

A Particular People

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[0 : 01] Father, you say that in your word, that these scriptures are given for our instruction, for our encouragement, and for our hope. And so, Father, even as we look at this chapter today, we pray that that purpose will also be achieved, that we might indeed know what you have to say to us and to be shaped by your word.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Who am I? Perhaps no question is obsessed over more by people in the 21st century.

Knowing who I am is seen as key to our mental health and overall well-being. And you can see why. All of our lives are lived out of a sense of identity.

I am a husband. I am a mother. I am an architect. I am a Sarawakian. I am a Fuchau who can't speak Fuchau. I am a fan of jazz music.

All of this will determine how you make sense and navigate this world. Without this sense of identity, you would feel lost. But where does your sense of identity come from?

[1 : 16] Increasingly today, we think that we can determine our identity by looking within ourselves, especially our inner feelings, with no regard to external influences, such as our upbringing, our social ties, or our cultural traditions.

But is that really possible? After all, no man, or woman for that matter, is an island. To some degree, we are our history.

Sure, we all have our individual, personal stories. And yet, our stories do not merely begin at birth. We are all born into the history of our family, our community, our country, and indeed the human race.

And those histories affect us, for better or worse. And so, like it or not, I cannot simply shrink my identity down to me, myself, and I.

And neither can you. To do so would be arrogant. And so, we can't just ask, who am I? We have to ask, who are we?

[2 : 32] Or, as the philosopher Alistair McIntyre once said, I can only answer the question, what am I to do, if I can answer the prior question, of what story or stories do I find myself a part of?

And one way we do that is by figuring out our identity markers. Now, what are identity markers? They are the very things we believe clearly demonstrate that we belong to a particular group.

So, for example, if you are a Sarawakian today, what are some of the things that makes you feel you are definitely Sarawakian?

It could be your very name, like Supang Lian, which is clearly not a name that you will find in West Malaysia. No, that clearly shows your origins as a Kelabit, one of the unique ethnic groups in Sarawak.

Or it could be the fact that you have a K on your identity card, something that clearly shows you belong to Sarawak, not Sabah or Melaka or somewhere else in Malaysia.

- [3 : 43] It could be your shared struggle with others to fight for the safeguards accorded to this region under the MA63 agreement. Now, these are some of the ways that help you proudly identify yourself as a Sarawakian.
- Those are your identity markers. And back then, Israel too had their own identity markers.
- For one thing, they had the land. They had a certain territory they believed had been promised to them by God. It gave them their identity.
- And perhaps more importantly, on that land, they had the temple. That's what differentiated them. That's what made them a particular kind of people.
- Because the land and the temple showed that they were part of a larger story. A story in which God would dwell with them, grow them as a kingdom of priests, and help them be a light to the nations, so that the nations will come and know God as well.
- [4 : 54] That way, God's glory would eventually fill the whole earth as the waters cover the sea, for it was really the whole earth that was God's domain.
- Not just this narrow strip of land in the Middle East. That was God's big plan. But here's the problem. Those key identity markers have now been removed.
- Look at Ezra 2, verse 1. How are God's people presently described? They are the people of the province. In other words, they are people who have been conquered.
- They are now just a province of Persia, and before that, Babylonia. Roughly 70 years before the book of Ezra, Babylon had come and conquered them as a sign of judgment from God.
- And not only that, they left the city and the temple in ruins. So put yourself in their shoes. All the gifts God has given have been withdrawn.
- [6 : 04] You have no land, no temple, no king, in fact. Imagine the Roman Catholic Church with no Vatican and no Pope, and maybe you start getting the idea.
- Even your most famous story in your history, the Exodus seems to have no meaning now. Why not? Well, look at Ezra 2, verse 1 again.
- They are the people whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken captive to Babylon. Remember, the Exodus had been all about escape from slavery to the Promised Land.
- But now, here you are being taken from the Promised Land back to slavery. And so if you're God's people, you must feel disorientated.
- All the symbols, all those identity markers of your collective identity, they're gone. You'll be asking, who are we now? What's our story?
- [7 : 10] Where do we belong? But today, Ezra 2 is going to answer that question. Yeah, I know you're wondering, what?
- You know, isn't Ezra 2 just a list of names and numbers? But that's not all it is. You see, by the very end of the chapter, in chapter 2, verse 70, notice how the people are now described.
- Who are they? They are priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, and temple servants. In other words, all people associated with God's temple.
- And more than that, they are no longer just people of the province. They are no longer captives of Babylon. No, they are once again Israelites settled in their towns.
- That's how they are described. They are once again the people God called them to be. So Ezra 2 is not just a list, but a story of how God restores identity markers so that his people are once again his particular people.

