

Ezra 7-8

Vs 1 of ch 7 begins with the phrase, “After these things” but what you’ll need to understand is that’s not a reference to something like “the next day” or “immediately following” the events that took place in ch 5-6. You recall the focus of our last few studies here in the book of Ezra, have been not so much about our walk *with* God, but rather the focus has been on our work *for* God. And I always try to be careful when I begin to speak of what we do for God, because in reality we don’t do *anything* for God, He’s done everything for us, and it’s Him by the power of the Holy Spirit who does anything of eternal value *through* us. The bible is very clear that, “... it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” Phil 2:13 So it’s always divine initiative (something that comes up semi-frequently around here) but at the same time we never want to *down play* human responsibility. He can put a work on your heart, and do the work through your life, but only if you choose to let Him because He’ll never force you beyond your will. So we have a good chunk of the epistle of James that enters in upon that mentality that says you show me your faith with out your works, and I’ll show you my faith *by* my works. Not that works save you, but they can serve in a certain context as evidence that *you are* saved, Jesus said we’ll know people (whether they belong to Him or not) by the fruit of their lives. So though we’d never even get anywhere near the mentality that would express the fact that our works have something to do with either our salvation, or our righteous standing before God, we do realize that once God *does* save us, once we *are* robed in His righteousness, He has a practical plan for our lives that He desires us to walk *in* and be busy *about*. And that’s been the focus thus far of the book of Ezra, the returning to the land of Israel (Jerusalem in specific), the rebuilding and restoration of the Temple, and a renewal of their worship of God.

We’ve also noted that anytime you may commit to a work as unto the Lord, the enemy will work to counter that commitment in your life. The greater the opportunity God gives you, the greater the opposition the enemy brings against you, he wants to end that work, extinguish that work. And he has a # of weapons in his arsenal that we’ve reviewed over the previous studies. He was a murderer from the beginning and his express agenda is to steal, kill and destroy. But just as sure as he sometimes wins a battle or 2, perhaps brings that work of God to an end through a certain means in your life, God has means to *enable* you once again. As long as there’s breath in your lungs, and a beating of your heart, God’s not finished with you. And He can enable you to enter in to that work that He wants to do both in you and through you once again. And He uses His people, to administer His word to your life, and we’re to allow that word to serve proper motivation and practical application, and that’s what we’ve seen happening so far.

They finished the Temple, celebrated the Passover and now we come to ch 7. But ch 7 takes place some 57-58 yrs after ch 6, and so far in the book we’ve seen a span of some 20yrs, so though Ezra wrote the book, he didn’t actually enter the equation till some 80yrs after Zerubbabel led the initial 50,000 back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

So “After these things” is nearly 60 yrs after ch 6, and it represents for us the next major division in the book as Ezra embarks on yet another “Exodus” leading back some 3-5000 more people out of Babylon into Jerusalem.

Vs1-6

So we have here an abbreviated snapshot of Ezra’s lineage that leads back to Aaron, the chief priest in the beginning when God established the order of the Levitical priesthood.

And this of course qualifies him as far as his heritage goes to serve the Lord, and minister on behalf of the Lord in the position, or platform that he’s administering over the people, he’s not just coming in there, presuming to be all that, and taking over the show. This is something God has called him to personally, positionally, and practically.

And verse 6 tells us that he was a “Skilled scribe in the Law of Moses.” Now in Jesus’ day the scribe had come into a negative kind of light by the Lord, not much different than the Pharisees. But in Ezra’s time the scribes were beginning to emerge in more of what we would consider to be a Pastoral role. Not only would they copy the Law of Moses so meticulously, but they would also instruct people in the Law of Moses, and explain the essence of it, expounding upon the principles and precepts with in it. So when we read that he was a “skilled scribe” we might liken that to a powerfully profound Pastoral type fella in that he wielded the Word of God with authority, and with accuracy. And this word “Skilled” actually goes beyond those things, in that it literally means “Quick,” or “Hasty,” perhaps your bible says, “Ready scribe” and the idea there is that he was quick to get a grip on what God’s word meant personally, and turn it to application in his life practically. The bible says, *“A scoffer seeks wisdom and does not find it, But knowledge is easy to him who understands.”* Prov 14:6 That was Ezra, he was a man of understanding who could get his mind *around* and get a hold of God’s word in a way that was tangible for his personal life. And he was quick to allow what he was learning to be assimilated into his day-to-day living. When he learned it, he lived it. And I don’t want to get ahead of myself on that, but you might just be aware of that, he was a skillful scribe in the law of Moses, if he preached it, he practiced it. Paul the apostle was the same way. He said, *“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”* 1 Cor 9:27 Translation, “I’m not out there laying a standard on others that I myself don’t adhere to.” He said in Phil 4:9 *“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”* That was Ezra, he wasn’t just quick to learn it, he was quick to live it.

