

**I. Introduction**

- A. Let's start today in the contents page of your Bible. I have a plan.
- B. The first thing you'll notice is that the Bible is a collection of a lot of books. It's actually a small library of 66 books.
- C. What you won't notice is that the books of the Bible are all interconnected.
- D. From the first book of the Bible, which is Genesis, to the last book of the Bible, which is Revelation, the Bible tells one unified, interconnected, meaning-making story.
- E. So, an example.
- F. Scan down to find the book of Ezra. Here's the sequence of books:
  - 1. 1-2 Chronicles
  - 2. Ezra
  - 3. Nehemiah
  - 4. Esther
- G. So, follow along:
  - 1. *The ending of Chronicles is the beginning of the story of Ezra.*
  - 2. Ezra has ten chapters. Chapters 1-6 form the first section.
    - a) Into these chapters you can fit all or parts of other books of the Bible:
      - (1) Haggai
      - (2) Zechariah
      - (3) Jeremiah
  - 3. Then, there's a 58 year gap in history.
    - a) In that gap, you can fit the whole story of the book of Esther.
  - 4. Then it's back to Esther, for the second section, chapters 7-10.
  - 5. Then there's a 13 year gap... and right into the story of Nehemiah.
  - 6. Ezra also refers to the ordinance of David (books of Samuel) and the Law of Moses (first five books of the Bible).
- H. Don't worry. We're not going through all the books of the Bible this way. At least not today.
- I. I am simply saying that all of the books of the Bible, and all of the sections of the Bible, fit with each other like pieces of an intricate puzzle.
- J. These books are telling an interconnected story. But it's actually more than that.

**II. Ezra**

- A. Four months ago, we started a series in this book of Ezra. We got ten lessons in. We've gone through the first six chapters. Then we took a break for Christmas and New Years.
- B. Today we're back.
- C. I'd like to do a recap. But more than that, I'd like to set up the last four chapters of this book.
- D. But even more than that, I'd like to bother your brain. I'd like to give you something to mess with your pre-conceptions here at the beginning of a new year.
- E. Ezra begins his book this way.
  - 1. *Now 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, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. (Ezra 1:1, 2, NKJV)*
- F. There's a lot in here. We have already covered it.
- G. But in two short verses, you have a lot of characters coming together.
  - 1. You have a pagan king, that's Cyrus.
  - 2. You have a biblical prophet, that's Jeremiah.
  - 3. You have the Scriptures, the written prophecy of Jeremiah.
  - 4. You have the nation of God's people, that's Judah.
  - 5. You have the symbol of God's salvation, that's the temple.
  - 6. You have the sweep of earth's history, in the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, and the exile of the Jews.
  - 7. And you have the God of heaven himself, Yahweh, the Lord.
- H. Rulers, prophets, Scriptures, nations, salvation, history, and God.
- I. You can't separate these things. They are not disconnected bits of driftwood, floating on different seas.
- J. They all go together.
- K. It's all a unit. Truth is unified. And it is all unified by the heart and reality and revelation of our Creator God.
- L. God gave us the Bible. It is his gift. In the Bible, we meet God. In these pages, God lays bare his heart. We find his will, his ways, and his salvation. Everything we really need, for life and human flourishing, for time and eternity, for truth and reality, is found right here, in the pages of Scripture.

**III. The Map**

- A. All of that was the lead up to this.
  - 1. *God gave you the Bible to draw a mental map of reality, to guide your journey through time and eternity.*
- B. All the major questions in your life find an answer in the teachings of the Bible. No, the Bible won't tell you what city to live in, or what job to take, or where to go to school, or what partner to marry. The specifics are up to you.

