

Restoration Team: Courageous Leadership & Risk Taking Faith
Ezra 7:11-8:36

"For the good hand of the Lord was on us"

Introduction: How does a book written thousands of years ago in a completely different culture, among radically different circumstances apply to us today? Why would we study a historical narrative about a wicked, exiled people returning to the land where they once were the dominant force in the known world and now were an asterisk, a group that tried to restart something but could never achieve their former glory? The answer is simple. We operate the same way they did, we simply have different circumstances. In other words, we still seek to glorify the Lord in the same way as they did: to walk by faith, by the understanding His Word, through the guiding of His Spirit, in order to be a light to those around, led by qualified leaders. Neither us or they received direct revelation, but were given prophets to speak on behalf of God, and trusted in God's unseen but powerful hand, called Providence.

Two phrases have stuck out in this study of Ezra: "**The Lord stirred up the spirit...**" & "**The good hand of the Lord was on us.**" This meant that God was directing and leading, which meant His people were free to plan and act. Ezra was a priest and a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses who had the audacity to ask the king of the known world, the most powerful dictator, to send him back to the land of his ancestors, in order to reform the worship practices there. He had confidence since the king granted all that he asked, "because the good hand of the Lord was on him" (Ezra 7:6). Now we will see how God prepared not only Ezra but a whole team to return. Ezra spent much space in this book describing this process which allows us to examine two distinct principles of restoration: **1) Courageous Leadership; 2) Risk Taking faith of a team that goes with him.** Today, both of these are needed not only in missions, but in accomplishing our mission. We must have leaders who are willing to be bold and teams that are willing to sacrifice for something greater than themselves.

Because this is a large section, we will trace the narrative through **4 phrases** of God's good hand being on Ezra and the people. Notice 7:28, 8:18, 8:22, and 8:31 which will help us see what leadership and teamwork was needed to form a restoration team, one that would bring God honoring worship in a land that had drifted away for the last 50+ years.

Courageous Leadership Trusts God Will Pave the Path (7:11-28)

Ezra 7:11 This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: ¹² "**Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace.** And now ¹³ **I make a decree** that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.....

Unexpected Provisions of the king (11-26)

Ezra fills in the blanks as to *how* Artaxerxes sent him back to Jerusalem. We looked already that the king granted him his request, but now we get to see what that actually was. Again, we see that God's providence works out in the hearts of men and the affairs of the world. Artaxerxes was motivated by **political stability**, and was willing to spend big to have Ezra return to make sure that there would not be an uprising like he had just extinguished. Understanding of historical context helps us here:

"Soon after Artaxerxes came to power, two or three years before the events portrayed in Ezra 7, the Persian king (and Persian empire generally) faced his biggest challenge ---an Egyptian revolt. Led by Inarus the Libyan and Amyrtaeus of Sais, the revolt was successful in defeating the Persian satrap in Egypt, Achaemenes, a brother of King Ahasuerus (Artaxerxes' predecessor). Athenians who sailed a 200

strong fleet of ships helped to capture the city of Memphis only months before the events recorded in this chapter. It was the herald of some of the fiercest struggles the Persian empire had known. Two years later, a sizable army, under the leadership of the satrapy of Syria, recaptured Memphis. Both the Athenian and Persian armies suffered considerable loss of life."¹

Artaxerxes wanted no part of another bloodbath to keep peace in the empire, so sent Ezra, a man who he knew and who had asked him to do so, back with a clear mission:

Ezra was given two basic tasks to accomplish: (14-15)

- 1) To check into the religious condition of the Jewish community
- 2) To take gifts of gold and silver from the king to the Temple in Jerusalem

The king did not leave Ezra empty handed, but sent official correspondence with the weight of the monarchy to ensure Ezra go the job done. Notice this was most likely above and beyond what Ezra asked for, but the king wanted peace beyond treasure.

