Great Expectations: Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah (Old Testament Figures)

Build-up, letdown, and a people still waiting for their Messiah

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, June 19, 2022
PASSAGES	Ezra 1:1-4; Ezra 3:10-13; Ezra 4:1-5; Zechariah 2:4-11; Ezra 10:1-8; Nehemiah 2:20; Nehemiah 8:9-12; Nehemiah 13:23-31; Isaiah 11:10-13; Zechariah 8:22-23
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:02:22 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

After exile, the prophets had promised a rebuilt Jerusalem full of God's glory, a son of David on the throne, a people with the law on their hearts, and the nations streaming in. The return under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah stirred all those hopes – and four times in a row they fell flat. The Old Testament closes with Israel still longing. We are not left grasping at shadows: the Messiah they waited for has come, and he rules now.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We do not lean on our own understanding – or, in modern terms, our own lived experience and "our own truth." That posture has shaped this whole series.
- The Bible is not a set of hero templates. It is one real story, and we find ourselves in it, far along.
- Ezra opens with Jeremiah's word being fulfilled and God stirring a pagan king, and the return deliberately echoes the exodus.
- The prophets pictured nations joining God's people and a city too full for walls. Instead the returnees said, "You have nothing to do with us."

- The rebuilt temple was dedicated and no glory cloud came. The mass divorce of foreign wives and the walls built against neighbours were, at best, disappointing.
- There is freedom in reading the Bible with gritty realism; the protagonist is always the Lord, patient with people like us.
- We need no Christ complex, because there already is a Christ. We will not finally get it right, but we can be subject to the one who always did.

▶ 1:02:22

It was Father's Day. Mark Kovac reminded the room that one Father's special day is every day, and Matt added that God wants to be not anyone's grandfather or special uncle but their specific Father. He recalled the sitcoms of his 1990s childhood: to combat dysfunctional patriarchy, the culture decided "instead of honouring women, just attack men."

Not our own truth

▶ 1:05:03

That, he said, is the pattern of so many social movements: a real recognition that something is wrong, pushed forward by whatever makes sense at the time. But Scripture says to lean not on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5) – "in modern parlance, lean not on your own lived experience, your own truth." The same distrust of our ability to piece things together has run through the series: "I hope to have robbed you of the idea that the Bible is full of hero stories of men and women that we should copy."

▶ 1:06:13

This was Matt's last Old Testament sermon; next week a New Testament series begins with John the Baptist. The Old Testament is "a real story that we happen to find ourselves in, rather far along," and it was the Bible of the New Testament. Without its stories, the New Testament has no context – "and then you will supply a context subconsciously." Today: Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, one long return from exile (Ezra and Nehemiah were a single book in the Hebrew tradition), under the heading of Dickens' *Great Expectations* – a cycle of prophetic build-up, and then letdown.

Expectation: the prophets' picture

▶ 1:08:56

> "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… '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, which is in Judah.'"
>
> EZRA 1:1–4 ↗

▶ 1:10:36

That parenthesis is dense. Jeremiah had promised seventy years of captivity, the rebuilding of the city, and a law written on hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). And God himself stirs a foreign king. Hopes rise. The prophets had much more to say about after the exile:

▶ 1:12:10

- A remnant returns; "the root of Jesse… shall stand as a signal for the peoples; of him shall the nations inquire," and the jealousy between Ephraim and Judah will be gone (Isaiah 11:10–13).
- Israel will seek "the LORD their God, and David their king" (Hosea 3:5) – which, David being long dead, means some spectacular anointed son of David.
- Many peoples will say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD… that he may teach us his ways," and out of Zion the law goes forth (Isaiah 2:3) – people coming in, God's light going out. "That also kind of looks like discipling the nations."
- Water flowing from the sanctuary makes the Dead Sea fresh, with trees whose leaves are for healing (Ezekiel 47:8–12) – "for the healing of the nations," Revelation adds (Revelation 22:2).