- C. But, what the Bible will do is show you the terrain, warn you of the pitfalls, and lead you to the highlands of joy, satisfaction, peace, and grace.
  - D. In other words, all the Bible is intended to give you a mental map. That mental map shows the way to your very own Promised Land —
    - 1. *The Map is a Guide to The Promised Land: the place where you experience maximum grace from God, God receives maximum grace from you, and the world sees a maximum demonstration of the gospel of salvation.*
  - E. The difference between being on the pathway to the Promised Land, and on a different pathway, is the difference between a life that feels blessed, and a life that feels cursed.
  - F. Okay, so let's back up.
  - G. The Bible draws a map in your heart, your soul, your emotions, your mind.
  - H. But what happens if you don't interact with the Bible?
  - I. Simple.
  - J. When you ignore the Bible, your mind draws a different map. A different map of reality. A different map of truth. A different map of life, of love, of relationships, of sexuality, of existence, and of life after death.
    - 1. There is no map of reality, or life, or of the way to God, that can ever account for the observable reality of our lives, in any and every realm, with the comprehensiveness of the Bible.
  - K. In other words, if you draw your own map, you're going to have big chunks missing.
  - L. And, you're going to fall off the edge of your map. You're going to have stuff happen that makes no sense.
- IV. Out of the Promised Land
- A. Ezra offers a perfect example.
  - B. I said that the Bible draws a map to the deepest longings of your heart. To your own personal promised land.
  - C. When Ezra opens, God's people were out of the promised land. They had been in it, but now they were out of it. They were exiled.
  - D. That's the backdrop to the next verse.
    - 1. *Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:3, NKJV).*
  - E. The pagan king of Persia, Cyrus, is telling the Jews they can go back to the Promised Land and rebuild their temple.
    - 1. But why were they out of the promised land in the first place?
    - 2. And why was there temple destroyed?
    - 3. And why did all of God's promises not work for them?
  - F. Simple.
  - G. They drew their own map of reality and based their lives on it.
    - 1. In their map, God was optional.
    - 2. In their map, God's laws were demoted from laws to suggestions.
    - 3. In their map, God's grace wasn't grace, it was leniency.
      - a) And God's truth wasn't absolute, it was relative.
    - 4. In their map, long standing values like truth, marriage, chastity, holiness, and truth were turned over.
    - 5. In their map, all roads led to god, because, well, any god will do.
    - 6. In their map, salvation and all the incredibly precise teachings embedded in their temple and their sacrifices, and their priesthood were sacrificed on the altar of accommodation to the culture and the world around them.
    - 7. In their map, the free gift of salvation became the harsh demands of legalism.
      - a) In other words, they left the Promised Land spiritually, long before they were exiled from it physically.
      - b) And they destroyed the gospel proclaimed by their Temple, long before the King of Babylon bashed it to the ground without one stone standing on top of another.
  - H. See, on their maps, you could mash God's truth into any shape you wanted to. You could flex God's laws. You could call darkness light, and light darkness. You could redefine God into a rock or a star. You could redefine salvation into a human achievement. You could redefine human dignity from something sacred to something no different from animals. And you could redefine truth from fixed and unbending to whatever you felt it should be.
  - I. Because when you have a map where north can be south, and where east can be west, you have introduced absurdity to the core of your existence.
  - J. You have invited contradiction, and are trying to pretend it's okay.
  - K. But it's not okay, and it can never be okay.
  - L. Because truth meshes with truth, and, fundamental life principle here:
    - 1. *No one can break God's laws. You can only break yourself against God's laws.*
    - 2. *No one can violate God's truth. You can only violate yourself against God's truth.*
  - M. When the Jews of that generation guided their journey by their own map, their lives fell apart.
  - N. Their whole world fell apart.
    - 1. Their temple was destroyed.
    - 2. Their city was destroyed.
    - 3. Their nation was destroyed.
    - 4. Their life in the Promised Land was destroyed.
  - O. And God had warned them this would happen. Prophet after prophet. Promise after promise. Warning after warning. The dangers were clearly mapped in the Bible, but that didn't stop them.