And then we have this phrase, “The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.” Which brings us back into that mindset of the providential sovereign hand of God that overshadows our lives as believers. We’ll save our comments on that phrase for now, but you might just mark it, or underline it when we come across it because you’ll find it surface as a favorite phrase of Ezra’s. And it’s a good one, he realizes and acknowledges the fact that if it’s good, and it’s come into his life, it’s a gift of God.

James said, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*” James 1:17. And that’s the general gist behind this phrase, that when something beneficial is taking place in your life, it’s because the hand of God is upon you in that situation.

Vs7-10

In vs 9 we see the phrase again, “...the good hand of his God upon him.” And then in vs 10 it says, “*For* Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.” Which is to say that *because* Ezra did those things, God’s good hand was upon his life. Now, understand this; Ezra’s doing what he did in seeking the Law of the Lord, doing it and teaching it in no way obligated God to grant him His favor, God *owes* us nothing. But God *honors* our commitment *to* Him, and our obedience *before* Him.

Look at vs 10, “Ezra *prepared* his heart,” what is that? That’s human responsibility; it’s your responsibility to prepare your heart before the Lord. Prov 16:1, “*The preparations of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.*” If you want to have attitude, and a non-penetrable, non-teachable, non-receivable condition of heart before the Lord, that’s your choice.

But if you want to seek *after* the Lord, be in that place where you might receive *from* the Lord, be taught *by* the Lord, than humble yourself before the Lord, make ready your heart through humility, repentance and openness, vulnerability before God.

This word “prepared” is a good one, it means to be “securely determined” or even “fastened.” He had purposed in his heart in a non-wavering kind of way, he was focused. 3 Things he’d securely determined in his heart to do, #1 To seek the Law of the Lord, this speaks of that which we spoke of a minute ago, his learning. He inquired of the Lord, sought to learn the various principles and precepts of the Word, he was a student of the word. He spent his time concentrating, and meditating on the Word of God. We read in 2nd Timothy “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*” 2 Tim 2:15 Ezra was one who modeled that pattern, studying, working, laboring in God’s Word that he might know it, and rightly divide it. He prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord.

#2 He prepared his heart to *do it*. Which is why I said, not only was he quick to learn it, he was quick to live it, he’d securely determined in his heart to be a doer of the word and not a hearer only. The bible says, “*Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.*” Rev 22:14 That’s the key to a sure foundation, so many people *know* the Word of God, but when the storms of life begin to beat upon them, they find themselves collapsing under the pressure.

But a huge key to a sure foundation is in being not simply a knower of the Word, but a doer of the word. That's what Jesus said; notice, "*Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.*" Matt 7:24-25 He prepared his heart to do the word of God.

Finally #3 He prepared his heart to teach God's Word to others. I want you to notice the order because it's critical, 1st you *learn* it, than you *live* it yourself, than you're qualified to *lead* others in it. And living it is the critical link between learning it, and leading others in it. Jesus put it like this, "...*why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*" Matt 7:3-5 Again Paul spoke of imitating him, as he imitated Christ, now to me this is convicting stuff, because I know I don't have it all down, but this is where it comes back to the heart. There's only One who had it all down, and He was the sinless Son of God. The rest of us are going to struggle now and then, here and there, but you see, he'd prepared his heart, purposed in his heart, to do the word of God, to follow the word of God in his own life, that he might then be able to facilitate that and exhort obedience to the Word of God in the lives of others around him. And God honored the position of his heart in seeking to excel in the things of God. Think about it, what is the securely determined position of your heart? A good retirement? To be living debt free, to be married with a family? All of those things are good, but they fall far short of what God desires for you, those things are things that are concerned with the things of this world, God would have us focus on things that are eternal, heaven and earth will pass away, but His word will last for eternity, learning, living, and leading in God's Word are those things that deal with the spiritual/eternal perspective, rather than the earthly/temporal perspective.