▶ 1:15:43

> "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the LORD, and I will be the glory in her midst… And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people."
>
> ZECHARIAH 2:4–11 ↗

Zechariah was preaching in this very period. The nations are not just guests; they will be God's people, streaming in until there is no room for walls, with God himself as a firewall – "the very first tech thing you see in the Bible," Matt said, watching the tech people wince. "Ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zechariah 8:22–23).

▶ 1:18:28

And there are deliberate echoes of the exodus. The people "go up"; their neighbours give them gold; they give freely to build; it culminates in a Passover. "We've been longing for a brand new exodus and a brand new Moses, and man, it feels like it's finally here."

Cycle one: Zerubbabel and the temple

▶ 1:19:32

Back in the land there is immediate conflict with the people living there – a hodgepodge of Assyrian resettlers, many of whom had adopted Yahweh worship, and Israelites who never left. Who belongs? When they offer to help build, Zerubbabel answers, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God," and the people of the land discourage, frighten and bribe against them for years (Ezra 4:1–5).

▶ 1:21:09

Scholars are divided, and so is Matt: rightly circling the wagons, or making enemies of would-be allies? Either way, it is a punch in the gut. "I thought the nations were going to be streaming in… and what I'm seeing now is, this has nothing to do with you." Then come the letters – which is why Ezra-Nehemiah is not anyone's favourite devotional book. "It's like reading someone's email inbox."

▶ 1:22:50

> "But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping."
>
> EZRA 3:12–13 ↗

▶ 1:23:51

Some rejoiced; others thought it dinky. Eventually the temple is finished and dedicated with a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs and twelve goats (Ezra 6:16–17). And then? When the tabernacle was set up, the glory filled it (Exodus 40:34–35); at Solomon's temple the priests could not even serve (2 Chronicles 7:1–2). Here, Matt imagined, everyone stands waiting. "Even a rain cloud. I'll take a rain cloud." Instead of nations streaming in, conflict; instead of glory, a small foundation and a longing. "Makes you wonder, what kind of temple is God's glory going to come back to?"

Cycle two: Ezra and the law

▶ 1:26:40

Ezra, the "super scribe," stages his own exodus: he leaves on the first day of the first month (the exodus began a new calendar), refuses to go without Levites to carry the holy things, goes sponsored, and prays for a straight way – the highway of "Comfort, comfort my people" (Isaiah 40:3–4). "Boom, exodus mic drop." His charge is to teach the laws of God to those who do not know them (Ezra 7:25). If at first you don't succeed, maybe more Torah knowledge will do it.

▶ 1:29:10

What follows Matt called bizarre. Alarmed that Israelites have married foreign wives, they hold a panicked meeting, and on Shecaniah's counsel covenant "to put away all these wives and their children," with property seized and exile from the assembly for anyone who does not show up within three days (Ezra 10:1–8). But according to what law? The Torah warned against adopting the Canaanites' practices and gods, not against marrying any non-Israelite. A whole book honours Ruth the Moabite, a direct ancestor of King David. "The holy seed already has Moabite DNA in it."

▶ 1:32:07

Some scholars call it great zeal, "never real enthusiastically." Others set it beside Zechariah's word that the nations would become God's people, and Malachi's, from the same era, that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Matt leans negative. But whether good, bad or grey, "it's still disappointing," because instead of the nations coming in there is "this really awkward meeting out in the rain where they're promising to divorce their wives."

Cycle three: Nehemiah and the walls

▶ 1:34:01

Another decree of Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah, governor of Judah, to rebuild the walls. Harassed by the neighbouring officials, he answers: "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:20). The same gears turn: good zeal, but something feels off. Persia mainly wanted a buffer against Egypt. And when did Israel ever need walls for God to protect them? At their height they had walls and armies and still lost; with few men they still won. The God who promised to be a wall of fire had been fighting for them all along.

▶ 1:36:54

Matt was not mocking walls, police or these leaders. But if you were a pious Jew who believed the prophets, you would have to ask: is this victory, disappointment, or both? "And now that they have

walls… now that they're learning the Torah, now that they have a temple, here's an even bigger question: what's going to be different this time?"

