

**Christ in Prophecy**  
**Jesus in the Old Testament 21**  
**Promises Kept (Ezra)**  
**Key Verses: Ezra 6:21-22**

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## Opening

**Tim Moore:** Hello, and welcome to Christ in Prophecy. I'm Tim Moore, your host for this program and the Senior Evangelist of Lamb & Lion Ministries. I'm joined by Nathan Jones, my co-host and our Internet Evangelist.

**Nathan Jones:** We're returning to our "Jesus in the Old Testament series" and moving into a trilogy of books that deal with the Jewish exile in Babylon and the return to the Promised Land.

**Tim Moore:** After Assyria conquered Israel and Babylon decimated Judah, Babylon was in turn defeated by the Medes and Persians. Seventy years later, Cyrus was the king of then Persians. Ezra, a Jewish scribe and priest, recorded in the first verse of his book that "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia." The great king made a decree, saying, "The LORD, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which in in Judah."

**Nathan Jones:** We know that Cyrus lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, so this book can be dated around 440 BC. Ezra's recognition that the Lord had orchestrated all the events that led to the sons of Israel returning to the Land is summarized in our Key Verse for this week, Ezra 6:21-22.

**Tim Moore:** Ezra documents the challenges and victories realized by the Jews who returned from exile. More important than all of that, it documents that God keeps His promises.

## Part 1

**Tim Moore:** Our guest today is a special friend to Lamb & Lion Ministries. Bob Russell was the lead pastor of one of the largest churches in the promised land, Kentucky. Under his leadership, and with the clear guiding of the Holy Spirit, Southeast Christian Church grew into a Christ-centered mega-church. Bob also served as a mentor as David Reagan and I worked through our own transition process here over the past few years. His wisdom and discernment have been a great blessing to me personally. Bob we are so glad that you could join us today.

**Bob Russell:** Well, thank you, Tim. And I'm really, really thankful that your transition went so well. You spoke recently at a church near my home, and I wasn't able to be there, but I heard really positive feedback about the effectiveness of that weekend. You know in transitions in a track meet if the passing of the baton is handled correctly there is actually a step gained in the race because the one that is reaching back, and the other is reaching forward. And I anticipate the transition between you and David Reagan has been so smooth, that you are actually gaining a step in the race, and that speaks well of David's humility and wisdom. It speaks well of your ability and your humility as well. But really pleased of how well it is going.

**Tim Moore:** Well, I certainly appreciate your guidance and your mentoring. People may not know that you wrote the book because after your own successful transition there at Southeast Christian you wrote a book called, "Transition Plan," and it was a godsend to us. And obviously I also give complete credit to the Lord Himself who guided us through this process, the wonderful staff here at Lamb & Lion Ministries. But your wisdom that you were willing to share has been a godsend and I know it has impacted many other ministries as well.

**Bob Russell:** Well, thank you. There are lots of books on transition, but I've had people tell me that that book, "Transition Plan," has been a help to them. Thanks.

**Tim Moore:** It certainly has.

**Nathan Jones:** Well, I don't think most people realize, Bob that you were my pastor, you and Dave Stone for many years when I served at Southeast Christian, for six years. And so, it's really fantastic the last 15-years that I have been here at Lamb & Lion Ministries our paths keep intertwining, and you continue to be my pastor and mentor over the years, so thank you for that.

**Bob Russell:** Well, that is kind of you, Nathan. You made a real contribution to our church, and everybody appreciated and liked you. I think about survey that the Carney Institute did years ago of several thousand people they deemed successful in life, and they finally drew the conclusion that success in life is 15% technology, and 85% personality. You know 15% knowing how to do it, but 85% relating to people. And that is true in almost every field. And one of the gifts that you have is that you relate so well to people and you have a high likeability factor and you were a genuine blessing to our church. Thank you.

**Nathan Jones:** Like I said, you are always the mentor, thank you, sir.

**Tim Moore:** Very true. Well, let's turn our attention to the book of Ezra. And obviously, he establishes, this scribe and priest of Israel, early in his book that Cyrus, the king of Persia did not come out of nowhere, but he came to an awareness of God's providence on his own. And that was because the Holy Spirit led him and motivated him to issue a decree that the Jews should be allowed to return to Israel for the purpose of rebuilding their temple.

