

“That We Might Humble Ourselves Before Our God”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 8:15-23 (Sermon covers all of chapter 8); John 10:22-42

Ezra—a man skilled in the law of Moses and a priest who descended from Aaron—was commissioned by the Persian king Artaxerxes to take a second group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. This was to be an official fact finding mission for the king. The others returning to Jerusalem with Ezra had not left Babylon with the earlier group of Jewish exiles several generations earlier for reasons unknown to us. The journey was a difficult one—four month’s duration and nine hundred miles. Chapter 8 of the Book of Ezra recounts Ezra’s journey from Babylon to Jerusalem to fulfill the mission assigned to him by the Persian king, and which fulfilled YHWH’s purposes for his people. But from a theological perspective, the scene described by Ezra throughout this chapter is that of a second Exodus, a theme which surfaced earlier, in chapters 1-3 of this same book. Apparently, as Israel’s prophets foretold of Jewish exiles returning to the land of Canaan, successive generations of Jews living in exile in Babylon sense the call to return home to Israel. Those Jews going with Ezra are depicted as an “ideal Israel” in miniature,¹ making the long and difficult journey through the desert to join their brothers and sisters who, several generations prior, had already made the same journey to that land in Canaan promised to them by YHWH.

We are continuing our series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and we are taking up Ezra’s account of a second group of Jews returning from their exile in Babylon to Jerusalem in 458 BC. Some sixty years have passed since the end of chapter 6, and the opening of chapter 7, which recounts Ezra’s appearance on the scene the same year. In the first six chapters of Ezra, we saw that upon their return to the Jerusalem area the first group of returning exiles began the task of rebuilding the altar and conducting sacrifices according to the law of Moses. Despite the efforts of their pagan neighbors—the people of the land—who made a sustained effort to keep the Jews from rebuilding, Jews finally completed rebuilding the temple 516 BC. The Jews were back in their land, they were one nation, but remained under the control of the Persian empire. While the second temple stands in continuity with the temple built by Solomon, things were not the same. The focus of Ezra chapters 7-10 shifts away from Israel’s past glories, toward the hope of the messianic age.

This shift can be seen in Ezra 7, as Ezra’ account of the Jews returning home to Jerusalem in 538 BC, and completing their temple (in 516), fades into the background in light of the need for reformation and renewal within Israel. Despite returning to their land and rebuilding their temple, the Jews once again face the perpetual struggle they have faced since first entering the promised land in the days of Joshua and the conquest, about seven hundred years earlier. How do the people keep their covenant with YHWH, when so many of them find themselves drawn to the paganism all around them? Although the people have been back in the land for several generations, by the time of Ezra, a number of the Jews have intermarried with pagan Gentiles, and many are starting to adopt pagan ways of thinking and doing. Now that the leaders of the first generation of exiles have died off (Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai, and Zechariah), God raises up Ezra and Nehemiah, who play important roles in Israel’s immediate future.

¹ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 111.

Ezra, as we have seen, is well qualified for the fact-finding mission given him by Artaxerxes. For one thing, his genealogical chart goes all the way back to Aaron, Israel's first high priest. Ezra is also a skilled and devoted expert in the law of Moses, a man well-known as a teacher who is zealous in his efforts to be faithful to the law and the traditions of his people.

In verses 7-10 of chapter 7, Ezra recounts that, "*there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.*" The material recounted in chapter 8 offers more detail about the journey of this second group of exiles to Jerusalem. As we saw last time, Ezra's group left Babylon about April 8, 458 BC, and arrived in Jerusalem on August 4, of the same year—a journey of some four months across a dry and desolate region.

In Ezra 7, this journey was mentioned in connection with the decree issued by Artaxerxes (which Ezra includes in its entirety and which makes up the bulk of the chapter). Ezra makes clear throughout his account of the king's decree and his role in the fact-finding mission, that God's hand was upon Ezra, seen in the fact that Artaxerxes authorized whatever resources Ezra needed to complete his journey and conduct his fact-finding mission. The Persians also contributed much gold and silver as a gift to the Jews, likely so as to continue the favorable relationship between the Persians and their Jewish vassals (subjects)—an arrangement which had been in place since Cyrus' decree, some ninety years previously.