[8 : 23] But those identity markers aren't just about land and temple. No, they are bigger than that. They are to do with what kind of people they are.

And that makes Ezra 2 our story as well. You see, like Israel, we were in captivity. As Ephesians 2 verse 12 says, We were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in this world.

But now, in Christ, we have become the true people of God. According to Ephesians 2 again, we are members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

And so, as God's people, how are we to be defined? What are our identity markers? Ezra 2 will show us. And I want to suggest that there are three identity markers from this passage that clearly shows what sort of people we are meant to be.

We are a people of promise, a people of passion, and a people of purity. So let's look at each of those in turn. First of all, we are a people of promise.

[9 : 52] At first glance, Ezra 2 just looks like a big jumble of funny names. And they all seem rather random. From verses 3 to 20, for instance, you have people identified by their family ancestry.

And then all of a sudden, in verses 21 to 35, you have people identified by their hometowns. And then from verses 36 onwards, you get people identified by their occupations.

And then verse 59 onwards, seems a bit of a done-lying-lying kind of category. You know, those whom you can't really identify properly. So it's almost as if the record keepers kind of messed up, like some government department who couldn't keep the documents straight.

But look a little closer, and we might be able to see a meaning to the mess. Let's look at that list, starting in verse 3 first.

What is the point of all these names from verses 3 to 35? It's not just about counting numbers. This list functioned to connect these people to their ancestors.

[11 : 11] Don't forget, many of these returnees were not born in Judah and had never previously been there. So on what basis could they identify themselves as God's people?

Well, as the Old Testament scholar, John Goldingay, points out, this list establishes who has a claim to belong to the community in the sense that they have a proper Judahite family or geographical background.

In other words, these people in verses 3 to 35, they are not squatters. These folk either have the right family names or the right city of origin.

They have a proper legal connection to the land. If you like, they have native customary rights to it. To use our local lingo, it's their pemakai menuah.

This list shows that they have established rights to the land thanks to their pioneering ancestors. But what is really important is that this list, therefore, functions as a kind of identity marker.

[12 : 32] It's telling us these guys really are the continuation of Israel. And as Goldingay goes on to say, it shows the exile did not mean that God's promise has failed.

The exile's ability to show that they belong to this family and country shows that they have a share in this purpose and are an embodiment of God's faithfulness.

In other words, it's as if God is saying, look, long ago, I made promises of people and land to your forefather, Abraham.

And I haven't broken those promises because, look, the true descendants of Abraham now are once again returning to the land.

They still are the people of promise because I'm keeping my promise. I'm fulfilling my word. You might remember from last week.

[13 : 42] And in case you need more reassurance, let's look at this list of names at the beginning of verse 2. Zerubbabel, Joshua, Nehemiah, Saraiah, Reliah, Mordecai, Bishan, Mizpah, Bigvi, Rehum, and Ba'ana.

Now, who are they? These are the names of the leaders. And how many of them are they? They are 11 names here.

But actually, don't forget one more name back in chapter 1, verse 8. Sheshbaza, who is the first prince or governor of Judah in this era.

And so, 11 plus 1 equals 12. I'm sure my maths is not so bad as to be wrong on this point. Now, what is significant about this?

Back in chapter 1, verse 5, we're told that it was the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and Levi whom God had moved to return to Jerusalem. And so, at first glance, it might seem as if we could argue that oh, God's people are not really coming home.

[15 : 00] It's just a sprinkling of them. You know, three tribes at most. Furthermore, in verse 64, we are told that all in all, there are 42,360 people who came back.

Not a small number, but hardly what you envision when you remember God promising Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But now God says, these people are being led by 12 men. And 12 men makes you remember the 12 sons of Abraham.