**Bob Russell:** Well, that's an amazing story of how God can use even pagan kings to accomplish His will. The Jews were taken captive by the Babylonians and they were in Babylon and settled in there and were a blessing to the Babylonian culture. But then Cyrus and the Persians conquered Babylon and Cyrus starts looking around and he can't understand why the Jews have been so persecuted and he feels moved to release them to go back to Jerusalem if they want to.

You know the Bible says that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, He directs it like a water course wherever He wants to. And that's an example of how God can use pagan rulers to accomplish His will. All the more reason why we ought to be praying for those in authority. We look back on the history of Israel more recently and God used President Truman who endorsed Israel when they returned and became a nation. And I think as hedonistic and pagan as Donald Trump has been God used him to appoint some conservative judges and restrict abortion, so we ought to be really praying that God continues to use people even though they may not, the rulership may not align with our values.

**Nathan Jones:** Well, it looks like in Ezra chapter 1-6 we have Zerubbabel returning to rebuild the Temple. Then in chapter 7-10 we get into Ezra's ministry, and Ezra might have even written

Nehemiah, and Nehemiah built the walls. And each time these men came back leading a remnant of Israel, or the tribe of Judah specifically back to the land. It seemed they had royal protection, they had a royal decree to do it, they had the money and funds coming from the government, yet again and again the people who had remained in that land continued to fight back against them and stop their work, they had adversaries all over the place. Well, what lessons do you think we can learn from continuing to do the work in the face of adversity?

**Bob Russell:** Yes, sometimes people think if they are doing God's will everything is going to go smoothly, and that's not true. I mean Ezra was obviously doing God's will. The people who went back to rebuild the Temple were doing God's will, but they had a number of setbacks and a number of times people opposed them.

I knew that was true in my ministry. We took a strong stand for biblical values, and the local newspaper was a lot more liberal than we were, and we were a pretty high profile church in our area. As a result, we were often attacked by the local media and criticized and sometimes there were demonstrations outside. And if we allowed those kinds of things to stop us the work of God isn't going to continue.

But you know what, Nathan, opposition doesn't just come from without, sometimes opposition comes from within. People disagree with the stance that we take inside the church, and there are going to be times when we have to continue to stand firm on God's Word even though it may alienate some people within the body of Christ.

**Tim Moore:** That is very true. And I know a lot of people when they read the Old Testament especially these books dealing with the exile period they kind of get bogged down in the various kingdoms. We know the Babylonians came to take away the people of Judah, of course the Assyrians had already conquered northern Israel, and so the Jewish people's captivity period began in about 722 BC, but after that they were indwelling, as you said, in Babylon. And some of them didn't even want to return. But this idea of the evil presence and I guess imposition of Babylon on the Jewish people is a theme that runs all the way through into Revelation.

So, we know that again, the Jewish people became assimilated, so many of them in the Babylonian culture. Some held out, we'll talk about Daniel in several weeks. But others didn't have any motivation to return to the Holy Land. And so, there was still a large contingent of Jewish people living in Iraq, what is modern day Babylon even up to the time of Saddam Hussein. What lesson can we learn about the influence of the pagan into Christian culture today as it points to even what Revelation tells us we should be anticipating with the resurgence of Babylon?

**Bob Russell:** Well, it is hard for me to determine whether everybody should have gone back to Jerusalem or not. You know when they settled in Babylon God had instructed them, through the prophet, to settle in and be a blessing to the culture. Just like Joseph was a blessing to the household of Potiphar and then the household of Pharaoh, that God's people should be a blessing in the culture. And a number of people settled in and maybe they were supposed to remain there. I think about Jesus calling Peter and John and the disciple to leave their nets and follow Him, and they left their occupation and followed Jesus. And then the demon possessed man who had been cleansed of his demons said, "I want to follow you." And Jesus said, "No, you go back home and stay where you are and be an influence there. Tell of the great things God is doing for you." And maybe some of those people should have remained in Babylon, but

they are not going to be of any influence if they're not distinctive. And it is a dangerous thing to live in the culture and not be influenced by the culture, because the culture is dangerous.

