

Restoration of Exiles: The Book of Ezra Chapter 8

In 458 BC, over fifty years after the Temple was completed in 516 BC, Ezra himself leads another procession of the captive Jews back to Jerusalem. Ezra was a priest and teacher, devoted to studying, observing, and teaching God's Law. King Artaxerxes, king of Persia from 465-424 BC, authorized this trip for the purposes of checking on the welfare of the people who had gone back previously, offering sacrifice to God, and appointing leaders to create a just society based on God's Law. He also provided gold and silver, returned the articles that the Babylonians had captured from Jerusalem over a century before, gave permission for Ezra to raise additional funds for his mission, and instructed the local leaders around Jerusalem to provide additional support and not to tax them.

Ezra 8 contains three sections: 1) the names of those who went with Ezra (8:1-14), 2) additional preparations Ezra made just outside Babylon (8:15-30), and 3) the actual trip and arrival back in Jerusalem (8:31-36).

8:1-14 lists other captives who went back to Jerusalem with Ezra. Read if you wish.

Ezra brings the caravan out to a place near Babylon where they camp for three days to make additional preparations for the trip. This includes:

Getting the right people they need for the trip (8:15-20). He reviews the people and priests who are going and realizes they need more Levites. The Levites in general were "ministers for the house of God" (8:17). This included some physical work (8:30) and helping people understand the law (Nehemiah 8:6-9). The relationship between Priests and Levites is difficult to understand but one distinction appears to be that Priests could touch holy objects but Levites could only carry them (once they were packed up)(Numbers 3-4).

Seeking God's protection (8:21-23). They fast, humble themselves before God, and implore Him for a safe journey, which he grants. Read this rich section.

1. Ezra had told King Artaxerxes that, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him" (8:22). Do you believe this? Can you think of examples of it that you have experienced personally? Would you make this claim to a non-believer, like Ezra did to the king?

2. In Ezra we have seen the Hand of God (or gracious hand of God) in the king allowing the journey (7:28), providing the Levites they needed (8:18), giving protection (8:22) and safely completing the journey (8:31). What things like this has the gracious hand of God given you?
3. Since Ezra had told the king that God would take care of them, he was ashamed to ask for an armed guard to accompany them on the trip to protect them from bandits. Would it have been a lack of faith for him to do so? How would you state the proper relationship between trusting in God and taking care of yourself? Can you think of an example in your own life where you think you handled this well?
4. Instead of asking for a guard, what did Ezra ask the people do before they left for Jerusalem? What was the outcome of Ezra's decision to seek God's protection instead of a Persian guard?

Entrusting the valuables they were taking back to Jerusalem (9:24-30). Ezra takes the silver, gold, and vessels that they had received from the king and his fellow Israelites in Babylon and entrusts it to some leading priests, charging them to guard and keep it until it can be turned over to caretakers at the Temple once they arrive. It is important to be responsible with God's money. Cf. 1 Corinthians 16:3 (in context of 1-4) and 2 Corinthians 8:16-21

5. How would you apply the importance of handling God's money responsibly to the church today?

The Actual Trip and Arrival

The actual trip (8:31-32). It was about a 900 mile journey that took them four months (7:9). The last phrase of 7:9 suggests that they may have been making good time. Again Ezra mentions that God protected them on their journey. They arrived and rested 3 days.

Turning over the money and articles for the temple (8:33-34). Notice the repeated concern for integrity in handling it all in v. 34.

Sacrifices are offered (8:35). This repeats the important theme of worship in Ezra.

6. When God helps you accomplish his work does it lead you to worship?

Passing on the king's orders to the local leaders to help them and not tax them (8:36; his orders are described in 7:21-24)