

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Ezra 7-8: The Responsibility of the Scribe

The phrase that marks out these chapters is 'the hand of God'. We find it in 7:6, 7:9, and 7:28; then we see it in 8:18, 8:22, and 8:31. It's a reminder of what we have seen so far in the book of Ezra: that God is in charge, leading and guiding his people.

1. Introduction of Ezra (7:1-10)

The story so far (in Ezra 1-6) is that the exile was over, many of the people had come back home to Judah, and the temple had been rebuilt. Then come the first three words of chapter 7 – 'after these things'. In fact, between the end of chapter 6 and the start of chapter 7, almost 60 years have gone by, and there is a different king in Persia – Artaxerxes. We don't know much about what happened between the completion of the temple at the end of chapter 6 and the start of chapter 7, although it's in this gap that the events described in the book of Esther take place in Persia with Artaxerxes' father, Xerxes.

In any case, over half-way through the book that bears his name, we're finally introduced to Ezra! His family tree is given (7:1-5), which is important, because it shows he is a *priest*, a direct descendant of Aaron (7:5). But we learn something else in 7:6: he's a *scribe*, a scholar of the word of God. We're also told that the king granted him his request (7:6b, although we're not told what the request was), and 7:7-9 then provides an overview of his trip to Jerusalem, the details of which are fleshed out in 7:11-8:36.

7:10 is key to this opening section. Ezra *studied* the law, he *did* the law, and he *taught* it to others. He's a scholar, but he's not wrapped away in the safe cocoon of his scrolls: he also *lived* and *taught* what he studied. What the people of God needed at this time was not an entertainer, or a managing director, or a therapist, or an entrepreneur, but someone who was soaked in the word of God. And not

just soaked in it, but who also *did* what it said, and *passed on to others* what it said.

Ezra was exactly who was needed. The people had lost touch with God's law. But Ezra had made it the basis of his life and worldview. And he came into his own as God's person of the moment. Just one person can be enough. That should be an encouragement to us. One person who knows the word of God, and lives the word of God, and teaches the word of God can be enough. It only takes one and a family can change. It only takes one and a workplace can change. It only takes one and a government department can change. It only takes one and a nation can change.

2. Commission of Ezra (7:11-26)

What follows is a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra. It allowed all Jews, including priests and levites, to return to Jerusalem if they wanted to do so (7:13). Ezra was also given money and gifts for the temple (7:15-24). The overriding concern, however, is Ezra's *religious* duty. The emphasis of the passage is on the *law* of God. Ezra is described in relation to the law in 7:11-12. It also looks from 7:14 as if Ezra was sent to find out how the people were doing in following the law. And he was given authority to appoint judges for the people, to teach the law, and punish those who disobeyed it (7:25-26). That's his commission. How does he respond?

3. Response of Ezra (7:27-28)

Now Ezra himself speaks (7:27-28). He blesses *God* who has put these things in the king's heart. It was the *Lord* who received the ultimate credit. There is *the* King behind the king.

4. Companions of Ezra (8:1-14)

The next section then lists others who were returning to Jerusalem with Ezra – about 1500

men, not counting their wives and children, which would have increased the total to about five or six thousand.

5. Journey of Ezra (8:15-36)

The journey itself is hardly described. He was taking 6,000 people 800 miles through the desert, in the middle of the summer, with tons of silver and gold! And yet it's given only two verses (8:31-32). It might be a comfort to hear that Ezra found what many of us find when we're going on a long journey: what comes *before* the journey itself can be more stressful and demanding than the journey itself!

(a) His careful preparation (8:15-20)

Before they set out, they camp for three days, and Ezra discovers there are no levites among them (8:15). He needed them to carry the treasure which was for the Lord's temple. He wanted to do things appropriately, even if it took more time and effort. The passage goes on to show how Ezra sends men off to recruit some levites, and they return with 38 levites and 220 temple servants (8:16-20). Ezra had studied God's law, and he was concerned with *holiness* not easiness. He takes extra time and effort to *prepare*, to make sure things are done right. He knows it's his job to lead these people back to the land, and it'll be his job to establish the scaffold of the law for their lives. So, he's got to show them that living under God's law works. The journey is Ezra's great visual aid to show that if you obey God's word his gracious hand will be on you.

(b) His humble prayer (8:21-23)

He didn't want to begin the journey without asking for God's protection (8:21). It would be 800 miles, and it could be dangerous, and it was summer so it would be hot, and they were carrying treasure. He could have asked for a military escort, but he says he was too ashamed to do so (8:22)! Ezra means 'God helps', and he lives up to his name. He's determined to live out his faith. The key phrase is in 8:21 – 'humble ourselves before God'. They felt totally dependent on God. And so they pray, and they fast to reinforce their prayer. The authenticity of our prayers will

flow out of our sense of dependence on God; men and women pray because they know they depend on God – which is a challenge for those who live in a self-reliant, self-sufficient culture. We depend on God for all things: for family, for food, for each breath, for each heartbeat. We have nothing we have not received as a gift from God. Ezra didn't presume on his own ability, and he didn't even presume on God's care. They humbly turned to God, and we're told that God honoured their request (8:23).

(c) His wise delegation (8:24-30)

He doesn't do it on his own; he delegates! He sets out who is going to be responsible for looking after the treasure they had received from the king and others (8:24-25). They were all weighed out and Ezra said they would be weighed again when they got to Jerusalem (8:29-30). Interestingly, although Ezra was happy to trust God to get them to Jerusalem safe and sound, he didn't trust those who were carrying the treasure! He was realistic about human greed and put in place a system of accountability for financial matters.

(d) His safe arrival (8:31-34)

They arrived safely, and all the items were weighed again (8:33-34).

(e) His thankful sacrifice (8:35-36)

Ezra made time to pray before the journey began. And after the journey is over, he makes time to give thanks and sacrifice to the Lord.

•••

What about the journey of our lives? What about the journey of our church? How do we conduct ourselves on the journey? By making sure things are done appropriately, by taking time to commit ourselves to God's care, by giving thanks. Let's pray we learn these things in our lives, and in the life of the church.

Of course, the real hero of the story is not Ezra, but God. He's the one whose hand was on Ezra through it all, and whose hand is on all those who, like Ezra, make his word their home. Amen.