I think about how kids in school today are just bombarded with propaganda that is against the Christian worldview. I hear kids just automatically using terminology that endorses Evolution. For example, I was talking to some kids today about an alligator and he said, "Oh, man that is prehistoric, that goes back a lot longer than everything else." No, God created them at the same time He created other animals. But we get absorbed in the philosophy of the age and the Prince of Darkness is an able influence, young people especially, in this culture. And adults have the same problem. I think about how easily we become absorbed in the drinking culture, and the drug culture, and things that were evil years ago are not considered okay, even among people in the Church.

**Nathan Jones:** Bob, why do you feel that is the case? Why is it so easy to get indoctrinated into pagan culture that our churches tend to slip from their doctrinally sound biblically positions to usually something very watered down and almost meaningless

**Bob Russell:** Well, there is a phrase in Scripture that says, "they wanted to please men more than God." And the approval of people is so important to many of us. And if the culture is going to condemn--I think if I could list three fears that people have: the fear of death, and the fear of disapproval would be one of those top three, and the fear or criticism of the culture, being rejected by the culture. And so, we first of all get silent, and then we begin to endorse it, and then we begin to participate in it ourselves. The Bible calls us to come out and be separate. I don't think that means odd, or weird, but there has to be a strong stand taken.

Let me tell you a little story. When I was 9-years-old I played Little League Baseball. And I came home excited one day and I said, "Mom, Dad our team is going to see the Cleveland Indians play in a couple of weeks. All we have to do it wear a uniform and take a sack lunch and we get in to see a ballgame free. I've always wanted to see a Major League Baseball game." Well, they rejoiced with me until they looked and said, "Hey, that is Sunday. We go to church on Sunday." And I said, "Well, I always go to church. Can't I just this once go to the ballgame?" And they said, "No, church is more important." And that Sunday morning my dad drove right by where the kids were getting on the bus, going to the ballgame, and they beeped their horn and waved on their way to church. I dove down into the backseat I didn't want friends to think I was a religious nut or something. But my parents taught me in that lesson, that not only is church important, but that we are to be different, we are to be distinctive, and sometimes you have to stand against the culture.

**Tim Moore:** I appreciate your words about the prophet telling the people even in Babylon to live and to prosper and to be a blessing. That of course is in Jeremiah chapter 29, we will talk about Jeremiah down the road. We are not following chronologically every book, but in the order that they presented in Scripture, so we will get to that.

But you know here in the last couple of years, Bob our society has been consumed by fear, oftentimes of an unseen virus, and eventually we know that virus will play itself out, just like all the other pestilences that have come in recent human history have. But surveys indicate, and we could cite the Barna Survey, I know that you are familiar with, that our culture is growing less and less Biblically literate and even those who would claim faith in Christ are not holding to a consistent Biblical ideology. In other words, they don't really align with Biblical principles when you ask them specific questions. And so how alarmed should Christians be? And how can

parents and grandparents be a positive influence on their children when the culture is driving so hard in an opposite direction?

**Bob Russell:** Well first of all example is the most important. I was so blessed myself to have been raised by Christian parents who their language was pure, their life was consistent, and their testimony was bold, and that example left an indelible impression on me. I think both the home and the church need to make a concerted effort to teach people the Bible. You know I grew up going to church Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, two week revival meeting, Vacation Bible School, every time the door was open we were there. And we've cut back on those services to the place where people are just going one hour on Sunday morning, and maybe twice a month.

So, parents have to be sharp enough to realize they can't trust the church to teach the Bible to their kids. And from the time little kids are born parents need to start reading the Bible every night to their kids, teaching them the Bible. You know Moses talked about write them on the doorframes of your houses and talk about them when you walk along the way.

And the Church, Tim and Nathan, the Church has got to make a more concerted effort to teach people the Bible. And small groups need to be more than discussion groups, they need to be Bible study groups. And that's why I encourage preachers to make most of their preaching expository preaching so that they are getting as much Bible into their people as they possible can. There are a lot of young preachers who think that doctrine doesn't matter anymore, it's just we are going to follow Jesus, but the two go hand in hand. The Bible says, "Watch your life and your doctrine carefully." David said, "Your Word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against God." And to withstand the pressure of this culture we've got to have God's Word deep in our hearts to the point that it comes out of our pores, and it is second nature to us.

When Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness He quoted Scripture. And we as a church and as families we've got to be more intentional about teaching people the Bible and discipling them.

**Nathan Jones:** Well, it is interesting that as Zerubbabel was rebuilding the Temple, the first half of Ezra, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries of the time and they continued dealing with the people that were dejected in their mission. They had been given the mission to rebuild the Temple but they kind of great apathetic and lazy. And the prophets would kind of come in and kind of whip them into shape, and the people would then become penitent, they would turn to the Lord. They would ask for forgiveness, not of their own sins, but for their national sins. Well, do you see that this is a pattern in Old Testament where the Lord has to discipline the people, they repent, and then He reenergizes and blesses them, and they can move forward in their mission?

**Bob Russell:** It is the same cycle we go through today. Ezra came back after the Temple was basically rebuilt, but he came to preach and to teach Scripture and to motivate the people to repent and to turn from their wicked ways. And when he came into Jerusalem, kind of like Jesus, he saw the conditions of the culture and he wept, and he was appalled at what he saw and called people to repent.

We hear a lot of talk today about the need for revival in America, and I agree, if America is going to be spared it is going to be the result of a spiritual awakening. So, a lot of people are praying intensely for revival in America. But there is a sense in which the need isn't prayer, the need is

repentance. The need is to say, hey, we have sinned, we have been absorbed by this culture. We are using the same language. We are adopting this world's view. We are involved in divorce and the same kind of immoral behavior, and pornography and we are absorbed into this world and we need to come to repentance. When Jesus came His first words were, "Repent and believe the Gospel." And I think maybe we've been shouting grace and whispering repentance in the church, and we need to call people back, to hey repent, and believe the Gospel.

**Nathan Jones:** And that can be very painful. I mean there is this really strange story in Ezra where Ezra tells the people who have married foreign wives, "Hey, this is in violation of God's law, you can't do that. You need to divorce your wives and send your children away." And sometimes repentance can be very painful, wouldn't you say?

**Bob Russell:** John Stott once said that repentance is prickly. So, preachers avoid talking about repentance because it disturbs people. But Ezra was a preacher, a teacher, and he was tough. He called the people to an assembly and if I recall he says, "Now, if you don't come to the assembly you are going to lose your property rights." Everybody showed up.

And then he discovered that a number of people had intermarried with foreign wives. And the horrible thing about that is that they would absorb their beliefs in false gods, and their immoral practices and there are about 100 of them who had intermarried with foreign wives. And Ezra you would expect him to say, "Well, we can't unscramble eggs, you guys just repent." He said, "No, I want you to put aside your wives and your children and come back and be pure." And I don't think that was a model that is supposed to be followed today, to apply to the church to tell people to forsake their wives that they have married who are not Christian, but it just shows you that repentance is a serious matter. And God calls us to come out of darkness into light. He calls us to come out of exile into freedom.

And the church, in my opinion the church of the future that is going to make the most impact is not going to be the seeker friendly church. I think one of the things that the pandemic has taught us is that the church has been weak, and inept and we have lost a lot of people because there wasn't enough depth there. I think the church of the future is going to be a distinctive church, a church that is a contrast to the world, and the people can say, "Hey, if I'm going to be a part of that I've got to come out of darkness into light." And I try to challenge young preachers, to take a strong stand, and let's be a distinctive people, let's be a people who are called out of exile and the world can see the contrast.

**Nathan Jones:** Well, it is interesting Ezra is a person who leads a remnant back to worship God. So, in this series of Jesus in the Old Testament we are looking for Christophanies, preincarnate Jesus appearances, types and symbols. Ezra is clearly a type of Jesus Christ because he leads the people to repentance. Would you see any other types or symbols that point to Jesus in the book of Ezra?

**Bob Russell:** Well, there are a lot of symbols in the Old Testament and Ezra coming back to call people to repentance, bring them back to God is like Jesus. But Ezra weeps over Jerusalem, and he sees the sin and the degradation and wants to call them back.

