By, By retaining,

What began in that way, When she itself, Had lost the life, And the vitality, And the vigor, That had given birth, To these things, And they are now, As it were, On the outside, Without being a part, Really, Of the inner life, Of the church at all, You begin within, That's only on our side, You begin within, You begin, As it were, With yourself, Now the altar of burnt offering, As I said, Was important, It was a place, As you know, And I just rush over this, It was a place where, The slain victims, Were offered to God, It was made of earth, It was like a mound of earth, The altar of burnt offering, Like a mound, A huge mound of earth, And it had four pillars, Or horns, Strong horns, They had to be strong, Because to these horns, Very often the victims, Which were taken to be slain, Were tied, And that's why you have the references, You have in Psalm 118, Bind ye unto the altar's horns, With cords, The sacrifice, They were bound to the horns,

Of the altar, These, As they were huge corner posts, And there was a platform, A raised platform, On which the priests stood, As they ministered, Offered, The offerings, On the altar of burnt offering, And the altar was fed, Unceasingly, With the, The, The, The, The, The, The, The, The sacrifice of life, Which was consumed, By a never dying fire, Underneath, And it was the most important, Of the temple furniture, Without it, Nothing could be done spiritually, It symbolized the meeting place, Between God, And the sinner, And it showed the sinner, God's appointed way, Of meeting him, By sacrifice, By blood, By offering, And was to the, To the person, Who came a constant reminder, Of his sin,

And of the punishment, That his sin, Demanded, And of the ground, Of his acceptance, Through the death, Of a substitute, In the presence of God, It was therefore, The meeting place, Between God, And man, The place where man had, Showed that he had, Fellowship with God, Anyone who was, Anyone by the way, Who had, No fellowship with God, Whose life, Was so tempted, By willful sin, He couldn't come, To the altar, Of burnt offering, Until that sin, Had first of all, Been atoned for, It was only the man, Who stood, In fellowship with God, Who was allowed, To come, To the altar, Of burnt offering, And there, He consecrated himself, Anew, To the service, And to the worship of God, There he received, The consolation, Of the friendship, And the fellowship, Of God, Into his own soul, And there, He received, Acceptance, Before God, In the basis, Of his own,

Sacrifice, That, Was the altar, That these people, That's what, This is what these people did, First of all, They repaired, They rebuilt, And they restored, And they reestablished, The altar, Of burnt offering, To the Lord, And that is where you and I, Have to begin, In a relationship with God, At the personal level, Before we do anything else, We have to restore, Repair, Reestablish, What may have broken down, In the life, That at which the fellowship, Has been broken, We've got to get it right, And we've got to get that relationship, Sorted out, First, And foremost, We begin, With the altar, At personal level, For those of you, Are head of families, You begin with the altar, At your family life, At the level of your family life, We begin with the altar,

[31 : 21] At the level of congregational life, Because of that's wrong, Everything is wrong, Everything is wrong, And I wonder, As I listen, For example, To our own praise, In the sanctuary, Here and in the church building, And when there seems to be so much apathy prevailing, When people are almost afraid, To open their mouths, Afraid to sing out to the Lord, Why?

Why? Is there something wrong, In a relationship with God, Have you got nothing to sing about? Oh yes, We've got to start right in there, Right in there, At every single level, Of your relationship with the Lord, Begin there, Begin within, Repair the brokenness, In your life, Restore the fallenness, Reconsecrate, Rededicate, And reconsecrate, Yourself anew to the Lord, This is what Jacob had to do, He had to build the altar at Bethel, Rebuild it, This is what Elijah had to do, He had to rebuild, The altar of Israel, And Carmel, This is what Samuel had to do, He had also to rebuild the altar at Ram, And there are many times,

When you and I, Have to rebuild the altar, And all religious to and throwing, And all the activity in our lives, I wonder if deep down, And right inside, Has that altar, Been repaired, Have these things, Been put right, I read a quotation the other day, And I give it to you, Because it's well worth giving, To worship, Said this man, Is to quicken the conscience, By the holiness of God, To feed the mind, With the truth of God, To purge the imagination, With the beauty of God, To open the heart, To the love of God, And to devote the will, To the purpose of God, That, Is rebuilding the altar,

All for that relationship, To get it right, To go back to Bethel, And to sort things out, That's where they began, And then finally, We read in verse 4 of chapter 3, After they had done this, They kept, The feast, Of tabernacles, Now these were the two things, That they did first of all, They rebuilt the altar, Of burnt offering, And then they kept, The feast of tabernacles, Know that, Now just listen to a word, The feast of tabernacles, Was, The longest, Feast in Israel, It lasted for eight days, From one Sabbath, To another, And it was the last feast, Of the year, And it took place, After, The day, Of atonement, And what it was really, Was, It reminded Israel, Of their 40 years,

