

Last week we ended with the Jews, who are now back in the land as a result of God bringing back of remnant, and they have just completed the house of the Lord despite much opposition from the locals who were trying to obstruct this project at every turn.

Ezra 6:15-16 ¹⁵ This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. ¹⁶ And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Ezra 6:21-22 ²¹ The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to *join* them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate *the Passover*. ²² And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

And so, what we've seen from chapters 1-6 is the progression of those who were under the authority of Babylon now being brought out by God for a specific task, not just to return to the land but to return to the land to worship and fellowship with the God who brought them into the land.

There's a tendency sometimes to think that coming into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is merely to be forgiven of sin and then hang out in the land, if you will, until Christ comes back. No, we are saved for a purpose and that is to be brought into the kind of relationship with God where we spend our lives worshipping Him and serving Him all of our days.

The Jews were reminded through the Passover, that number one, they needed a way to be made right with God and that was seen in the lamb being slaughtered for them and the blood of that lamb was the substitute for their own lives. This very Passover was not something the Jews devised, but was instituted by God Himself as the only way for their being made right with Him.

But now we come to chapter 7 and essentially what Ezra does is to go back to the beginning and rewind the events that led up to his personal journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:1-6 ^{NAU} Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, *there went up* Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah,

son of Hilkiah, ² son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, ³ son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, ⁴ son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, ⁵ son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest. ⁶ This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God *was* upon him.

And so, we're back in Babylon on our way out to the Promised land. This priest by the name of Ezra has been given the privilege to travel back to the land to help in the restoration of the temple.

By the way, why do you think Ezra goes through all the trouble to give his family history here in the beginning of chapter 7?

He was acknowledging that he was part of the true line of the priesthood of Aaron. He was able to prove his lineage back to Aaron and thus prove that he was a legitimate servant of God for the role of priest in Jerusalem.

If you're going to rebuild the temple for the Lord wouldn't you rather bring someone back who had skills in carpentry, mason work along with strong bodies who could do the labor part of this project?

Why bring back, as one of the main people, a person who was a priest skilled in the Law of Moses?

Because again, God was not bringing the Jews back to the land to build a building for the sake of building a building. They were being brought back to show the world that the true God was setting apart a people for His own possession with the express purpose of having those people honor and worship this one true God.

And this should be true of us today.

1 Peter 2:9-10 ⁹ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

But what is amazing for Ezra is how God continues to intervene in the lives of people to make sure that His will is carried out. The

very nature of man is one that will try and obstruct the will of God and reject the things of God at every turn. And since God will not be thwarted in His will He will often cause the ungodly to do that which will accomplish His will.

Psalms 135:5-12 ⁵ For I know that the LORD is great And that our Lord is above all gods. ⁶ Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. ⁷ He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; Who makes lightnings for the rain, Who brings forth the wind from His treasuries. ⁸ He smote the firstborn of Egypt, Both of man and beast. ⁹ He sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, Upon Pharaoh and all his servants. ¹⁰ He smote many nations And slew mighty kings, ¹¹ Sihon, king of the Amorites, And Og, king of Bashan, And all the kingdoms of Canaan; ¹² And He gave their land as a heritage, A heritage to Israel His people.

And in keeping with His promise to His people look what the Lord does as it relates to King Artaxerxes.

Ezra 7:21-26 ²¹ "I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are *in the provinces* beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently, ²² *even* up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed. ²³ "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. ²⁴ "We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll *on* any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God. ²⁵ "You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are *in the province* beyond the River, *even* all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant *of them*. ²⁶ "Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment."

For all intents and purposes it almost looks as though Artaxerxes is one of God's people as he is adamant about making sure that the God of heaven has His will done through the hands of Ezra. This is an amazing thing because Artaxerxes is a pagan and this amazed Ezra as well.