Artaxerxes Letter contained:

- It authorized Ezra to take with him all that were willing, to go see that God's law was being observed (14, 25)
- It provided a grant to buy sacrifices and temple vessels (15-19)
- It commanded the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra (21-23)
- It gave a tax exemption to all Temple officials (24)
- It authorized Ezra to set up a judicial system to see that the Jews obeyed the Law (25-26)

Emboldened Confidence in the KING (27-28)

²⁷ Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a **thing as this into the heart of the king**, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. **I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.**

How did Ezra know God was with him? How did he know he'd have success? How did he know how to proceed? When he boldly asked the king, the king said yes, and then did one better, sending him with an array of authority and wealth. Ezra knew that it was not his power of persuasion nor his political maneuvering that caused the king to act so magnanimously. In fact, the request would have seemed crazy, audacious, and one of those things that we say "unless the Lord moves, there is no way this can happen!" This is the type of **prayer and dreams** that asks NOT for material gain but for kingdom effectiveness. Do we pray this way? Are we willing to act this way? The problem that we face is not that we pray and God doesn't answer, the problem is that we pray too little and do not expect enough! We need to pray for things that unless God does it, there is no way to explain it, whether that's a young man going to Japan or sending our own to the harvest.

Courageous Leadership Trusts God Will Assemble the Right People (8:1-20)

Ezra 8:1 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:

¹ Derek H. Thomas, "Ezra & Nehemiah: Reformed Expository Commentary, p. 121.

Ezra 8:15 I gathered them 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.....** ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ ***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; ¹⁹ also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20; 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.

Taking Stock in Who Was Willing to Go (1-15)

Before heading off on the 4 month journey (the group left Babylon on April 19 and arrived in Jerusalem on August 4 - Ezra 7:8), Ezra gathered by the river outside of Babylon to review the people, supplies, and routes. He was leading 5,000 people with literally tons of silver and gold, so he needed to know what he had with him. There were a few issues that stood out:

1) There were 12 identifiable families - and these were of the same lines that went back 80 years earlier. These would have heard the stories throughout the year and would have been returning to relatives who they had only known sparingly or not at all. **NOTE:** The heads of the family are emphasized. This is important as we strive to move forward in a healthy way. Yes, we want to emphasize reaching our youth and children, the next generation, and even Millennials, but there is always an order. The best way to raise up the next generation is having fathers (and mothers) who train their kids to follow the Lord, teaching them the Scripture, and modeling their faith. This cannot be delegated solely to teachers or the church, but these provide complements, not supplements.

2) Notice in verse 2 the name **Hattush, of the sons of David**. He was NOT mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:13), but Zerubbabel was. 1 Chron. 3:17-24 has Hattush as the 4th generation after Zerubbabel. **Why is this important?** Because **Jesus** would come from the line of David, so Hattush's return meant that the line had not been broken and the Son of Man would still come out of that line. All of this, the rebuilding of the Temple and the people being back in the land would pave the way for Jesus coming on the scene in a few hundred years.

3) They were lacking Levites (v. 15), which were Temple servants. And when I say lacking, I mean, they had zero, none, nada.

Making Up for What Was Lacking (16-20)

Levites came from the specific tribe of Levi, and their main job was keeping watch or guard over the Tabernacle and later the Temple (see. Num. 18:2-4,6) . They would police the Temple, guard the outer gates, and keep everything in the sanctuary clean. They would take care of the outer gates at night (the priests got the inner workings), and would also lead the Temple music. It was a messy job dealing with the cleaning up after sacrifice, menial work (that of a servant), and would require weeks away from family throughout the year for Festal times.

