

## **Ezra 2:1-70**

There are some difficult chapters in the Bible. Ezra chapter 2 is one of them. History, for many people, is not very interesting.

Conversely, even many Christians have a compulsive interest in their own family history if not in any other. Why do we find such a list of names in the Bible, (repeated by Nehemiah)?

The Bible is, first of all, a book about God. The safest rule of interpretation of any passage is to ask: What does this teach me about God?

### **Summary**

**Ezra 2:1-70 demonstrates the faithfulness of God to His covenant with His people.**

#### **1. Covenant God vv. 2-4**

In 538 B.C., Cyrus the Persian king issued his decree permitting the people of God in exile to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (**Ezra 1:2-4**).

The decree was in fulfillment of earlier prophecies (**Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Jer. 25:11; 29:10**). The exile was a time of considerable testing and trial.

Some of the exiles died in captivity. Others were so successful in acclimating to their new environment that when the decree to return was issued, they decided to stay, but as the various families assembled to discuss the decree to return to Jerusalem, there were some whose hearts “God had stirred” (**Ezra 1:5**).

In the record of the return journey, Ezra focuses on the things that are particularly relevant for redemptive history: names. For some, the motivation to return was political and ethnic. National, ethnic and political identity is often important to us too but these things are not the most important thing when it comes to our identity as Christians. Sometimes, we must even sacrifice our personal temporal interests for the sake of witness to another of a different national, ethnic or political persuasion.

We are entitled to our point of view, but we must sometimes be willing to become “all things to all people” for the sake of an opportunity to testify to Christ (**1 Cor. 9:22**).

Judah remained a part of Persia and had no independent authority of her own.

For the returning exiles, therefore, a greater motivation impelled them to return than the assertion of their national identity. They were the people of God to whom promises had been given, promises that appeared impossible of fulfillment in Babylon. Exile signaled judgment and abandonment. Their return signaled that the promise that the Covenant God had given to Abraham (**Gen. 22:17**) had not been forgotten.

#### **2. Problematic Numbers**

The number of those who returned, 42,360 (**Ezra 2:64**), is somewhat problematic. The total number listed comes to 29,818, leaving a difference of 12,542. It is most

likely that the family names are incomplete but that the total is accurate, since Ezra, Nehemiah, and the non-biblical book of 1 Esdras record the same number.

The number 42,360 does not add up to the number of the “stars of heaven” but God can cause oaks to grow from acorns.” God is faithful to His promise, then as now. We are not to despise “the day of small things” (**Zech. 4:10**).

Ezra later refers to God as “the God of our/your fathers” (**Ezra 7:27; 8:28; 10:11**). When the people of God return, their ministry will be a continuation of the prior ministry in Jerusalem. We are the beneficiaries of faithful men and women who endured hostility and opposition.

### 3. Interesting Details

We see some interesting details in the list of names in Ezra 2:

First, there are twelve leaders: the eleven in **Ezra 2:2** and Sheshbazzar, (**Ezra 1:11**).

The number is significant. These leaders are representative of Israel; now more like a church than a nation. Secondly, **Ezra 2:36–39** gives a list of the four clans of priests, 4,289 in total. They returned with a single purpose: to rebuild the temple and restore worship in accord with God’s commandment. Thirdly, there is also a list of Levites (**Ezra 2:40**). These were priestly “helpers.” Their tasks were mundane and often unseen but nevertheless they returned. Fourthly, the tasks of the temple servants (**Ezra 2:43–54**) and Solomon’s servants (**vv. 55–57**) were even more mundane.

Fifthly, there are those who cannot accurately prove their descent, either to Israel generally or to the priestly tribe in particular (**Ezra 2:59–63**). They are permitted to return and to count themselves as members of the covenant community but in the case of their uncertain membership to a priestly class, they were ordered not to count themselves as priest until a time when the determinative ritual of Urim and Thummim could be performed (**Ezra 2:63**).

All these things teach us that service in the church of Christ need not be glamorous to be noticed by God. Our service may be such that no one ever takes note of it, which can often cause us irritation and resentment.

Nothing that we do for the Lord is unnoticed by Him, however.

Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus’ name is noted and praised (**Matt. 10:42**).

Our motivation is pleasing Jesus, not the recognition of men. “We make it our aim to please him” (**2 Cor. 5:9**) in everything, however small and insignificant.

Of all these 42360 people, however, leaders, priests, levite helpers and temple, none of them could ultimately bring the promised blessing. Under God’s hand, they would reestablish the types and shadows but they must patiently wait in faith for the anti-type, Jesus Christ; the seed of the woman; great David’s greater Son.