

His People Return (Ezra 2)

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[0 : 00] Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken captive to Babylon.

They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to their own town. In company with Zerubabel, Joshua, Nehemiah, Saraiah, Reliah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mishpah, Bigvi, Rehim, and Banah. The list of the men of the people of Israel. The descendants of Parash, 2,172. Of Shephathiah, 372. Of Arar, 775. Of Paheth, Moab, through the line of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812. Of Elam, 1,254. Of Zatu, 945. Of Zekai, 760. Of Banai, 642. Of Bebi, 623.

[1 : 05] Of Asgad, 1,222. Of Adonakam, 666. Of Bigvay, 2,056.

Of Adin, 454. Of Atar, through Hezekiah, 98. Of Bezi, 323. Of Jorah, 112.

Of Hashem, 223. Of Gibba, 95. The men of Bethlehem, 123. Of Netopha, 556.

Of Anathos, 128. Of Asmaveth, 42. Of Kiriath, Gerim, Kephira, and Beroth, 743.

Of Ramah, 621. Of Michmash, 122. Of Bethel, and Ai, 223.

[2 : 04] Of Nebo, 52. Of Magabish, 156. Of the other Elim, 1,254. Of Harim, 320.

Of Lord Hadid, and Onur, 725. Of Jericho, 345. Of Sinah, 3,630.

The priest. The descendants of Gediah, through the family of Jeshua, 973. Of Immer, 1,052.

Of Pashur, 1,247. Of Harim, 1,017. The Levites, the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the line of Hadevah, 74.

The musicians, the descendants of Asaph, 128. The gatekeepers of the temple. The descendants of Shalom, Atar, Talmon, Kaub, Akub, Hatita, and Shobai.

[3 : 07] 139. The temple servants. The descendants of Zihah, Hasufah, Tavoth, Karos, Yaha, Padim, Lebanon, Hagabah, Akub, Hagab, Shaomai, Hanan, Hanan, Gedel, Gahariah, Rezin, Nakoda, Gazim, Uzapassia, Besai, Asna, Munim, Nifuzim, Bagbuk, Hakufah, Harher, Basluth, Mahita, Hafe, Bakos, Sisira, Tamah, Niziah, and Hatifah.

The descendants of the servants of Solomon. The descendants of Sotai, Hasopareth, Perudah, Jala, Dakin, Gedel, Shephethiah, Hatil, Pokhareth, Hazabim, and Ami.

The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon. 392. The following came up from the towns of Telmela, Telhasha, Karab, Adan, and Immer.

But they could not show that their families were descended from Israel. The descendants of Delia, Tobiah, and Nakoda. 652. And from among the priests, the descendants of Hobiah, HaKoz, and Barzillai.

A man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Galidite. And was called by that name. These searched for their family records. But they could not find them.

[4 : 35] And so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food. Until there was a priest ministering with the Um and Thummim.

The whole company numbered 42,360. Besides, there's 7,337 male and female slaves. And they also had 200 male and female singers.

They had 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys.

When they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for this work.

61,000 derrickes of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priestly garments. The priests, the Levites, the musicians, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants settled in their own towns, along with some of the other people.

[5 : 40] And the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns. Thank you. What a wonderful reading.

Thank you, Mariah. What a wonderful list of names. And so some of you might have thought, I braved the windy and rainy weather for this passage.

Well, let's see how God can surprise us and thrill us with his word. Shall we pray? And let's see how God can speak to us.

Father, we thank you. Because you see these people not just as a list of random names. You see them as people, your people, at their best, faithful to return to Jerusalem to worship you.

Thank you for their example. Thank you that they point us toward Jesus, the true Israel. Do help us to have attentive minds as we hear from your word today.

[6 : 49] We pray and ask all these things. In the name of Jesus. Amen. Despite appearances, I am in fact an island boy.

Let me explain. I was born, not in New Zealand, but on the island of Borneo. Borneo is in Southeast Asia, part of Malaysia today. And I was born in a city called Kuching.