Why were they lacking? The text does not say, but there is plenty of archaeological evidence to suggest that life for the Jewish people in Babylon was not bad. They could engage in banking, brokering, lending, and even in the royal court. Life was normal, comfortable, and stable, with the ability to rise the ranks of the middle to upper middle class and beyond. Think about it. If you had a job that people respected, money in the bank, and retirement a few years away, would you leave that for the menial work of Temple cleanup and protection!!!??!! Yet there was no unimportant job when it came to the

Temple, so Ezra sent leading men and men of insight back into the city and mustered up 38 men with 220 servants. This is a paltry number compared to what was needed. ***What kept the Levites away from this venture? What keeps us away from the same thing?***

In 1810 Adoniram Judson, after feeling the deep call of dedication to the Lord and preparing himself to reach the unreached with the gospel, asked for the hand of Ann Haseltine after knowing her for a month. This is the letter he wrote to her father to ask for her hand:

"I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to hardships and sufferings of missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean, to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all of this, for the sake of him who left His heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God? Can you consent to all of this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteousness, brightened with the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Savior from heathen saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?"²

Her reply:

"I feel willing, and expect, if nothing in Providence prevents, to spend my days in this world in heathen lands. Yes, Lydia (her friend Lydia Kimball), I have about come to the determination to give up all my comforts and enjoyments here, sacrifice my affection to relatives and friends, and go where God, in His Providence, shall see fit to place me."

Ann married Adoniram on February 5, 1812, took the 114 day journey to India, came home for 2 years and 4 months after 8 hard years in Burma because of illness, returned to her husband, cared for him as he was imprisoned for 17 months, giving birth to their daughter while walking 2 miles a day to see him, and died October 24, 1826, followed by her daughter 6 months later. She had sacrificed much to care for her husband, and sacrificed it all for the sake of the gospel and the lost of Burma.

The sacrifice for Ann and Adoniram was immense, and the seed that died produced much fruit. William Carey told them not to go. Burma (or modern day Myanmar) was hostile to the gospel, a place of constant war and anarchic despotism. Yet for 38 years, Judson sacrificed and suffered, and at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd millennium, Patrick Johnstone estimated Myanmar Baptist Convention to be 3,700 congregations with 617,781 members and 1,900,000 affiliates --- the fruit of this dead seed.³

What keeps us away from this type of dedication? What do we hold onto that makes this type of decision feel so foreign to our experience and thinking? Are we like the Levites who have a hard time leaving what is comfortable to become servants in His hand?

Courageous Leadership Trusts God for Protection (8:21-23)

Ezra 8:21 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. 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***

² John Piper, "Filling up the Afflictions of Christ", p. 92, from the biography of Adoniram Judson

³ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, eds., *Operation World* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001), p. 462.

is against all who forsake him."²³ So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

Humble Approach before God

For any trip, any mission that multiple people are involved in, safety is always a factor. I remember taking trips down to Mexico with our youth group and the concern that anyone would be hurt, left, or detained was always on the forefront of our planning. Ezra realized he was a scribe/priest, not a soldier and he had women and children carrying tons of precious stones over thousands of miles where enemies and ambushes (8:31) were the norm. His trust in the sovereign hand of God led him to call for a **fast**, a restriction of eating, as an act of humility to seek the Lord for a safe journey. Fasting is NOT a regularly practiced discipline today, but it should be. Psalm 35:13 connects fasting with humility and prayer. It was in the midst of worship that the Holy Spirit called out Barnabas and Saul for missions, which led to **fasting and prayer** from the whole church in releasing them (Acts 13:1-3).

Sometimes we are too quick to act and trust our own background and experience in situations, and prayer becomes not just the afterthought, it becomes the reaction (uh oh, I'm in over my skis, I better cry out to God). Ezra knew this was too big of a venture NOT to pray, and fasting expressed humility before the Lord.

Convictional Dependency on God

But there was another reason that led Ezra to cry out to God for protection. He had told Artaxerxes that "the hand of our good God is on those who seek Him", bragging of the power and might of YHWH. Because of this, he had NOT ASKED THE KING FOR A MILITARY ESCORT, which he would have been entitled to and the king would have given to insure his investment. To Ezra, this would have seemed like double speak, that he spoke of the might of God without trusting it himself. So Ezra expressed faith in risking the whole caravan without cover, and IT WORKED!