Vs11

There it is again, he was renown for understanding *in* and application *of* the Word of God. What a cool reputation, when people thought of Ezra, they immediately identified him with one who had powerful/personal working knowledge of God's Word.

Vs12-18

Few things, notice again back in vs 13 that whoever was to go back with him was to do so *voluntarily*. It was not mandatory; our seeking after God, desiring to worship and be right with God has to be something that happens freely, not forcibly. God wants us to worship Him, and to seek Him out of personal desire, not political demand, or some sort of forced submission. And when people come to God because they want to, that's a special thing, when they come to God because they feel somehow forced to, it means nothing to them, nor to God. The 2nd thing emphasized here is the freewill offering, so that not only am I to freely come *before* Him, and freely seek *after* Him, I'm also to freely *give to* Him. I shouldn't be constrained, or compelled by guilt in my giving to God, but rather it's essential that I give freely and of my own free will.

Vs 17 shows us a designated donation, the king wanted a portion of that which he freely gave to go towards the sacrifices that they would offer to God.

Then vs 18, “Whatever seems good to you and the rest of your brethren... (as far as the money goes)... do it according to the will of your God.” As long as you’re seeking God’s will, do what seems best with it. What an important disposition to have with regards to the resources we give to the Kingdom of God via our home church, or wherever we may be giving. I believe we do well to want what we give to God to be used for the purposes of God, but it’s equally important that we have trust in the integrity of the leadership, those making decisions in our church home. I have no problems encouraging people that if they can’t trust what they’re church is doing with their money, if they’re not comfortable with the way things are going, than a) inquire about it, that’s fine, but b) find somewhere that you are comfortable. Because if you can’t trust the leadership to seek the *will* of God for the resources *of* God, than I wouldn’t be there anyway. You need to be somewhere that you are comfortable, and confident that with the resources God is providing for that ministry; they’re seeking God’s will for the direction of those resources. It’s true that after you’ve given, you’ve given to God, there are others accountable for that now, but equally true is the fact that we’re responsible on the pre-side of our giving to direct our God given resources to a direction that we believe will seek the will of God. So he tells them, “As long as you’re seeking God’s will, do whatever seems best.”

Vs19-23

Notice the emphasis again on diligence, we spoke about this last week, we’re to do what we do *thoroughly*, diligently as unto the Lord, he repeats this phrase twice here in these 3 vs between vs 21-23, that what they’re doing as unto the Lord, they need to do diligently. Of course the bible tells us that *whatever* we do, we’re to do *heartily* as unto the Lord, looking to be a God pleaser as opposed to a man pleaser.

Vs24-26

Vs24, if you’re in the ministry vocationally, you’re not to be taxed (now I like that) as a church we don’t *pay* tax, but here there would be no federal or state tax taken from the payroll so to speak. But look at the favor God gives him; he’s commended to set up a legal system according to the law of God in the land of Jerusalem. It’s his responsibility to set up magistrates, and judges, people who will enforce the law. And it becomes federal law to learn the scriptures! What a slap in the face to the foundational layers of our nation, founded on the word of God, and now they’ve taken the bible from schools, want “In God we trust” off the currency, “One nation under God” out of the pledge of allegiance. Artaxerxes makes learning the scriptures a federal law for that region, “Those who don’t know the laws of your God beyond the river, teach them. And if they don’t comply *with* them, let judgment be executed speedily on them, be it the death penalty, banishment, fines, (confiscation of goods) or imprisonment.”

Vs27-28

Prov 21:1 *“The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.”* Ezra just erupts here in spontaneous praise to God, for the goodness of God in giving him favor in the eyes of the king.

Ch8

The 1st 14 vs of this ch consist of another exercise in linguistic gymnastics that I don't feel too much like tumbling around in. Ultimately it's going to tell you that nearly 1200 men (1196) signed on with him, and when it's all finished just under 1500. Now that doesn't include women and children, but it's still an incredibly small # even compared to the 50,000 who went back with Zerubbabel, but when you consider the 2-3million Jews who were carried away into captivity it was really only a remnant who chose to return to Jerusalem. They'd gotten comfortable in Babylon, were treated pretty good, had successful businesses, no practical reason to return to the ruins of Jerusalem. Only those who had a heart for God, or who were really seeking after God would want to go, we spoke of how comfort leads to lethargy, it's so easy to just settle in where we're comfortable. God help us to be where He'd have us to be, rather than purposing to be where its most comfortable for us to be.