Ezra 7:27-28 ²⁷ Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put *such a thing* as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Ezra knew that this was not on the king's heart to serve the God of heaven in this way. He knew that only God could accomplish such a thing and he praises God for it as he is encouraged and strengthened by God's mercy and grace.

Chapter 8 of Ezra is a recount of those who came out of Babylon to return to the land. But as they are returning to the land Ezra, knowing the perils of traveling all of those miles and knowing the dangers along the way, decides to stop and have those under his care to fast and pray for a safe return to the land.

But what I find interesting in this account is his motivation for doing this.

Ezra 8:21-22 ²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. ²² For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him."

Ezra knew that if he had requested protection from the king the king would have obliged and sent troops to take him all the way to Jerusalem. But he doesn't. Why?

Because he had lifted up the God of heaven and stated that God was all powerful and able to take them all the way to Jerusalem without the help of any human agency since His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him."

What essentially did Ezra tell the king about the ability of His God?

And in many ways we do the same thing. We talk about God being able to deliver, or to protect us or meet our needs but often times we act as though He can't. This doesn't mean God doesn't use certain means that aren't miraculous in nature.

Again, look at who He uses to allow the Jews to go back to the land. A human being who happens to be a king that has the resources to bless the Jews. So it doesn't mean God has to do everything miraculously to show that He is the God who provides.

This is why we can pray to God for healing and yet he encourages us to use means like doctors and medicine for our ailments, much the same way Paul encouraged Timothy to mix a little wine with water for his stomach ailments, that I'm sure Paul and Timothy continued to pray about.

But in this case for Ezra, he decided, I'm sure after much prayer, to let the king know that as thankful as he was for all the provisions he had given Ezra for the trip, he didn't need the king to send troops to get them safely back to Jerusalem, God was more than capable of taking care of His enemies who might try to come against them.

And so, they do in fact make it safely back to Jerusalem, the work of rebuilding the temple continues and now that they are back in the land the Jews honor God by keeping all His commands and have nothing to do with the pagans and their practices, which essentially was the reason they were thrown out of the land by God in the first place and taken into captivity.

Praise God the people are back on track, or are they?

Ezra 9:1-2 ^{NAU} Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, *those* of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. ² "For they have taken some of their daughters *as wives* for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness."

Here we go again. This is amazing that God has shown mercy and grace to these people and they knew why they were going back to the land. It wasn't simply to relocate but to go back with the express purpose of honoring God in the land He had given them.

They knew what the law said about intermingling with the peoples of the land who did not belong to God and adopting their abominations.

Leviticus 18:24-30 ²⁴ 'Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. ²⁵ 'For the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. ²⁶ 'But as for you, you are to keep My statutes and My judgments and shall not do any of these abominations, *neither* the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you ²⁷ (for the men of the land who have been before you have done all these abominations, and the land has become defiled); ²⁸ so that the land will not spew you out, should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. ²⁹ 'For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do *so* shall be cut off from among their people. ³⁰ 'Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the LORD your God.'"

Remember, Ezra was not only a priest but a scribe who was skilled in teaching the law of the Lord. Do you think he had a clue regarding this particular passage? I think so, and when he gets word about the evil practices of the leaders who are intermingled with the pagans of the land he does the only thing he can do.

Ezra 9:3-4 ³ When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. ⁴ Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

This is an amazing picture and a real dilemma for Ezra. He hears about the sin of the leaders and he humbles himself before the people. Notice there is nothing said at this point about humbling himself before God. He makes a public show before the people by tearing out his hair and tearing his clothes, both acts being very dramatic.

He must have looked like a mad man and in a sense he was because he knew that the same God who had forced the people into exile, and who had now brought them back to the land in His grace, is the same God who could destroy them completely.

By this time people are beginning to notice that Ezra seems to be out of control by tearing his clothes and tearing out his hair and they begin to gather around him and he along with them sat appalled until the evening offering.

What is significant about the evening offering?