And two months ago, well, I got to go there on holiday. I went with my eldest daughter. And so I went there for Chinese New Year. And it was great. This was our view coming in. Very, very exotic. And it was great. I got to introduce my daughter to the rest of my family. My dad and my sister still live there, stepmom. Got to experience island culture, amazing food.

We avoided the durians. We'll talk about that later. And we were back during Chinese New Year. So it was very festive. Kuching is one of the most Chinese cities in all of Malaysia.

[7 : 53] And so very loud, very colorful. And there were fireworks and firecrackers. It felt like New Year's, really. There were lion dances and different kinds of lions to what you and I might be used to here.

We would visit family and friends from house to house. All very festive, decked up in red. Yeah.

Lots of exploring. Even got a day to go out to the jungle to look for orangutans.

And yes, we did find some. This is Sudoku. We're not related, by the way. Different species. In Kuching, right in the middle of the center of the city, there's this little building. And it's the Chinese History Museum.

All right? Some of you would be like, oh, boring. You know, I'd rather go shopping or whatever. It was closed when we went this time. But a couple of years back, I did go in for a visit. And it was the first time I'd ever been inside.

And you know what? I'll never forget walking through the front door and seeing a list of names in the front entrance. This is a list of every Chinese family name who had ever immigrated to Malaysia, to Kuching, to Borneo.

[9 : 02] All on one page. And then I realized that actually my last name is actually on there, right? On second row, now fifth down. And when I saw it, it was, for some reason, it was a really emotional experience for me.

I just stood there for a while, just thinking about the reality. Now, of course, you might not be moved by a list of random Chinese words. That's fine, right? You do you.

Look, there might be, though, other names that move you, right? Whether it is a list of all blacks released who are going to face the wallabies.

Whether it's the actors and castes scrolling upwards after your favorite K-drama. Maybe it's the names of soldiers etched on a memorial that you'll be visiting this Thursday.

Or names of innocent lives, perhaps, lost in a terror attack. Names can move our hearts. They can move our hearts. So, perhaps, we need to think in a similar way when it comes to names like these in Ezra 2.

[10 : 11] Beautifully read, but very long, right? These are all names, though, displayed with honor for God's people. We want to remember that the first people who read this list would have felt deeply emotional and moved over these names and people.

And you know what? As a people of God today, PCBC, these people, these pioneers, these people who went on mission back to Jerusalem, they're part of our family history as well.

This is what I want to suggest. What we see in Ezra 2 is not just a list of boring names that we skim past. What we see in Ezra 2 is we see God's people at their best.

We see God's people Israel. They're returning to Jerusalem to worship the Lord with purity, with generosity. And this list of names actually points us forward to Jesus, the true Israel.

Better believe it. Recall that our theme this year is united in service, right? But we need flesh on the bones for that kind of statement, right? It's one thing to say. That's our theme this year.

[11 : 23] That's our theme. But what does it look like to be united in service? What does a group of God's people united in service look like? What's their purpose? What do they care about most?

Ezra 2 gives us a great answer, a clear example for us today. Let me share three points. Firstly, God's people united in service are people who return to worship.

God's people in Ezra 2 show us that God's people at their best are people returning to worship, right? This is a long list of names, but why is it so specific?

Why is it so specific? Well, if we look closely, there are some things we can learn about it. Have a look again in your Bibles, right? Firstly, in verses 1 and 2, we see the author listing the names of those who lead the company of exiles back.

We see names like Zerubbabel and Joshua, right? Or Joshua. These might be familiar to us. We saw them in action in the book of Haggai last year.

[12 : 28] Then there's nine others listed in verse 2, right? If we include Shehzbashah from last week, Ezra 1. These are 12 men who remind us of the 12 sons of Jacob, right?

That they ultimately descended from. The people of Israel, in a sense, had kind of 12 leaders, 12 sons of Abraham leading his people home. Sound familiar? We also know from elsewhere, right? For example, Matthew chapter 1. That Zerubbabel named here, he's meant to remind us that there is a royal line coming through. Every time we see names like Zerubbabel, we have to remember promises like the ones from Haggai.

In him, Zerubbabel is God's chosen king. When God's people read these names, they are seeing not just facts, not just difficult words to spell.

