

**EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST  
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2020**

**SERMON: ARE YOU INCLUDED?**

**SCRIPTURE: EZRA 2: 1-2; 36; 40-43; 55; 59; 62-63; 68-70**

Have you ever been in the situation where you felt out of place or like you were a third wheel? I was single until I was mid-30's and there were times when I would go out with friends who were a couple and it would be a bit awkward. The feeling like you are being included for the sake of not being neglected. I was appreciative, but at times awkward. This can happen when you begin a new job and attend office meetings where you are expected to bring ideas to the table. Some might look at you as the "new person" who has not earned the right to speak. This happens far too often in churches. At times new people or people who are young are given the idea that they need to stay quiet.

Last week in Ezra, we had the question "Who is in Charge?" This week, we seem to get the question..." Who should be included?"

Our scripture reading in Ezra 2 is a bit different this morning. Ezra 2 is basically a list of people who have opted to return to Jerusalem from Babylon. It is one of those chapters that, at face value, seems boring, filled with hard names, and useless for us today. Let's read scripture and then try to apply it...

Selections from Ezra 2:

**2 Here is the list of the Jewish exiles of the provinces who returned from their captivity. King Nebuchadnezzar had deported them to Babylon, but now they returned to Jerusalem and the other towns in Judah where they originally lived. <sup>2</sup> Their leaders were Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.**

**This is the number of the men of Israel who returned from exile:**

**<sup>36</sup> These are the priests who returned from exile:**

**The family of Jedaiah (through the line of Jeshua)**

**<sup>40</sup> These are the Levites who returned from exile:**

**The families of Jeshua and Kadmiel (descendants of Hodaviah)**

**<sup>41</sup> The singers of the family of Asaph**

**<sup>42</sup> The gatekeepers of the families of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita, and Shobai**

**<sup>43</sup> The descendants of the following Temple servants returned from exile:**

**<sup>55</sup> The descendants of these servants of King Solomon returned from exile:**

**<sup>59</sup> Another group returned at this time from the towns of Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Kerub, Addan, and Immer. However, they could not prove that they or their families were descendants of Israel.**

**<sup>62</sup> They searched for their names in the genealogical records, but they were not found, so they were disqualified from serving as priests. <sup>63</sup> The governor told them not to eat the priests' share of food from the sacrifices until a priest could consult the LORD about the matter by using the Urim and Thummim—the sacred lots.**

**<sup>68</sup> When they arrived at the Temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the family leaders made voluntary offerings toward the rebuilding of God's Temple on its original site, <sup>69</sup> and each leader gave as much as he could. The total of their gifts came to 61,000 gold coins, 6,250 pounds of silver, and 100 robes for the priests.**

**<sup>70</sup> So the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the Temple servants, and some of the common people settled in villages near**

## **Jerusalem. The rest of the people returned to their own towns throughout Israel.**

### **WHO IS RETURNING?**

At its basic level, Ezra 2 is a list of those who had their hearts stirred by God to return from Babylon to Jerusalem to help rebuild and reestablish the temple.

The list breaks down people by category:

- Lay people (according to ancestry) – It is distinguished “by ancestry” because Cyrus had decreed that only legitimate descendants of the original captives were allowed to leave.
- Lay people (according to their ancestral home towns)
- Priests (according to ancestry – actual descendants of Aaron)
- Levites (according to ancestry)
- Gatekeepers (of the temple – according to ancestry)
- Temple servants: Nethinim and Solomon’s servants (according to ancestry): These temple servants who we are told were “given” to service in the temple assisted the Levites who, in turn, assisted the Priests in their duties.
- Those who could not demonstrate their ancestry

If you add up the number of people who return, it may seem like quite a few, but in actuality it makes up a mere “remnant” of those who were taken captive originally. An example of this is the number of Priests who returned to Jerusalem. Originally King David had divided that priests into 24 families. These families were assigned temple service rotations throughout the year. Of the 24 priestly families, only 4 families returned to Jerusalem.