And Ezra also, the whole book reminds us that God is true to His promises. That He promised Abraham that He would bless those who blessed him, He would be a blessing to the world. And then He promised through Moses if they obeyed they would be blessed, but if they strayed,

Deuteronomy tells us, if they strayed they would be taken into captivity. That's exactly what happened. But God preserved a remnant. And Ezra works with a remnant of people.

And one of the most telling examples, or types of Jesus is that the Lord still works with a remnant. Many are called but few are chosen. And God blessed, Ezra brings back about if you do the counting, it is about 5,000 people that come out of exile. But they come back and those people stray, that is the picture of the church.

Then all of a sudden they build houses of luxury and they neglect the Temple of God, and they are called back to priorities. And what a picture of the church. The church compromises with the world, and then they are called back to repentance. And I think that is our role today to be modern Ezras or to be like Christ and ask people to come out from among them and be separate and be distinctive.

**Tim Moore:** Well, Bob, you obviously have been distinctive throughout your ministry and you continue to minister still today. I talked about you being a mentor to us here at Lamb & Lion Ministries, but really you are a mentor by calling even now in your role as a pastor to pastors. So, tell us a little bit about Bob Russell Ministries and how our viewers can be in prayer for you and for the outreach you have to bless other younger pastors.

**Bob Russell:** Well, I retired in 2006 after a 40-year ministry. And I didn't retire so I could just play golf every day, though I play golf. I wanted to have another chapter in my life where I could be influential on young preachers. I have a real heart for preachers because it is a difficult calling. Difficult occupation, wonderful calling but a difficult occupation because you had the pandemic and the culture today, and it is getting tougher and tougher. So, I wanted to be an encourager to preachers. And one of the ways I do that is about eight times a year I conduct a retreat, I call a time of refreshing. And I limit it to eight pastors because I want there to be interaction. And we hold them for three-and-a-half-days and we do study, we do interaction, we take time to play. And it is just a spiritual R&R for preachers.

And I've done over 100 of those retreats. And if you had told me when I retired that I would do 100 retreats and it would never get old for me, I would have never believed that. It is kind of my sweet spot, and the guys who come will say, man, I am ready to go back into the ministry. I am refreshed and revived. So, that has been very rewarding for me. And I travel and speak, and I do a lot of counseling and consulting with preachers and churches.

**Tim Moore:** Well, you certainly have been, again a blessing to us. I look forward to crossing paths with you back home at some point. And again, we are so grateful that you could join us today.

**Bob Russell:** Thanks, Tim and Nathan. Boy, continue to do the great work you are doing. We love what you are doing.

**Tim Moore:** Thank you, Brother. Godspeed.

## Closing

**Tim Moore:** Bob Russell captured so many truths today. Even when we grow disappointed with the world around us, and even with the shortcomings in fellow believers or church, we can rely on God because He keeps every promise.

**Nathan Jones:** And although we haven't focused on the prophet Isaiah yet, Ezra records that in order to fulfill the word of the LORD delivered through Isaiah, the Holy Spirit stirred up the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia. God's Word is true, and His promises are yes and amen, even if they involve the actions of a pagan king.

**Tim Moore:** The assurance that truth offers us should make us sing out like the visionaries who returned to Israel with Zerubbabel. Praising and giving thanks to the Lord, they sang, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever."

The promise that they would return from exile originated with God. The idea for a return was initiated by God. And the provision and the protection and the perseverance to see the project completed was all to God's credit. You might say He was the author and perfecter, just as Jesus is for our faith.

**Nathan Jones:** The resource we're offering today focuses on God's eternal promises to Israel, it is the book "The Jewish People: Rejected or Beloved," by our founder Dr. David Reagan. For a gift of \$20 or more, and that includes shipping we'll happily send you a copy of this powerful book.

**Tim Moore:** In our next episode we'll continue the account of the Jews return from exile in Babylon. Nehemiah will tell how they overcame adversity to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Read ahead and look for Jesus on every page. Until next week, this is Tim Moore.

**Nathan Jones:** And Nathan Jones, saying, "Look up, be watchful, for the Lord who keeps all of His promises is drawing near."