Cycle four: revival – and a sour ending

▶ 1:38:12

The people were working on the Sabbath, mistreating the poor and leaving the Levites to farm for their food. Then comes the great renewal, often held up as a template for revival. Ezra reads the law, the people mourn, and the leaders say, "This day is holy to the LORD… do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:9–12) – the very passage John Patrick had asked to read that morning. They keep the Feast of Booths as it had not been kept since Joshua, and they confess their sins. "You could be talked into feeling hopeful again… now it's on."

▶ 1:40:26

Then the last chapter. Nehemiah finds Tobiah living in a temple storeroom "like it's a condo" and throws his furniture out; the Levites and singers still are not paid; merchants camp outside the locked gates waiting to trade on the Sabbath. And the foreign marriages again:

▶ 1:42:28

> "And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair and made them take an oath in the name of God… Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites… Remember me, O my God, for good."
>
> NEHEMIAH 13:23–31 ↗

"This is how you start a revival." You close the book and think, what did I just read? It begins with Jeremiah's hopes kindled in your heart and ends with the governor ripping out hair, and Nehemiah saying, in effect, "God, at least I tried. Remember me."

Where the Old Testament leaves us

▶ 1:44:02

"There's a freedom in reading the Bible with a gritty realism." You do not have to glorify every leader and decision; it simply happened, within a larger story whose protagonist "yet again is not that guy… but the Lord, who's patient, and his lovingkindness is extended to people – these kinds of people, our kinds of people."

▶ 1:45:24

That is how the Old Testament closes: a temple, a hodgepodge of people, serious animosity about who is in and who is out, zeal in some and apathy in others, a longing for peace with a need for walls – and a longing for a son of David whose rule will bring justice, mercy and glory. Which is exactly where John the Baptist will find them.

▶ 1:46:27

We can identify with that longing as we wait for Christ's return. "But the true light of Jesus having already shined means that we don't need to grasp at shadows." It is the year of our Lord 2022: the Messiah has come, died, and now rules, whether we submit or not, and he is coming back; the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). That glory already sits on the throne of heaven and can be on the throne of your heart. "Today's a good day" to trust his rule.

▶ 1:48:53

Matt closed with Indiana Jones: the woman dangling over the chasm, reaching for the grail just out of reach – and falling because she kept reaching. "We are not going to be what she thought she could be, the very special one who could finally do it."

> *"The reason why Christians shouldn't have a Christ complex is because there already is a Christ. That role's taken."*

▶ 1:50:18

If you want someone to identify with in Scripture, it is the Nehemiahs who rage and pull hair, the Ezras who start strong, the Davids who see and desire and take – "just like Adam and Eve, who saw, desired and took. That's us." We are not going to finally get it right, "but we can be in subjection to the one who always did." He prayed that God would help us long for his return and glory in his presence now.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Proverbs 3:5
- Ezra 1:1–4
- Jeremiah 31:33
- Isaiah 11:10–13
- Hosea 3:5
- Isaiah 2:3
- Ezekiel 47:8–12
- Revelation 22:2
- Zechariah 2:4–11
- Zechariah 8:22–23
- Ezra 4:1–5
- Ezra 3:12–13
- Ezra 6:16–17
- Exodus 40:34–35
- 2 Chronicles 7:1–2
- Isaiah 40:3–4
- Ezra 7:25
- Ezra 10:1–8
- Malachi 2:16
- Nehemiah 2:20
- Nehemiah 8:9–12
- Nehemiah 13:23–31
- Habakkuk 2:14

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said we should lean not on “our own lived experience, our own truth.” Where do you find that hardest?
2. The prophets pictured the nations streaming in; the returnees told their neighbours, “You have nothing to do with us.” Where do God’s people today draw lines he may not have drawn?
3. Which of the four letdowns – no glory, the foreign wives, the walls, the sour ending – struck you most, and why?
4. How does reading the Bible with “gritty realism” free you, rather than unsettle you?
5. We are not the Christ, but we can be subject to the one who is. What would trusting his rule look like in one specific area of your life this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel’s senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church’s governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope’s own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Xuj_8iIXuY&t=3742s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.