### **WHAT DOES THIS LIST TELL US?**

One of the most important aspects of this list is what it says about the fundamental values in the Jewish community at this point in history. We see how central the Temple is to the community. Priests, Levites, and others who worked in the temple are highlighted. A second aspect we see is the importance of “home town”/place of birth. A significant group are known by where their families are from. This shouldn’t be shocking. Heritage is extremely important. The Hebrew people have always identified first with their original tribes and then with their

towns. Remember when Caesar Augustus call for a census to be taken. The people were to return to their home towns, so Joseph, along with his fiancée Mary, went to Bethlehem, because he was of the house and line of King David. So they went to the “city of David” which was Bethlehem.

A third major aspect is how much Israel valued ancestry. Those who could prove their genealogical roots, belonged in the community; they had a place in the restored nation.

### **UNDOCUMENTED MEMBERS**

We then have a group of people who seem to be “undocumented.” They could not prove their ancestry or their ties to the temple. We don’t know what happened to these people. More than likely they were treated as outsiders.

It was even worse for those who claimed to be priests but could not prove their ancestry. They were “excluded from the priesthood as defiled” (v.62). Their situation deteriorated when the governor, Zerubbabel, decreed that defiled priests were not allowed to “eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim” (v. 63). Why was this important? All that the priest needed to live was provided for by the temple. Their meals came from the sacrifices given by people at the temple. If you were excluded from the priesthood, you lost your meal ticket.

We are told that some of these situations were resolved by consulting the Urim and Thummim. We aren’t sure exactly how this works, but the Urim and Thummim is traditionally something that the priests used to discern the will of God.

### **WAS IT RIGHT TO BE DISCRIMINATORY?**

In today’s world of inclusivity and non-discrimination. Passages like this, where people are excluded because they can’t prove their ancestry seems to go against much of what our world stands for. For some, it may recall the horrific ethnic cleansings that have happened not so long ago. So was God be unfair?

We need to remember that God’s covenant with Abraham included the blessing of his descendants (Gen. 12:2). Not only that, but it was a major sin for the Children of Israel to intermarry outside of the faith. The consistent compromises

they made sent Israel down a slippery slope that brought Baal worship into the community and lead the nation away from the one true God. This struggle to be faithful would ultimately cause their current situation in captivity. Every time the people compromised their ancestry, they as quickly compromised the holiness of their religion.

The whole point of Cyrus' decree was to reestablish God's temple. Now is the time to makes sure it is done correctly and fulfills God's standards for those responsible for teaching and leading the people in worship.

If I were to overhear a couple at a restaurant plan their wedding. I go over to them and say, "Hey, you looking for someone to marry you? I can do that for you! You want my credentials? Sorry, I don't have any and I can't prove that I can legally marry you, but trust me...I can marry you!" Would you want someone like that performing your wedding?

The reestablished temple needed true priests!

### **CAN YOU BE COUNTED ON?**

So once again, as we apply scripture to our lives today, we are faced with the question, "**are you in or are you out?**" when it comes to be part of the kingdom of God. I hear far too many people say, "we are all God's children!" but in reality we are not. We are all part of God's creation, but it is relationship to Jesus that makes us a child of God.

Our churches need to be diverse. We must be open to all who come to us wanting to be part of the kingdom of God. But we must join with Jesus properly – we must be true to scripture.

We are in a season where the world is expecting the church to compromise. We are being belittled, we are mocked, and at times, we are punished if we do not conform to society. Now, truly, we are living in a day where we are to be "in the world but not of the world!"

Our message cannot change from "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me!" to "all roads lead to the same place, it is more important that you are nice!" Sadly, Christians are dropping like flies to embrace a unbiblical view of ethics, attitude, actions, and beliefs."

Where do you stand today? Is Jesus the only way, or are you dabbling in worldly ideas of inclusion regardless of belief.

People claim that Christians have no right to dictate beliefs. They are right! Things go terribly wrong when Christians decide to reinterpret scripture for a new era or generation. The only one who has the right to dictate beliefs is God...so to that end we must hold to what scripture tells us. We must also approach the world with true Agape love. There may be only one way to God, but God invites all to come to Him. How much more inclusive is that! The onus falls on the individual to embrace God's ways.

Are you included in the list? Do you know you have a place with Jesus when the time comes? If you can't answer YES – please come, see me. God's offer of salvation takes a moment to accept and a lifetime to live.