

October 6

Ezra 7-8

Today we have returned to the Book of Ezra where we read chapters 7 and 8. You will remember that the return to Jerusalem from Babylon was accomplished in three separate stages. The first stage happened when Zerubbabel and Joshua returned. Haggai and Zechariah took part in that phase of the repopulation

The passage we read today reflects the events which occurred some 60 years later when Ezra received permission from King Artaxerxes to bring a second group of Jews "home" to Jerusalem. In the intervening period, under the reign of King Xerxes the story of Esther occurs. If you want a date to tack on to today's reading, this return under Ezra probably took place in 458 or 457 BC. This, by most scholars reckoning marks the beginning of Daniel's 69 weeks. Add 69 times seven or 483 to 458 BC and it will bring us to 26 AD, the year that Christ's public ministry probably began!

The journey from Babylon (about 500 miles as the crow flies but 900 miles as the pedestrian walks) took four months to complete and was undertaken by Ezra and a group of people numbering 1754 men, women and children, a much smaller party than Zerubbabel's group 60 years before.

The key phrase in today's reading -- it occurred five different times with some slight variations, "The good hand of his God was on him." Ezra received everything he asked from King Artaxerxes because the hand of the Lord his God was on him. The journey to Jerusalem took only four months because "The good hand of his God was on him." He was able to convince the leading men of Israel to go with him because "the hand of the Lord his God" was on him. When it was discovered that no Levites had volunteered for the trip, he was able to recruit them "because the good hand of God was on him." Finally Ezra felt compelled to travel without a contingent of troops to guard him and the treasure he carried because he had told Artaxerxes that "the good hand of God" provides security for his people.

Here is another classic example of a servant of God who truly believes in the providence and sovereignty of God. He knows in humility that anything he achieves is accomplished only because God's hand of blessing is upon him. He is very careful to make sure that credit is given where credit is due -- to God and to God alone. Ezra didn't write the hymn "To God be the Glory" but he would have loved to sing it. In the New Testament James reminds us that every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father on high. Ezra really understood that.

It could have been otherwise because Ezra had a pretty distinguished bloodline. His genealogy was pretty impressive. It went all the way back to Aaron the brother of Moses and included some impressive names like Eleazar, Aaron's son, and Zadok the great high priest who served both David and Solomon. So Ezra was a blueblood -- a priest in the line of the great Zadok, but he was also a scribe or teacher.

I am sure that you also took note of the fact that in the telling of his history Ezra switched at the end of chapter 7, from the third person to the first person: "Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me." The remainder of the Book of Ezra -- from the end of chapter 7 onward is written in the first person as the personal memoirs of Ezra, the servant of the Lord.

As Zerubbabel had done a generation before him, Ezra returned bringing a great deal of treasure -- gold and silver and bronze with him. Some of the treasure appears to be in the form of articles designed to be used in the temple which were being sent by Artaxerxes himself, and other offerings

came in the form of gold and silver talents. They were gifts from the largest of the Jewish population who chose to remain behind in Babylon and Persia. As with Zerubbabel the need for security was great because the treasure they were carrying made them very lucrative bait to bands of robbers and Marauders in the desert. I am impressed that despite the human risk of traveling without soldiers these people were willing to put their faith to work and simply trust God to defend them. God honors that kind of faith. The good hand of God truly is "on everyone who looks to Him." Just in case you were wondering how much treasure Ezra brought back to Jerusalem with him a talent weighed about 75 pounds so 650 talents is nearly 25 tons of silver and 7,500 pounds of gold and another 7,500 pounds of silver articles. This treasure was worth millions and millions of dollars!

O.k. now we can understand why Ezra was a little nervous about the security side of the expedition and why he called for a period of prayer and fasting before they began. In order to keep the treasure safe, Ezra weighed it out and entrusted portions of it to various individuals. Each man was responsible to make sure that his portion of the wealth, which had been weighed and recorded, got safely from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

At the end of the journey we read "Everything was accounted for by number and by weight and the entire weight was recorded at that time." That is a pretty amazing statement. On that entire trip nothing went missing and no one got greedy and tried to steal any of the treasure.

An interesting note is that now the exile has ended Ezra and his compatriots no longer think of themselves or call themselves Judeans. Now they prefer again to use the term "Israelites." "Ezra and Nehemiah use the term Israel some 24 times. Likewise emphasized is the term God of Israel throughout the Ezra material. On the other hand Judah as a term occurs only four times in the Ezra material, and then only as a geographical term..." (Yamauchi p. 652 citing W.J. Dumbrell)

Ezra's job when he returned to Jerusalem was to teach people God's laws and to administer that law as well. Many scholars believe that the present form of the Pentateuch -- the first five books of the Bible structured and arranged as we now have them may have occurred during this time and by the hand of Ezra the scribe.

Enjoy the reading of Ezra, one who was sure of the great hand of God in his life.