

God's Hand upon God's People

Part 1

Text: Ezra 8:1-23

Introduction:

1. Ezra 7 & 8 are a wonderful testament to the truth of God's hand upon His man and His work. Six times in these two chapters we have reference to "the good hand of God" being upon God's man (Ezra), God's work and God's people (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31).
2. "Chapter 8 (like chap. 2) provides the register of those who returned as Ezra's companions (Vs. 1-14); and then records the preparations at the river Ahava for the journey (Vs. 15-30; the journey itself (Vs. 31); and the arrival in Jerusalem (Vs. 32-36)." (M.K. Hall)
3. In this chapter, we see God's hand of protection and preservation upon His people as they make the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.
4. Ezra 8 is a testament of:
 - The record of the returning remnant.
 - The godly leadership of Ezra.
 - The protecting power of God.
5. We will break the chapter into six segments for our study.

Note firstly,

I. THE SURRENDERED FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 1-14)

This section of the chapter provides a record of this new remnant of people who returned with Ezra. Ezra gathers approximately eighteen men who are heads of Jewish families who influence those within their family groups to join the expedition. The result was a total of approx. 1,515 men, plus women and children, who agreed to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. This genealogy reminds us that this remnant was:

A. Submitted to God

1. These dear men and women had heeded the call to join Ezra and return to Jerusalem. This was a huge **step of faith** for these people as most of them probably grew up in Babylon and were comfortably settled there. Many others chose to remain in Babylon and never return to the promised land.
2. The important role of the heads of homes is again emphasized in Scripture. The "chief of the fathers" are mentioned by name and then the number of men that accompanied each of them from each family group. These men were surrendered and their example had an influence on their relatives.

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- a. God could say of Abraham, “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.” (Gen. 18:19)
- b. 1 Cor. 11:3 “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and **the head of the woman is the man**; and the head of Christ *is* God.”
3. It is a wonderful thing when God works in family groups. We need to remember how important it is that Christian men who are heads of their homes be totally yielded to the Lord. Their role and place of influence cannot be overstated. When the head of the home is not surrendered to God, it makes it very hard for his wife and children to go forward for the Lord.

B. Recognized by God

1. While some names are listed, most of this remnant as with the first group of pioneers recorded in Chapter 2 are unnamed. We simply are given a number.
2. They were unnamed heroes of the faith but while their names are unknown to us each and every one of them was and is known to God.
3. God allows some to be named heroes of the faith in this life to inspire and encourage us but that is not the case for most of us. The most important thing is now whether we have a name known by others in this life but that we are known to our God and that He will reward us for faithful service.

Note secondly,

II. THE SERVANTS FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 15-20)

A. The Problem concerning Servants (Vs. 15-17)

1. Ezra’s Discernment (Vs. 15)
 - a. Having gathered the people together to the river Ahava, Ezra took time to review the people. This is indicated by the phrase “and I viewed the people”. Ezra then “found” that there was an absence of Levites.
 - b. Ezra knew the people he was ministering to and was discerning. He detected the absence of the Levites. This man was astute, alert and watchful. Blessed are the people who have wise leaders watching over them who plan, prepare and avoid rushing the people of God in decisions without prayerful forethought and.
2. Ezra’s Dilemma (Vs. 15, 17b)

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- a. There was a shortage of “ministers” (servants) for the house of God. The same problem persists in our day. The problem is not that there is a lack of work to do for the Lord but a lack of willing servants to do the work.
- b. This is why Christ commanded his disciples to pray for labourers for the harvest field. Luke 10:2 “Therefore said he unto them, **The harvest truly *is* great, but the labourers *are* few:** pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.”
3. Ezra’s Delegation (Vs. 16-17)
 - a. To address the problem, Ezra puts together a delegation of 11 men to go and seek for willing servants to join the team.
 - b. It is noted that these men were “men of understanding”. Evidently, they were mature and godly men who could be trusted with such an undertaking. How God’s work needs men of understanding in our day. Men who understand the needs of the hour and have the wisdom to find the right kind of help to meet those needs.
 - c. 1 Chronicles 12:32 “And of the children of Issachar, *which were men* that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; the heads of them *were* two hundred; and all their brethren *were* at their commandment.” Ezra sends them to a man named Iddo who was evidently a leader among the Levites and Nethinims with an appeal that they would provide them “ministers for the house of our God” (Vs. 17).