Ezra 8 opens with Ezra making reference to a list of the heads of those Jewish families who remained behind in Babylon, but who now wanted to return to Israel after the time in exile. "*These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king.*" We learn two important things from this declaration. The first is that even during their time in exile the Jews maintained their families and their history, and they continued to remain tied to their religion and its traditions, even though they dwelt among pagans. Apparently, many Jews followed Jeremiah's exhortation (Jeremiah 29:4-9), that the exiles live their lives in peace and as loyal citizens of their new homeland (Babylon), even while remaining faithful to YHWH.

In verses 2-14, Ezra includes a detailed list of those returning with him. I won't read the list in its entirety, but I do think there are a couple of things in the list worth noting. In verse 2, Ezra lists the priests first—Phinehas (also an ancestor of Ezra), is mentioned as being in the line of Aaron, Israel's first high priest.² But after mentioning Phinehas, Ezra states, "*of the sons of David, Hattush.*" Hattush is mentioned among the royal/Davidic descendants of David in the genealogy of Chronicles 3:1-24. We can glean from this list that Hattush is from the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. This would fit with the chronology of the Persian kings passing from Cyrus to Darius, from Darius to Xerxes, and Xerxes to Artaxerxes. This serves to confirm the date of Ezra's return to Jerusalem in 458 BC.³

Since Ezra mentions that Hattush is a descendant of David, it is clear that the Jews were keeping careful track of such things—even during nearly a century in exile in Babylon—and that even though none of

² Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 110.

0. Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part seven).

David's descendants will take the throne again in Jerusalem after the exile, the Jews nevertheless expected a Messiah to come, and that the most important messianic qualification is that the future Messiah be a biological descendant of David. We can see the importance of this from an entirely different perspective in the New Testament—looking back upon this time in Israel's history.

In Matthew 1:12-16, the tax-collector turned apostle recounts how the line of David continues on until the coming of Jesus—when some of the same names we've been hearing in Ezra's lists reappear as ancestors of Jesus. "*And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.*" In the words of one commentator, "So here in Ezra 8, does not the mere mention of Hattush, a son of David, hint that the Davidic covenant, though presently eclipsed, is not dead and buried?"⁴ No king from David's line will sit on Israel's throne until the coming of Jesus (the significance of Palm Sunday), who now reigns in heaven as the promised Davidic king, the main point in Peter's Pentecost sermon recorded in Acts 2.

Another thing becomes clear from the list of families in Ezra 8:2-14—many of the same family names appear here, also appear in Ezra 2, where another long list is found of the Jewish pioneers as they are often called, those who returned with the first group of exiles to go from Babylon to Jerusalem. There are some 1,500 people on the list, although if we include women, children, and household servants, the number probably climbs to about 5,000. There is one group of priests, and other of royals, and then ten additional families, for a total of twelve. This number once again suggests a second Exodus motif, by implying that the group traveling with Ezra is representative of true Israel (with twelve tribes) leaving their captivity behind, heading to the land of promise (Israel), with its capital (Jerusalem) and its temple.⁵

This is quite remarkable, because this is a strong indication that over the four generations or so the Jews are in exile, certain families still believed the promise that God made to Abraham—that he would make Israel a great nation, give them the land between the River of Egypt and the Euphrates, and that Abraham would have so many descendants that they cannot be counted. These families raised their children in the faith of their fathers and even though many of the members of these same families left for Jerusalem with Zerubbabel in 538, in 458 BC, when Ezra leads another group, many of the members of these same families desire to go with Ezra and return to the land of promise. And this despite the difficulties they know which await them—not only the dangerous journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, but the fact that things in Jerusalem were far more difficult than they were in a prosperous city like Babylon. The lesson here for us is the importance of passing our faith to our children and our children's children. The Jews survived as families, as a people, and remained a nation, despite several generations in exile in a pagan land. They did so by being good citizens, and by catechizing their children in the law of Moses and in the traditions of their fathers. There is a huge lesson for us in this.

In verse 15, Ezra returns to narrating events from that point where he left off in verse 28 of chapter 7, where he had written, "*I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered*

⁴ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part seven).