1. *Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." (1 Samuel 7:3, NKJV).*
  2. *Then the runners went throughout all Israel and Judah with the letters from the king and his leaders, and spoke according to the command of the king: "Children of Israel, return to the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; then He will return to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. (2 Chronicles 30:6, NKJV).*
  3. *Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:7, NKJV).*
  4. *Come, and let us return to the LORD; For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. (Hosea 6:1, NKJV).*
  5. *So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. (Joel 2:13, NKJV).*
- P. But they wouldn't return to the Lord.
1. *I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, Who walk in a way that is not good, According to their own thoughts...(Isaiah 65:2, NKJV).*
- Q. The dangers were clearly mapped in the Bible. But that didn't stop them.
- R. And here's the grace.
- S. The way back home was also clearly marked in the Bible.
- T. And here, in the Book of Ezra, for the first time in a long time, the Jews took that way home.
- U. Here's a simple fact of life:
1. *God is always calling you back to the only truth, the only map, and the only pathway that can truly satisfy your soul.*
- V. The Bible
- A. Every day you're confronted with choices you have to choose. You have to choose a fork in the road. You have to go left, you have to go right, you have to go straight.
- B. Every day, you're making choices.
1. You're making moral choices: Is this right? Is this wrong? Is this good? Is this evil?
  2. You're making lifestyle choices? Should I do this? Or that? You're making relationship choices? Should I date this person or care about this person? Or fall in love with that person?
  3. You're making sexual choices? How will I express the gift of sexuality that God has placed in my life
- C. Every single day, you are making your way through the jungle of the world.
1. How would you decide what is healthy? How will you choose your career?
  2. How will you discern what will mess you up versus what will bless you and give you a great life?
  3. How are you going to make those choices?
- D. I'm telling you, that if you just go with the flow, If you just go with culture, you're going to be heartbroken. You're going to be heartbroken, because that's where our culture is at right now.
1. Our culture is fragmented.
  2. Our culture is fractured.
  3. Our culture is heartbroken.
- E. That is society today.
1. Arts. Media. Education. Entertainment. Music. Academia. Government. Even the church, and so many in it.
- F. And the weird thing is we have collectively chosen the mess we're in.
- G. The good thing is that you have an alternative, you have a different way, a better way.
- H. You have the most life-giving, life-affirming, joy-producing, heart-filling guide and map anybody has ever had, and it's all right here in the Bible.
- I. There is no book like the Bible. No other sacred literature, and no work of philosophy in all the ages of humankind can compare.
1. If you want a book of moral precepts to guide us into love and respect for one another, there is no book like the Bible.
  2. If you want an origin story that dignifies the human race as created in the image of God, there is no book like the Bible.
  3. If you want a revelation of a God who not only shows love, but is love, there is no book like the Bible.
  4. If you want a book that satisfies our intellectual curiosity while simultaneously fulfilling our emotional needs, there is no book like the Bible.
  5. If you want a book that explains your life, both the good and the bad in your life, there is no book like the Bible.
  6. If you want a book that maps the way to heaven, there is no book like the Bible.
- J. Search the sacred literature of all the world. Comb through the annals of history. Study the finest points of religion and philosophy. You will never find a collection of meaning, truth, realism, and hope that can even begin to compare to the Bible. There is nothing like it.
- K. To enter the Bible is to enter a zone. To enter the Bible is to enter a realm of fellowship with God. It isn't just information; it's power. It's relationship. It's communion a community and fellowship with each other and God.
- L. The greatest tragedy that can ever happen to a church or to a Christian is to lay down your Bible.
- M. Because your only alternative is a map too small... a map where you will be constantly falling off the edges, and have no rational explanation for the world you've made or the problems you face.
- N. Just like the Jews of the generations before Ezra.
- O. But now, it's time for a comeback.

## VI. The Comeback

- A. Ezra is the story of a comeback.
- B. The Jews have been in exile for 70 years. They have been out of the Promised Land.
- C. But now they are coming home.
- D. They are coming home in waves.
- E. The first wave is detailed in the first two chapters. A small number of Jews return to Judah. They start their nation again from scratch. They rebuild their altar. They rebuild their temple.
- F. This is a comeback.
  - 1. A comeback from failure.
  - 2. A comeback from disobedience.
  - 3. A comeback from the consequences of our own dumb choices and even your own evil choices.
    - a) *If you're drawing breath, and if there is an inch of softness in your heart, then there is no point of no return with God.*
- G. There are consequences in life that might never go away. But God has a way of bringing blessing out of cursing.
- H. We have studied six chapters in Ezra. Next week we will begin chapter seven.
- I. But here's the weird thing. Maybe you noticed, maybe you didn't.
- J. Ezra, the main character of this story, has not yet returned to Judah.
  - 1. Let me say that the dates are hard to piece together. Some scholars say Nehemiah came before Ezra. No. I don't accept that argument. Or that Ezra came early, and then went back to Persia. Possible. Reasonable arguments on both sides.
- K. But in the book of Ezra, he doesn't appear till chapter seven.
- L. But now, here he comes. Here's a sneak peek at chapter 7:
  - 1. *For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:10, NKJV).*
- M. Ezra is a priest from a priestly line.
- N. He has one passion. He has prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.
- O. Translation:
  - 1. Ezra's mission is to draw a map of God's truth and make it plain for every child of God.
- P. *Because the Law of the Lord [all Scripture] is a map of the heart of Jesus Christ and of everyday life with him.*
- Q. These are things concerning him (Luke 24). (The Road to Emmaus.)
  - 1. *Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27, NKJV).*
- R. Ezra's goal, my goal, and I hope your goal is refocusing the lens of Christianity on Christ himself. His natures. His Person. His works. His offices. His crucifixion and resurrection, and all the attendant doctrines.
- S. Look.
- T. At.
- U. Christ.
  - 1. In Christ you have a trailblazer.
  - 2. In Christ you have a forerunner.
  - 3. In Christ you have a Way-maker.
  - 4. In Christ you have steps to follow.
  - 5. In Christ you have God's own presence for the journey all the way home to eternal heaven and the mansion he has built for you there.
- V. Christ is the map of what a human can be.
- W. Christ is the map of what the world can be.
- X. Christ is the map of how to get to that place your heart longs to be.
- Y. And the only way to look at Christ is to go deep into the Word of God.
  - 1. Life is a journey.
  - 2. You are on a path.
  - 3. Following Jesus, by his grace, all the way to glory.