And those 12 sons of Abraham will grow to become the 12 tribes of Israel. And of course, in the New Testament, we have the 12 apostles on whose witness the church is built.

12 here, you see, is the number of completeness. And so it's like God is saying, don't worry, I will complete my people.

[16 : 06] It is why, end of verse 2 again, even though there are only three tribes mentioned, the writer calls this list, the list of the men of the people of Israel, the whole nation.

This is the true remnant. And who does this list of names in verse 2 begin with? Zerubbabel.

Who is he? Zerubbabel is the royal heir of Judah's last king. He is the rightful heir to David's throne.

Then who is next on the list? Joshua or Joshua, depending on your translation. Who is he? He is a descendant of the last high priest.

And if you read the book of Haggai, you will get to know both of them a little better. But for here, what we have is the continuation of the kingly and the priestly lines from pre-exilic Judah.

[17 : 09] Again, it's as if God is saying, see, I haven't forgotten those promises to David about a king from his line who will establish an eternal kingdom.

I haven't forgotten my covenant relationship with you, which is why the high priest, the covenant mediator, is still around. And you see, here's the thing.

In Ezra 2, this list connects these people to their ancestors and therefore to God's promises. But this list also names these people as our spiritual ancestors and so connects us through them also to God's promises.

If you come to the beginning of the New Testament, Matthew 1, you would find that it also starts with a list of names. In Matthew 1, verse 1, it begins with Abraham.

And then as you go down to chapter 1, verse 13, you will find that name, Zerubbabel, again. And then you go all the way down and that list ends with Jesus the Messiah.

[18 : 23] And because we now belong to Jesus' household, that means these biblical genealogies are now our genealogy. This Bible story is now our story.

And so we too are the people of promise. It's why the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians chapter 3, verse 6, this mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

It is why the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2 can use language originally used of Israel in the Old Testament. A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

And he says the church now rightfully inherits that identity. And if we are in Christ, there is a sense in which we are gathered in Jerusalem, a better Jerusalem in fact.

Look at what Hebrews chapter 12 verse 22 says. But you, that's the Christian, have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

[19 : 43] Through faith in Christ, we have begun to experience in some measure the fulfillment of the promises that the Old Testament believers long for. We are already experiencing the blessings of the new covenant promised in Jeremiah, with its promises of God's forgiveness and the law being written on our hearts.

We are already experiencing God's presence with us without the need to go and visit a physical temple, for the Holy Spirit dwells in our midst.

And so these promises shape our life together because we know we are counted as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, whose names are recorded in heaven.

Our life together becomes marked by gratitude and confidence. Through the gospel, we have these privileges because we are the people of promise.

That's our first identity marker. But now secondly, Ezra tells us we are a people of passion. A people of passion.

[21 : 00] As already mentioned, we know that 42,360 people made this journey back to Jerusalem. That means there were many who stayed back in Babylon because there were definitely more than that number in exile.

But not an insignificant number came back. Why? You see, these people were gripped by a passion. Now think about it.

Why do people move in mass numbers from one place to another? It's usually to get to a safer and better place. Just think of the Ukrainian refugees fleeing their war-torn countries.

But in this case, the people are returning to the bomb site. They are returning to rubble. So why? What would cause them to do so?

Last week, remember, it's because God moved them to rebuild the temple. Or put another way, God stirred their hearts so that it burned with a great desire to give God their wholehearted worship.

[22 : 13] They couldn't stand to see the temple in the state it's in. They wanted to give God the glory. And we can see this in several ways.

Look at verses 36 to 39. Now, during King David's time, he had organized the priests into 24 family groups to take turns to do their duty.

But we can see here that only four of these family groups came back. So at first, that seems to be a bit of a downer. But count the numbers, we're told that from this group, 4,289 priests made their way back.

Now, that's about 10% of the entire group. That's a lot. Imagine if 10% of the population of Keqing were all pastors.

people of God. Why so many? Because, you see, they wanted to restore the public worship of God.

[23 : 21] They wanted to serve where they were meant to serve. They longed for the courts of the Lord. Their heart and flesh cried out for the living God.

You see, if you belong to the people of God, that is the natural inclination of your heart. That is your identity marker. And if you serve as part of the leadership of the people of God, that is even more so.