Journey through the wilderness, And what they did, Was this, For eight days, They lived in tents, Booths, Similar to the ones, Of which they lived, When they were in the wilderness, For eight days, And they worshipped the Lord, And in the course of time, Two, Things were associated, With that feast, Which spelt out, Something of the joy of it, The ritual, The first thing was, Is that, A certain ritual, Was observed on the last day, Of the feast, Water was drawn, From the pool of Siloam, In a golden pitcher, And poured, Onto the altar, Of burnt offering, By the priest, And as it did this, It was accompanied, By congregational singing, You have a reference, In Isaiah chapter 12, You shall draw water, You shall draw with joy, Water, From the wells of salvation, This is what happened, Recorded in John chapter 7, When Jesus, On the last day of the feast,

[35 : 57] Said, If any man thirst, Let him come unto me, And drink, You see, It was after he had seen, This being done, And was associated with, Water associated with joy, And then, The other ritual was that, One of the temple courts, Was lit brightly, And permanently, And that is, The reference that you have, To the saying of Jesus, In John chapter 8, I am the light, Of the world, Now that, These people, After 70 years captivity, 42,000 of them, For the first time, In many a long day, Held the feast, Of tabernacles, Now, They didn't hold it fully, We know from the book, Of Nehemiah, That was about 50 years, After this, Before, Jerusalem, As a city, Really, Thoroughly, Thoroughly, Observed the feast, Of tabernacles, But, They observed it at least, In a measure, And it reminded them, Remember, Of the journey,

Of what God had done, For their forefathers, In bringing them back to, In bringing them into Canaan, After 40 years, Wandering in the wilderness, But notice this, Why should they keep, The feast of tabernacles?

What was the significance, Of it for them? This, Of course, Here, Now, Were a people, Who could enter, Meaningfully, Into, A remembrance, Of what God had done, For them, It wasn't just, That God had brought, Their fathers, Through the wilderness, Into Canaan, God had brought them, From captivity, Back, To Jerusalem, And this is part, Of the worship, Of the Christian church, It's a meaningful, Exercise, For the worshiper, What's he doing?

He's lifting his heart, In joyfulness, In thankfulness, To a God, Who has brought him back, From the captivity, Of sin, Into the liberty, The glorious liberty, Of the people, Of the people, Of God, He can worship, God now, As one, Who has, Been, Delivered, Been, Freed, By himself, He can say, That God, Not only brought back, Israel, But he has brought, Him back, The Lord, Did great things, For Israel, As we sang here tonight, But he's done, Great things for us, This is the testimony, Of the Christian, Of the Christian church, God has, She has been released, Redeemed, Delivered, By the power of God, Enabled, To rededicate, Her life, To himself, And can therefore, Worship in a meaningful, In a personal way, And can say,

The Lord has brought me, Into this place, Can you say that, Tonight? And is the Lord, Reminding you, That you have to renew, Your own, Commitment, To him, That you are to rejoice, Within the, Circle, Which is, The church of God, Where life, Fellowship, Ought to abide, Wouldn't it be good, If you and I, Could begin, With ourselves, Tonight, Could begin, With our own heart, In our own, Relationship to God, Wouldn't that be good, So that, From us, From within, The life, That he has, Communicated to us, Would then, Would then, Funnel, Its way through,

[40 : 00] Into the life, And the witness, And the fellowship, Of others, They began, With the altar, They worshipped him, In a feast, Of remembrance, Thankfully, And then, They went on, To build, The temple, Of the Lord, Not without opposition, As we shall see, But they had the resolve, And the willingness, To work, In his name, Let us pray, Our Lord, We bless thee, For, Thy care, For thy provision, For the fact, That thy purposes, Are unfolding, And that, Thy will, Will not be thwarted, Forgive us, For not being, What we ought to be,

In the service of God, And help us, We pray thee, To, Apply ourselves, To the tasks, That thou hast given, To us in life, Forgive us, If our relationship, With thee, Is not what it ought to be, Give us grace, O Lord, To set thy right, In dependence, Upon thy own grace, Lay thy hand, Upon us, This night, Bless us in our fellowship, And go before us, Helping us, And all who may come unto thee, In all our ways, To acknowledge thyself, Forgiving sin, For Jesus' sake, Amen.