These are reminders that God is faithful to his people. He is keeping his promise of making a name for himself, of a son that will one day save.

[13 : 33] But then what happens next, right? Verses 3 to 20, we get this long list of men of the people of Israel. Now, verse 3 to 20, what do we see? We see ordinary families, don't we?

Who return from exile. Now here, the writer groups them all as sons of someone, right? Whether it's Parosh or Shepetiah, Ara. Look, it seems like there's at least 15,000 men listed this way.

And so you want to then add women and then children too, all right? That's a lot of people to journey along in a camel train. And then after ordinary families are listed, verse 21 to 35, we see another list of 8,000 plus men from specific counties and regions.

You see, what happens, firstly, naming a family by the town or province, it was something probably very commonplace back in those days. And for a people who belong to the promised land, to have a name linked to a place in Israel meant that you belonged.

You had an inheritance. You were included in God's promises. And you want to imagine as well the idea of naming people from places all over the map.

[14 : 49] What does that tell you? If I said God's people here come from Pakuranga, Highland Park, Botany, Mission Bay, and so on. We get this picture, don't we?

That people from all kinds of backgrounds return home. God's people at their best include the rich and the poor of the land, don't they?

These two lists, they are just more than names. They highlight the central message of the Bible, don't they? That the Bible is longing to bring God's people into God's place under God's rule.

You can sum up the whole Bible with that one sentence. God's people at their best who represent different families from different places. They are a diverse bunch of people.

But look, their purpose is not just to teach us about diversity and family, as important as they are.

What happens next, verse 36 onwards, we see a different focus, a sharper focus.

[15 : 52] Because look at the kinds of people listed next. Over half of the list, from verse 36 onward, they're devoted to families who specifically serve in the Lord's temple, don't they?

Right? The priests, verse 36. The Levites, verse 40. The singers, the gatekeepers of the temple, the temple servants. Can you see the picture that is starting to form? What does this tell you about the priority of God's people?

Are they going back to start a restaurant? Are they going back to open up a franchise of Babylon Inc.? No. Look, this doesn't mean that among God's people that went back, there weren't carpenters and cooks or artists and weavers.

Surely there were, right? Certainly there would have been these skills among the many people who return, and yet they are not specifically named here. First things first for Israel, their first priority to tell everyone is that they are going back to make worship possible again.

What should be the highest priority for God's people? Should it be a holiday? Should it be school and family and career, as important as they are?

[17:06] The highest priority for the people of God is worship. Ezra 2 tells us, reminds us of this. After so many years in exile where they could not worship, God-honoring worship is what God's people focus on.

We will see in chapter 3 the first thing they've built when they're back in Jerusalem is not a citadel for a ruler. The first thing they've built is not a barracks for an army. But they're going to build an altar for the sovereign Lord of Israel in accordance with what is written in the law of Moses.

And so, so far, I hope you can see Ezra 2 is teaching us a lot. It's more than a family tree. These names and details, they recall God's people. They're united in service.

And what is their main aim? They're returning to worship. But let's keep going. Secondly, Ezra 2 lists for us a people who are focused on purity.

Look, before the author lists the full count of people in verse 64, what happens in verse 59? Listen again, right? The following came up from the towns of Tamela, Tehasha, Kerub, Adon, and Emel.

[18:17] But they could not show that their families were descended from Israel. So, what's happening here? Here's some of God's people. They couldn't seem to prove their lineage as Israelites.

Maybe they'd lived in parts of the Persian Empire where there were incomplete records, right?

There was no museum about their history that they could go easily look up. There was no family expert that could tell them, oh, this is where we descended from.

And so, maybe some people that decided to go back to Jerusalem went back knowing they couldn't prove where they were from. And then when we look two verses down, right, from among the priests, right?

62, verse 62 says, these priests, they searched from their family records, but they could not find them. They couldn't prove their lineage to the priestly line of Aaron.

Every priest had to descend from him, remember? It's not that these priests were lying about their identity. Rather, they tried to search their records. They couldn't prove their lineage.

[19:18] Let's go back to that analogy of the Chinese museum. Look, I could have gone there, and if I hadn't found my name on the wall, it would be best, right, if I don't sign up to be the president of the Chinese association in Kuching, right?