And perhaps that's why in 1 Timothy 3, verse 1, it says that those who aspire to be elders or overseers are aspiring to a noble task.

They desire for God's household to be put back into order. They desire what is good. And so that's why we also get a record of the Levites next.

Levites helped the priests, a little like how deacons assist elders, and they had plenty to do. There were only 74 of them.

[24 : 29] So that's one Levite to every 58 priests. So there are a little short staff. And therefore actually there's no big incentive for the Levites to come back.

Remember they're under no obligation. After all, if you know that there's going to be a lot of work for you to do, and you might not always get acknowledged for it, you might not have the motivation to come back.

But they did. Because they had a passion for worship. And then look at the rest of the occupation's name in verses 41 to 58.

There are the musicians, there are the gatekeepers of the temple, those are the people who stood guard, there are the temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon who assist the Levites.

And it's interesting, isn't it, that these are the very people whom Ezra too zooms in upon? You see, as I prepared to preach this series on Ezra, one of the books I consulted is a preaching guide by a guy called Adrian Reynolds.

[25 : 40] And this is what Reynolds insightfully points out. He says that if you look at Exodus and Kings and Chronicles where they tell you about the building of the first tabernacle and the first temple who are named, you will find builders and artisans and stone masons and metal workers and so on.

But where are they on this list? You don't see them. Now that doesn't mean that they were not there. Some of the descendants in verses 3 to 35 probably did this kind of jobs for a living.

But what is Ezra too interested in? Not on who will build the building. Instead, they are focused on the people who are crucial to temple worship.

They are focused on what will happen in the building once it's constructed. That is what is important. We are to see beyond what the building will be to what it is for.

And that's the attitude we are to have towards God's temple today. The church. Yes, facilities and amenities are important.

[27 : 00] But is our passion more for how comfortable we will be when we're in here than whether we are actually worshipping God in our singing and in our praying and listening to God's word and then living our whole lives in response to it?

You see, if so, we got it the wrong way around. First and foremost, our identity marker is not whether we have a beautiful and modern building which will make people go ooh and ah, like some of the new church building projects that are currently happening in Kuching, but more importantly, whether we have a passion for God to be worshipped in all that we do.

And there is one more way to see how the people here are a people of passion. Look down with me to verses 68 to 69. When they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave free will offerings towards the rebuilding of the house of God on its side.

According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 derricks of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priestly garments.

Their passion for God was also displayed in how they gave. Notice two things about their giving. First of all, verse 68, it was a free will offering.

[28 : 33] It wasn't given out of duty. It wasn't because they had to keep some law. They gave out of their own pockets. Later on in Ezra, we'll discover God moving kings to finance what is needed.

But here, the people dipped into their bank accounts. And second of all, verse 69, they gave according to their ability. They gave according to what they had.

A principle repeated in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 8, verse 12. And yet, at the same time, the amount weighs here is extraordinary.

The gold weighs 500 kilograms. The silver is almost three tons. No one could miss the generosity here. Think about it.

Remember that the people returning home have no permanent homes as of yet. They didn't necessarily know if they had a job. And they could have just withheld all of this in the name of being prudent.

[29 : 41] given. But because the house of God and therefore the worship of God mattered most to them, they still gave.

Now, isn't that a challenge for us? Ezra too isn't encouraging recklessness here. Remember, each gave according to their ability. But the point is, to them, as the true people of God, that's just what they do.

They still give. That's their identity marker. And that's what we also see the Macedonian church doing in the New Testament.

Look at what Paul says about them in 2 Corinthians 8, verse 4. They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

Imagine that, though this church were not rich, they begged to give. Why? Because they were passionate to give to God's living temple, his people, as part of their worship to him.

[30 : 54] So we are a people of promise, we are a people of passion, and finally, we are a people of purity. Let's look now at verses 59 to 63.

what is going on here? These are basically families who have lost their important documents. They can't produce the birth cert or the land titles, and say they have no current hard evidence to determine if they were truly part of the people of God.

Now, it doesn't mean that they were not, just that at this point, they had no proof. these included some who were from among the priests. Verse 61.

You could just imagine what they could have said. Ayah, but you know my father, right? You know which family I come from? You know that priestly one, right? So, of course, I can serve.