⁵ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 110-111.

leading men from Israel to go up with me.” Returning the first person account, Ezra writes *“I gathered them [the families mentioned in verses 1-14] to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi.”* The group traveling with him has left Babylon not long before, and arrived at a location [the river which runs to Ahava] no longer known to us, where the group decided to camp. While going over the lists of those who had decided to come with him, Ezra notices that there were no Levites or temple servants among those making the journey. Ezra directs a number of men to go back and request additional Levites and temple workers return to Jerusalem with this group. We read in verses 16-18 that, *“then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God.”* Two of these men apparently possessed a certain level of persuasiveness (insight). They were to find Iddo (the leader) at a place called Casiphia and request that Levites and temple workers accompany them.

We do not know where or what Casiphia was exactly, nor do we know the precise role it played during the time of exile. Likely, there was a Jewish sanctuary or altar of some sort located there, presumably headed by Iddo. It is very likely that during the time of the exile, the Jews established Casiphia as a place to worship and offer sacrifices.⁶ This may even have been a place where priests and Levites were trained for their future roles at the Jerusalem temple (i.e., a seminary), should they be among those to eventually return home.

Ezra’s men succeeded in making their way to Casiphia and got a very good response. According to verses 18-20, *“and by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18; also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20; besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name.”* Thirty-eight Levites, several hundred temple servants, and a skilled leader, Sherebiah, responded to Ezra’s call on short notice, which Ezra takes as a sign of the good hand of God. Ezra has a list of the names of the temple servants, men whose duties include aiding the Levites in their official duties. As Ezra’s group begins to take shape, the image of a true Israel in miniature is certainly in mind as the second Exodus theme comes into view yet again.

As the group prepares to move on, Ezra now turns his attention to giving thanks for YHWH’s gracious provision with the addition of the Levites and temple servants, as well as seeking YHWH’s blessing for the journey which is to follow. But Ezra must also organize things so that the group is safe and the great treasure they are carrying makes it safely to Jerusalem. Ezra recounts this in verse 21. *“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.”* Fasting is a means of consecration, through setting oneself apart for a time unto YHWH and to his service. Ezra’s entire group humbled themselves as a way of expressing that they are ultimately dependant upon YHWH and his gracious provision to make the journey safely.

But this raises a dilemma every Christian faces at one time or another. We seek God’s protection by praying for safety, for good weather, etc., but then, “should we still plan for possible emergencies? Does

⁶ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 110-111.

doing so imply a lack of faith in YHWH's promises? Ezra clearly is wrestling with this question as he seeks YHWH's protection because, as he tells us in verse 22, "*for I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, 'The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.'*" Having expressed his faith in YHWH's promise to the Persian king, Ezra cannot now say to Artaxerxes, "on second thought, I'd like the king to send a few soldiers along with us for protection." According to Nehemiah 2:7-9, Nehemiah, on the other hand, accepts a military escort from the king as a sign of God's favor.

This raises the question of prudence. This large group of returning exiles, no doubt, checked to make sure that they had sufficient water, and that everyone knew the places where they could find more. The women, no doubt, made sure the children were ready to travel, and the men made sure sufficient food was loaded for the people and the animals. At the same time, the returning Israelites prayed, fasted, and humbled themselves before the face of YHWH. Their pleas were offered to God, while at the same time the group is making preparations to travel. Planning and preparation is not a sign of unbelief, but rather is the expression of their confidence in YHWH's faithfulness, and in his providential purposes for his people. We make the best plans we can, and then entrust ourselves and our plans to YHWH's care. We must do this sort of thing all the time as Christians, just as Ezra and the Israelites are forced to do here.

A group of as many as 5,000 people were going to cross the desert and travel some 900 miles. The exiles must be prepared, if they wish to arrive safely in Jerusalem. The dangers of such a journey were real and present. Not only was this a large group, they were carrying much gold and silver—an attractive target to any one of a number of hostile groups in the area. Ezra plans and prepares, but then prays that God will bless his plans. According to verse 23, "*we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.*" As we read later on in verses 31 and 32a, "*then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way. We came to Jerusalem.*" That Ezra's group made the four month, nine-hundred mile journey, and finally reached their destination is YHWH's answer to Ezra's prayers and to the people's fasting and humbling themselves. YHWH did hear Ezra's prayer and he did allow his people to reach Jerusalem with no major incidents recorded. In this case, no new is good news. There is nothing remarkable to report which is a genuine sign that YHWH delivered his people from trouble and ensured a safe journey.