B. The Provision of Servants (Vs. 17-20)

God’s hand moved on their behalf and raised up the necessary help (Vs. 18-20). God provided:

1. A man of understanding of the sons of Mali. Who this man was we cannot be certain but he was likely the leader God raised up for this group of Levites.
2. A total of 38 Levites. It appears that these Levites were primarily from two family groups – Sherebiah (18) and Hashabiah (Vs. 19).
3. A total of 220 Nethinims. This is the only place in the Bible that informs us that these Nethinims were originally appointed to the service of the Levites by King David and his princes.
 - a. Of the Nethinims M.K. Hall comments, If the Levites assisted the priests, the Nethinims, in turn, were those who assisted the Levites. The word means “those given” – that is, given to the Levites as Temple servants.
 - b. The word first occurs in 1 Chronicles 9:2, where the first inhabitants of Jerusalem on the return from the exile were the “Israelites, the priests, Levites, and the Nethinims”. In Ezra 8:20 it is stated that David and the princes appointed the Nethinims

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for the service of the Levites. The origin of these people is not precisely known but it is generally accepted that they are the Gibeonites. (See Josh. 9:23)

- c. We could say these dear saints served the servants! Pastors, deacons and ministry leaders are just servants but these servants also need willing servants to help them. At the end of the day no matter what your role is in the house of God, it is all team work for the furtherance of the cause of Christ and the glory of God.

Note thirdly,

III. THE SEEKING BEFORE THE JOURNEY (VS. 21-23)

Before undertaking the long and dangerous journey to Jerusalem, Ezra leads the people in earnestly seeking the Lord. Ezra was a spiritual, godly leader who took steps to prepare the people of God for a spiritual undertaking.

A. Their Method for Seeking God (Vs. 21, 23)

1. The Fasting of their Seeking (Vs. 21)

This fast was:

- a. A public fast (Vs. 21a)
 - i. There is private fasting in the Bible. Christ spoke of this in Matthew 6:16-18 “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; **That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret:** and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”
 - ii. There is public fasting in the Bible where the people of God fast and pray together for a matter of special importance. Queen Esther proclaimed a fast when her life and the lives of her fellow Jews were under threat (Esther 4:16). They fasted for three days without eating or drinking! The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3).
- b. A purposeful fast (Vs. 21b)

The purpose of the fast was to:

 - i. Humble themselves before God – “that we might afflict ourselves before our God”. The word ‘afflict’ reminds us that fasting is where we deny ourselves by saying no to bodily appetites. The purpose is not to punish the flesh to

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get God’s attention as the heathen. The purpose is to humble ourselves before God and to give our entire focus to seeking Him undistracted. The word ‘afflict’ is also translated ‘humble’ frequently in the Old Testament.

- ii. Seek the Lord – “to seek of him a right way”. Fasting not only demonstrates humility before God but also is for the purpose of earnestly seeking God in prayer. Fasting and prayer are usually coupled together in the Bible and where fasting is mentioned without a specific reference to prayer, it is implied. In fact, there are certain answers to prayer that can only be obtained through fasting and prayer. Mark 9:29 “And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by **prayer and fasting.**” Fasting is best done on a day when the heart can be focused on the main prayer need the individual or church is bringing before the Lord.

2. The Focus of their Seeking (Vs. 21c, 23)

This was fasting and prayer with a purpose of seeking specific answers to specific needs for the people of God. They were earnestly seeking God for:

- a. His Direction (Vs. 21)
 - i. The right way for themselves – “a right way for us”. The idea seems to be that they were seeking the Lord for the best route across the deserts to Jerusalem.
 - ii. The right way for their families – “and for our little ones”.
 - iii. The right way for their substance – “and for all our substance”.
- b. His Protection (Vs. 22, 31)
 - i. Ezra knew there were dangers on the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (See Vs. 22 & 31) and this drove him to lead the people of God to earnestly seek the Lord.
 - ii. In like manner, there are many spiritual dangers that confront the believer in this earthly pilgrimage and an awareness of that should drive us to earnestly seek the Lord for the spiritual protection of our families.
 - iii. Psalm 5:8 “Lead me, O LORD, in thy righteousness **because of mine enemies**; make thy way straight before my face.”
 - iv. On a very basic level, we are reminded in this passage of the principle of seeking God for traveling mercies. Romans 1:9-10 “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might

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have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.”

B. The Motivation for Seeking God (Vs. 22)

1. Ezra was conscious of their testimony before the Persian monarch. They had rightly testified of the power of God to preserve, protect and keep His people. To then request a band of soldiers for protection would appear to contradict that claim. Instead of seeking help from an earthly king, Ezra resolved to seek help from the King of kings.
2. Later, Nehemiah would accept the help of soldiers from Artaxerxes. This does not indicate any less faith on the part of Nehemiah. His was a different context. Their Protection on the journey.
3. The people of God prayed and God answered! (Vs. 23) In this verse the word (“entreated) is used in the passive mood, - not so much “we intreated Him” (which was true) but “He was intreated of us”. It conveys the sense that God had heard and answered their prayer, and voices their faith that He would indeed answer their prayer through the course of their journey.
4. Ezra was a man of great faith. “Here were several thousand Jews, inexperienced in travel and warfare, carrying a fortune in gold and silver, led by a scholar, not a soldier, and planning to travel through dangerous territory that was infested with brigands, and yet their leader didn’t want an army to protect them! If anybody deserves the “Great Faith Award,” it’s Ezra!”

Conclusion: Are we earnestly seeking God that His hand of guidance and protection might be upon our lives and that of our families? When was the last time we prayed with fasting for a special need?