Now, was this wise? Maybe a better question is this: was it right? This is a fascinating study on faith and trust in the Providential hand of God. Some of us in here resonate with Ezra, desirous to walk by faith and not so much on planning or man-made systems. But, **Nehemiah** DID ask for military support in his return, and when he received it, saw this as "the good hand of God" being with him (Neh. 2:4, 8-9).

Was Nehemiah wrong? The answer is "of course not". Two men, two sets of convictions, two radical steps of faith. One chose to trust God and accept consequences of no cover, and the other trusted the Lord to provide it from the same source that sent him.

Walking by faith is hard and it requires all of us to walk in **humility and trust** all the while not neglecting **planning and wisdom**. H.L Ellison captures it this way:

"There are times when faith must take on flesh, when what is professed must be expressed in concrete situations. There are times when we must reject all visible human help and risk all on God alone. When could we possibly be safer? But we often don't view it that way. We are like the terrified lady onboard a ship in a terrific storm. She happened to pass the captain and ask, 'Is there any hope, Captain?' to which he replied, 'Our only hope is in God'. She turned pale and gasped, 'Are things really that bad?'

Courageous Leadership Entrusts Leadership to Others (8:24-36)

Ezra 8:24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them.

Ezra 8:31 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.**³² We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days.³³ 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.³⁴ The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

Delegation was Required

Two key principles of leadership emerge as this journey concluded. The first is the power of **delegation**. This was the wisdom of Moses' father-in-law Jethro (Exodus 18) where he saw his son-in-law drowning in responsibility and wearing himself out commanded him to delegate responsibility to able, God fearing, and trustworthy men. This not only saved Moses' life but allowed for healthy leadership development and leadership of a nation. Ezra knew the power of delegation so he gave authority to 12 of the **leading priests**. True delegation requires:

Real entrustment - This means not just menial tasks are given out, but those of true importance; this includes teaching of God's Word and the gospel itself (2 Tim. 2:1-2)

True Release - Delegation means a release of micromanagement, and giving the freedom to someone who may do things differently

Confidence in the Lord - When we trust ourselves, we believe that we alone can get the job done. When we see that delegation is how leaders are developed and how influence is multiplied, we are willing to release people. When we want control, we keep all authority.

This principle will always test our leaders here, since the day we stop entrusting leadership to others is the day we have ingested the poison pill that will cause the slow death of any church.

Integrity of Everyone was Needed

The counter balance of whimsical release is the need for solid integrity, especially in financial matters. After God had delivered them from their journey, Ezra had the priests give strict accounting of all the silver and gold. "The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded." (8:34). The gold and silver was for use in the Temple, for sacrifices and supplies, and stealing from it was stealing directly from God (which is what all theft is). Ezra expected each man under his leadership to maintain high standards to make sure they were above reproach. Lack of integrity with money will always be one of the quickest ways to disqualify a person for ministry, so strict accounting is imperative.

The whole restoration team gathered outside of Jerusalem at the end of their journey, and the first order of business was to offer sacrifice and **worship** (8:35). The real work was about to begin, worship was not an afterthought, it was drumbeat of their heart. They offered sacrifice not only in thankfulness, but to make sure their sin was covered. It is a good reminder as we continue to move forward in reaching our community and sending leaders out of here. We walk in trust and thankfulness, knowing that we ourselves are weak and frail, sinful and fallible. So we rest in a glorious gospel that frees us to do both things, to make much of God in Christ while remembering that our sins are forgiven as we continue to fall short.

Courageous leadership and risk taking faith are necessary for restoration, whether in Jerusalem from exiles or this church in Simi Valley. You do not want to miss next week as we talk specifically about what this means for us as a church moving forward....(that is an official tease).