Exodus 29:37-43 ³⁷ "For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it; then the altar shall be most holy, *and* whatever touches the altar shall be holy. ³⁸ "Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two one year old lambs each day, continuously. ³⁹ "The one lamb you shall offer in the morning and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; ⁴⁰ and there *shall be* one-tenth of an *ephah* of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a drink offering with one lamb. ⁴¹ "The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, and shall offer with it the same grain offering and the same drink offering as in the morning, for a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the LORD. ⁴² "It shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the doorway of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. ⁴³ "I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory.

Ezra knew there was no escaping a confrontation with God. He sat appalled all day knowing that as the sun began to set he was forced to come before God on God's terms.

Here he would bring the evening offering for the sins of the people who were shown mercy by God as He brought them back to the land and now he has to come before God with a sin offering, knowing that the sin the leaders committed were done knowingly and continually.

You can imagine how Ezra felt. On the one hand he rejoices that there is a way to come before God as he knows God forgives sin as he brings the offering, but on the other hand he knows that bringing an offering for sin while people continue to sin is showing contempt for the grace and mercy seen in the offering.

And again, knowing the law the way he does he knows that the evening offering of the lamb is to be brought before the Lord at the tent of the meeting, knowing that according to Exodus 29:42 this is precisely where, as God says, I will meet with you, to speak to you there.

How do you face God like that? Here's how he does it.

Ezra 9:5-15 ⁵ But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God; ⁶ and

I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. ⁷ "Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings *and* our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as *it is* this day. ⁸ "But now for a brief moment grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. ⁹ "For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. ¹⁰ "Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, ¹¹ which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, "The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end *and* with their impurity. ¹² 'So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good *things* of the land and leave *it* as an inheritance to your sons forever.' ¹³ "After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited *us* less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us an escaped remnant as this, ¹⁴ shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? ¹⁵ "O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as *it is* this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

We're not told that God spoke with Ezra that evening but he instinctively knows what to do. As he is praying the leaders gather together before Ezra and we read about it in the next chapter.

Ezra 10:1-8 ^{NAU} Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. ² Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been

unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³ "So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ⁴ "Arise! For *this* matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act." ⁵ Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath. ⁶ Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. ⁷ They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem, ⁸ and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles.

Again, nowhere in this exchange do we see God giving them direction nor do they seek God to see if this is the answer. But they proceed and we're not told that God was displeased with their decision. But in this decision their sin is about to affect the lives of a lot of people, not just the people of God, but the people with whom they intermingled.

You and I, and even God, concedes that these outsiders, if you will, are not considered the people of God. But what we're about to see is the destruction of many families. From a human standpoint the women and children of these Jews who intermingled with these pagan women are going to suffer.

Imagine your flesh and blood child seeing you for the last time as you banish that child or children with their mother outside of the assembly of the land of Judah. Crying, confusion, anger, all of the things associated with such a decision. This is what sin does.

And like some newspapers that publish the names of dead beat dads, the eternal word of God records for us the very names of the one's involved. And if you count up the individual names you come up with 113 Jews who married foreign women.

And the book of Ezra ends thus.

Ezra 10:44 ⁴⁴ All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives *by whom* they had children.

These individuals were certainly guilty before God for their decisions, but it does beg the question, especially considering that this was a relatively small group of people who certainly knew the business of each other.

Where were the leaders, including Ezra, when it came to making sure that what must have been common knowledge wasn't nipped in the bud long before it got to this point?

None of this was done in secret. Marriage in those days was a celebration that went on for days. And you can bet that of the 113 men who married foreign women there must have at least been one marriage where it was done in public and with great vigor.

It is not our duty to spy on the people of God to make sure they are following after God, but when sin is out in the open it is prudent to approach such people in love with the truth.

Next time we get together we'll move into the book of Nehemiah, a contemporary of Ezra. They both served the Lord at the same time and we'll see Ezra's name pop back up in that book, though nothing of this particular incident will be mentioned.