Not just yet. Let me find my name first. In a similar way, out of concern for the law, these families are going to step aside. They're going to let others serve first. They'll wait until things at the temple are working normally again.

There can be a bit of discernment with the Urim and Thurim. There can be a way forward for these families and their claims. But for now, they wait. And this section, I think, is included because it shows us the heart behind these people.

They go back to worship, but they want to do it right. God's people care about the spiritual purity of their people. And this is not a purity based on race.

Rather, it's based on obedience to God's commands at the time. I mean, sadly, this doesn't last long. A couple of hundred years later, in the time of the prophet Malachi, this passion for purity would have faded away.

[20:25] But for now, we celebrate because here's a list of people rightly concerned to obey God's law. And in verse 64, we get a final count, right?

The whole company, how many of their number? 42,360. Right? Probably this number includes the wives and the children. Probably this number lists, right, not just servants and singers and all kinds of animals.

There'll be other things involved as well, other supplies and so on. That's a huge entourage making that risky journey back to Jerusalem, isn't it?

From all parts of the Persian Empire. This is God's people at their best, is it not? This is the mission team. Going back to worship. Focused on purity.

But thirdly, notice in Ezra 2 that these are a people moved to generosity. We'll see this in verse 68 to 70.

[21:24] So have that in front of you. But let me share with you, a few months ago, I was on another holiday. I love talking about my holidays. And in this holiday, we relocated a camper van. Sorry, a motor home.

So as you can tell, I had the time of my life trying not to crash this one-ton truck-like thing. And we had to go from Christchurch all the way to Auckland. It was over 1,000 kilometers of travel. And you know what it's like, right? As you get closer and closer to your destination, you get more and more excited, right? And then we were just hitting the edges of Auckland. But we just couldn't make it.

We had to have a rest stop, right? And by then, you know, it was nighttime, right? It was dark. I think there was a Maccas nearby. And look, so we just pulled over, got out, and the first thing we did was to go buy some dinner to eat.

I want you to imagine, though. Imagine if this had happened. Imagine if I got out of the car, gone to the counter at McDonald's after that long trip, and then just emptied my wallet and my credit card and said, take it.

[22 : 25] You'd be like, what on earth? What's going on, right? If you were the staff member, they'd be like, oh, what's your pin number? No. This is exactly what happens here in verse 68.

Here, verse 68, when they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the house of the families, they gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site.

They just emptied their wallets and credit cards. And you know how much they offered? It's incredibly generous. The amount of gold here is about 500 kilograms, half a ton.

The silver here, three tons, right? My car's about a ton and a half. So imagine like two cars worth of silver in weight. Look, whether it's money given to them by their neighbors from last chapter, whether it's treasures that the returnees own themselves, look, this is next-level generosity.

We have to see that from the text. These numbers, they're not meant to bore us. They're meant to amaze us. They're meant to show God's people at their best, spontaneously, freely, generous to help restore worship.

[23 : 38] And as the chapter ends, what happens? Verse 70, it concludes with the people living once again in the promised land, fulfilling again God's promises from last week. The sovereign Lord at work to restore his people.

All the promises of God so far have come true. The work to restore the temple and its worship can now begin. A boring list? Yeah, right.

This is a wonderful account of the people of God, is it not? Can you see that? Can you see how much there is to learn just from reading this passage carefully? For example, in seeing their focus on worship and not anything else, it reminds us as PCBC that our first priority should be more than anything else, but worship.

Right? Every week we say, let's do life together. But that is not our ultimate priority. Our ultimate priority here as a church is worship. Worship of our one true and living God.

The high point of our time together, church, should not be groups or games or food as wonderful as they are, but the true worship of God. Singing his word, praying his word, hearing his word, sharing his word with each other, following up.

[24 : 54] And I think we can learn too, as we remember these names and see them, we too should be defined by a desire to worship with purity, spiritual purity.

Not just to say, oh, whatever works, works. Not just to pick whatever song, whatever reading. We want to be passionate about the true spiritual state of people.