Vs15-20

So a few days down the road they stop by a river, and he discovers that they're lacking Levites. And since all the priests, gatekeepers, singers, people of that nature were to be of the tribe of Levi this presented a problem. So in essence he drafted some of them, we're not told what he told these guys to tell them, but I wish I knew, I'd be using it for the children's ministry and nursery, ushers, any other area of need. But he was able to rally up another 240 men approximately, to make the trip with them. Now the name "Ezra" means "Help." And it's kinda cool, in several ways you can do a study in typology whereby you see a type of the Holy Spirit represented in Ezra in how he calls men to himself, teaches people the word of God, gives these guys the words to say as they went out looking to enlist these Levites into the ministry.

So they're here by the river, they're all ready to roll and we read.

Vs21-23

Ezra found himself in quite a quandary, remember back in vs 23 of ch 7 when Artaxerxes was all, "Why should there be wrath against the realm of the king, and his sons?" Well, that was because Ezra had really been witnessing to him, telling him that as long as you're really seeking God, His hand will be upon you for good, but if you forsake Him, His power and His wrath will be against you. And now here they are preparing to leave on this 4 month journey filled with Bedouin raiders, people who made their living off of raiding and robbing these caravans out in the middle of nowhere. But if he goes to the king and requests a military escort he feels like that'll contradict his witness to the king of God's ability to protect them, His good hand upon them and all. Yet at the same time he realizes that he's responsible for the safety and protection of the little ones, the ladies, and all the possessions that they have.

I mean the king loaded them up with all these treasures and all. So what does he do? He proclaims a fast, and he humbles himself before God, and seeks from Him the right way to go about it.

He was concerned for his responsibility to the women/children and possessions, and his witness of the love/power/and protection of God upon the lives of those who fear Him and seek after Him, to the king. Now later on Nehemiah has no problem taking military escort, God working supernaturally through the natural circumstances, God does that all the time.

But here Ezra felt differently, was seeking to walk sensitively, and we like that he didn't just presume, he'd have humbled himself before the king if that was what God told him to do. But rather than just presuming in one direction or the other, he humbles himself (God love humility) he proclaims a fast, (a practical denying of the flesh) and seeks the Lord for the answer. And verse 23 "He answered our prayer." Apparently He told them to trust in Him and He'd ensure their safe arrival.

Vs24-30

This is another thing that the Holy Spirit does in our lives, he invests and entrusts various gifts and treasures, gifts of the Spirit, the treasure of the gospel in these earthen vessels of our bodies. We're to watch and keep them, that is be responsible with them until the day we stand before the Lord to give an account for them.

Vs31-34

Well done good and faithful servants, they'd all been accountable.

Vs35-36

Real quick, I had you underline or mark each time we came across the phrase having to do with the good hand of God upon Ezra's life. And if you'll look back on your own you'll begin to realize that the way that translated into his life was #1 God's favor upon him #2 God's faithfulness towards him #3 A Strengthening of him inwardly/personally, an encouragement to his inner man. #4 Success regarding his calling and #5 A Sustaining of him outwardly/practically from the onslaught of the enemy.

Think on those things, rejoice in those things, that God's good hand upon your life will be translated into His favor upon you, His faithfulness towards you, His strengthening of your inner man, His sustaining of your outer man, and success in His calling upon your life. Now God doesn't gauge success like we do, Jeremiah was successful in God's eyes, but look at all the hardship he endured. But prepare your heart to seek the Lord, to learn his Word, to be a doer *of* the Word, and to lead others by example in those things you've learned in the Word, and God will honor, and bless your life.

Prayer Points: God teach us what it means, how to be securely determined in our heart to seek after You, to learn Your Word, to be a doer of Your Word, help us to lead by example, allowing your Word to assimilate into us, becoming a changing force in us, that we might be conformed more and more into Your image. Thank You that Your hand is upon our lives for good.