In verses 24-30 we learn of some of the plans which Ezra made, yet which he submitted to YHWH.

Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them. And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered. I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver, and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold. And I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers. Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the LORD." So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.

This is a significant amount of gold and silver—one scholar estimates that the gold amounts to three to

three and a half tons, while the silver weighs some 24 and 1/2 tons.⁷ That is a lot of gold and silver! The gold and silver contributed by Artaxerxes, was supplemented silver and gold given by the Jews in Babylon, the care of which was entrusted to the priests, who were to regard it as “holy to the Lord.” Whether it be the priests—whose work was to be performed in YHWH’s temple—or the gold and silver, both were regarded as “holy.” This is a good reminder to us that the primary sense of “holiness” is being set apart by God for his purposes.

As mentioned, the specifics of the group’s journey are not mentioned by Ezra, which is the proof that YHWH delivered his people safely to their destination—Jerusalem. We read in verses 31-32, “*then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way. We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days.*” Ezra acknowledges that the safe trip means that the hand of God was upon the group, and that there were no ambushes or other serious incidents worth recording or mentioning. How easily we forget that every day which goes by without incident, every trip we take and reach our destination, anything we do with risk, and then nothing bad happens, should be as much a sign to us that God’s hand is upon us as it was to Ezra. This is certainly something to think about, and that we ought follow Ezra’s example of giving thanks that God’s hand is continually upon us.

Ezra goes on to state in verses 33-34, that “*on the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Meremoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui. The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.*” The gold and silver was inventoried, and everything was just as it was supposed to be. The journey was a safe one and every once of the three and a half tons of gold, and the 24 and 1/2 tons of silver made it to Jerusalem. It is worth pointing out, that some of the people mentioned here will appear again in the Book of Nehemiah.

This second group of exiles demonstrate thankfulness, not only for a safe journey, but because they are back in Canaan, in Jerusalem, and now able to serve in the second temple. We can only imagine the joy these people felt when they got their first glimpse of Mount Zion, the city, and the temple. In verse 35, Ezra recounts that “*at that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD.*” They not only sacrificed for themselves, but in a highly symbolic gesture, they sacrificed for all Israel (twelve bulls and goats). These exiles are finally home. They rejoin their families who made the first journey and from whom they have been separated by both time and distance. The reunion must have been sweet.

In accordance with Artaxerxes’ command (Ezra 7:21-24), Ezra’s group delivers the official correspondence from the king to the local officials. “*They also delivered the king’s commissions to the king’s satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God.*” The exiles have come home. The hand of God has been upon them, and this matter of fact, business as usual report, is actually the proof that God keeps his promises. His people fasted, humbled themselves, and sought YHWH’s protection. YHWH has delivered.

The application for us is that God still watches over us and protects us—nothing which happens to us, for

⁷ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 119.

good or ill, is outside the will and beyond the purposes of God. In John's Gospel, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, who continually watches over us, protecting us from a form of danger far greater than ambush, or the perils of the desert. In John 10:27 (a portion of our New Testament lesson), Jesus tells us, *"my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*

Just as God protected Ezra's party of exiles heading to Jerusalem, so too the Good Shepherd is in our midst, watching over us, ensuring that each and every one of God's elect will reach our heavenly home, the new Jerusalem, which John describes for us in Revelation 22:1-5. *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."*

The Good Shepherd leads us during our journey through the wilderness of this life. He ensures that we reach our goal—the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. In the person and work of Jesus—his death for our sins and his Easter victory over death and the grave, he has fulfilled everything to which the Jerusalem temple pointed. Jesus is greater than the temple. Jesus is the true Israel. And Jesus is leading us to a much better city than the one to which Ezra was leading the Israelites. In light of Jesus' promise, and following the example of Ezra, let us humble ourselves before our God, because one day we will come to the new Jerusalem, safe and secure, and not one of God's elect, will turn up missing.