Ayah, you know my baptism registration is not there, but I assure you I've been in the synagogue for 25 years already. But there was no compromise. The Old Testament law is clear.

[32 : 03] If you are not a priest, but you try to take on the role of a priest, woe to you. And so, the purity of the temple could not be put at risk by using priests with uncertain credentials.

By the end of the book, we'll actually see that that was the smart thing to do. Now, this ban was not permanent. If they didn't have the paperwork, but they were really priests, you know, they just have to be patient.

Once the temple operations were proceeding as normal again, one of the actual priests, the high priests, they could use the urim and tumim to decide whether or not these folk are real.

Now, no one knows for certain what the urim and tumim are, but it appears they were small objects, perhaps gemstones, kept in the pocket of the high priest garments, and used in some way in the Old Testament to discern the will of God.

And so, God would have revealed at a later time whether these are really the true priests or not. people of the people of purity.

[33 : 19] We can't compromise. That's our identity marker. And when it comes to maintaining purity in our midst, we should exercise caution.

We shouldn't just throw people straight into serving in our ministries simply because we have a shortage. Now, we should encourage them to stay in our midst and share in our community life.

Our community is not to be a close one. Some commentators have looked at the names of the temple servants and they noticed that quite a few of them sound foreign. So it's possible for outsiders to come into the family.

But these verses remind us also that we should not forget to wait on the Lord to help us see more clearly the truth about each individual.

In Romans 16, 17-20, Paul tells us to watch out for certain people who deceive naive people with their smooth talk and flattery, but who, if they find their way into church life, causes all sorts of division and obstacles.

[34 : 34] So there you have it. We are a people of promise, people of passion, and a people of purity. But is the takeaway today just to say, let's be like this?

Well, the answer is yes and no. You see, we need to set Ezra within the larger Bible story. And what does the rest of the Bible tell us?

If we were to read the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, for example, we are confronted with a sobering picture. Israel is back in the promised land, but they are no longer a people of passion.

The sacrifices they offer are blemished. They are half-hearted. They withhold their tithes. They are no longer generous. And they are certainly not a people of purity.

they are divorcing and marrying foreign wives who worship other gods. So in other words, if we just say, hey, in Ezra 2, the people are like this, so let's be like them.

[35 : 50] That won't do. Because the rest of Israel's history shows us they cannot remain like this. And neither can we. If all we do is just try harder.

But God says, you know what? My people do remain the people of promise, and so I will keep my promise.

Now, how can I do that? Well, God says what we need is a person of absolute purity. A person who is totally uncompromising in wanting to please me.

what we need is a person of absolute passion. Someone who is filled with zeal for my temple. And then God says, let me provide you with such a person.

Let me provide you with the true Israelite, Jesus himself. And if you trust him daily, if you say, he rescued me, he's transferred me into his kingdom, so now his agenda is my agenda, then we can begin to become an Ezra to people.

[37 : 05] You see, we never ever gain an identity through achievement. We can only receive our identity as a gift.

And so only through Christ, and in Christ, can we truly be a people of passion and purity. And that is why we constantly need to go back to God's promise.

It's why we take the Lord's Supper regularly, as we just did earlier in this service. To be the particular kind of people God wants us to be, we must ultimately be people of the gospel.

And that means accepting we are messy people, we are sinners, we hurt God, we hurt us, each other. But when we trust Christ, he redefines us.

He says our old lives are now hidden and buried with him. And he says, we have become a new kind of people, the kind who long to give our whole lives to him, the kind ready to open our bank accounts for him, the kind ready to leave comfortable places to participate in a spiritual reformacy movement with him.

[38 : 22] Because we know we are no longer captives, but his treasured possession. That's who we are. So KEC, let's remember, this is our story, so let's live out of this sense of identity.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we trust that you have spoken. And Father, help us to heed your voice.

help us to be the people whom you have taught us to be. Help us to be a people who long to worship you with all of our lives.

Help us to be a people who want to be holy. And help us to remember that we are not our own, we were bought at a price. Help us to say thank you every day that you have purchased us, you have purified us, and we can look forward to that day when we will be gathered in the heavenly Jerusalem with people from every tribe, every nation, every tongue, giving you our worship for eternity.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.