Not just whether each of us feel a sense of belonging or not, or we like the carpet here or not. And as we review these names, let us remember too that we as well can consider our giving and serving.

Is it free and generous? Or is it under pressure and forced? And you know what? Imagine if everyone in our membership lists, in our department committees, all five of them, plus our nine ad hocs, imagine if all these names, all these people shared these goals, right?

Priority to worship, doing it purity, and being generous. Imagine the impact it could be. And look, our church has changed a lot, hasn't it?

[26 : 05] Over time. But we do this together, don't we? Collectively. And we can draw much encouragement from God's people in Ezra too. God's people at their best.

I want to encourage you, when you read and review a list of names at church, maybe some of you members, you were like, wow, that's a lot of names on that agenda. Let's take a different approach.

How can we be praying for them to prioritize worship, for a pure life, for them to be generous in all they do and say? And yet, of course, Israel at their best here in Ezra needs to ultimately point us forward, right?

God's people, as good as they are, they fail again and again. And so we must remember to look forward to Jesus, the true Israel, the name above all other names.

I want us to consider the character and life of Jesus, the true Israelites. He too was chosen for a great purpose. He too had a mission to establish true worship in spirit and truth, right?

[27 : 17] And only he perfectly kept God's law. Only he lived a life of complete purity. Only Jesus. And only his sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate act of generosity.

And that generosity brings people from distant islands even. And people here, all around the world, selfish people joining together into an unbroken chain, a family united in service.

You know what? In the same way that Zerubbabel and his kinsmen begin to resettle in Jerusalem, Jesus, descended from this guy, will one day set his path to Jerusalem, won't he?

But what will he do? He goes to Jerusalem on a different mission, to die for a chosen people. And remarkably, the Bible teaches us that any one of us, even you, who turn from their sins and believe in Jesus Christ, will no longer be exiles from God.

Will be part of a real people of God, a forever people of God. Because in the words of Isaiah 49, 16, our name will be graven on his hands.

[28 : 33] In the words of Revelation 13, 8, 21, 27, our names in Christ will be written in the Lamb's book of life. Now there's a list of names worth celebrating.

As I conclude, let me remind you, as we see Israel at her best here, and Israel 2, we want to look beyond Israel and God's people then, and think of Jesus and his perfection and beauty.

We want to consider carefully what it looks like to be God's people today. We are diverse, and yet we ought to be united. We ought to be devoted to true worship by God's Spirit.

We ought to be passionate about purity among our myths. We should be moved to generosity because Jesus generously gave his life for you and me.

So let me encourage you, next time you see another bunch of names here at PCBC, could be names in a group chat, in an email, listed on a bulletin, whatever, ask what priorities should come to mind for you.

[29 : 41] Worship with purity, generosity. What can you do to bring this into focus more and more as you interact with each other? Maybe it could be to pray regularly for people as you see them on a list.

Even people you don't know. Maybe it could be to come alongside someone who is not walking in purity this week. To gently restore them with God's instruction.

Maybe it could be to give generously to a need that you know. Spontaneously, freely. You may not realize what island or descendants you came from or were born in.

Your name may or may not be written anywhere, famous or significant. But let me encourage you, when one day you and I see the names in the Lamb's Book of Life, when we meet these people in the new heavens and earth, it will move us more than any name on any list.

So can I challenge you though to ask yourself, will your name be there? Have you placed your trust in Jesus to belong to the people of God? In this final list, in the end of days, there will be lots of names.

[30 : 59] There won't be boring names though. There will be names of people here among us and from PBC next door, from the Samoan Congregational Church, from brothers and sisters here in Auckland, in Australia, Asia, all over the world.

Too many names to count. Not boring at all. Devoted to worship. Totally pure now. Giving their praises to God in the presence of Jesus, the true Israel, who has won a people for himself.

So with that final list in view, that final picture, you and I, let's keep going. Let's take courage from God's people at their best. Let's walk together. Let's trust in no other name but Jesus until he returns.

Let's pray. Lord, we come to you finding comfort in these words. We thank you because you have given us Jesus and there is no other name under heaven in which we may be saved.

So Lord, we give you great praise and thanks and ask that you would continue to help us respond in worship. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.