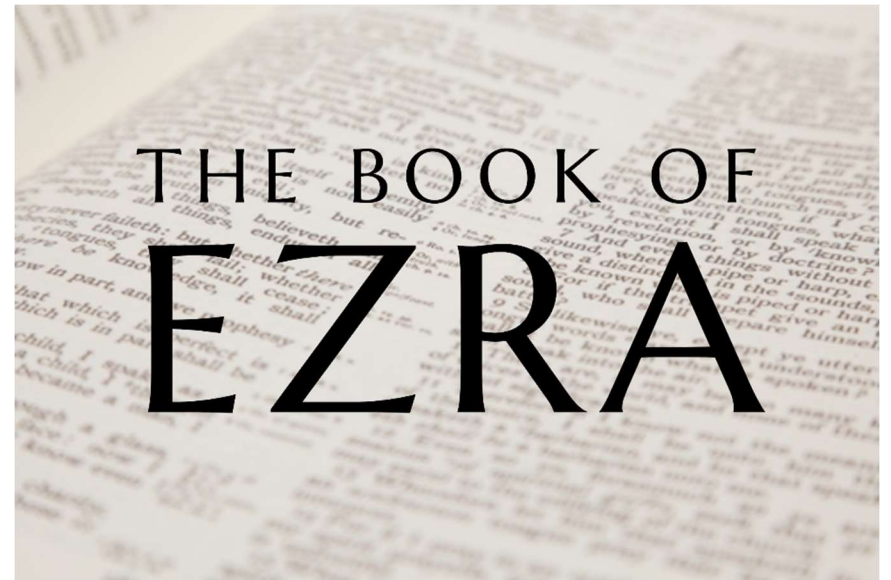


FAMILY WORSHIP BOOKLET



God tells us that Ezra read from the book of the Law,
day after day, and that the people of God
were filled with joy!

Friday – Ezra 8:21-23 – Fasting.

As Ezra prepared to lead an expedition from Babylonia to Jerusalem, he gathered those who were going at the side of a river or canal that ran into the Euphrates. As we have seen before, King Artaxerxes provided him with enormous amounts of money and supplies for the support of the worship of the LORD. Ordinarily, carrying large amounts of treasure the many hundreds of miles to Jerusalem would have been very dangerous. Without armed guards, such a group of travelers was likely to be attacked by bandits on the vast stretches of road between towns and cities. The prudent thing to do would be to ask Artaxerxes to provide soldiers to escort the returning Exiles. However, Ezra was too embarrassed to do so. He had spoken so confidently of the LORD's provision for His faithful servants, that he feared asking the king for aid in this matter would make it appear either that the LORD does not keep His promises or that Ezra lacked faith. If the Jews were to make it safely to Jerusalem, the LORD would have to guard them. So, Ezra proclaimed a fast. Fasting is a spiritual discipline encouraged in Scripture that consists of the denial of food (or, perhaps, some other comfort or enjoyment) to the body. It can be a sign of repentance or of seeking the LORD's will in general.

Fasting demonstrates faith in God's power to sustain us, and tells the flesh that even its legitimate needs and comforts are second to our spiritual needs. Ezra and his followers fasted and prayed that the LORD might protect them on their journey. As we will see in the days to come, Ezra's expedition made it safely to Jerusalem with all the treasures for the Temple - an extraordinary feat in that age. Truly God heard their prayers and kept them safe on their journey.

Q1. What is fasting?

Q2. Why did Ezra proclaim a fast?

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Thursday - Ezra 8:15-20 - Levites Needed.

As Ezra prepares to lead this expedition of returning exiles, he gathers them at "the river that runs to Ahava". We do not know precisely where this was but can safely assume it was a small river or canal that ran into the Euphrates. While they camped there for three days, Ezra took account of who had gathered with him. While there were some priests, like himself, he found there were no other Levites to help with the Temple worship.

As we see both from Ezra's recognition that faithful preachers of the Word were needed in Jerusalem, and from the revelation of God found in the book of the prophet Malachi, the worship in the Temple needed to be reformed. The priests and Levites in Jerusalem had become lax in their attention to the details of sacrificial worship and were neglecting faithful proclamation of God's Word. Ezra would need the help of both priests and faithful Levites. He sends for wise men who intercede with Iddo, a leading Levite living at Casiphia (probably a town not far from Ezra's encampment). With Iddo's aid, Ezra recruits thirty-eight Levites plus two hundred and twenty Temple servants. (Again, these were most likely the descendants of the Gibeonites who did menial work in support of the Temple.)

Just as in Ezra's day, it is not enough that the Church have teachers and other leaders. Each Christian receives spiritual gifts from the LORD to use in His service. These are not the same gifts, from one believer to the next. Rather, the LORD gives a variety of gifts to different Christians so that we can serve in a variety of ways. In this way, the ministry of the Word is enhanced and supported, and the Gospel is able to reach more and more people - even to the ends of the earth.

Q1. Why did Ezra need Levites to accompany him?

Q2. Why does the Church need people with a variety of gifts?

Monday - Ezra 7:11-26 - The Decree of Artaxerxes.

Because of God's grace and providential care of His people, Ezra finds favor in the sight of Artaxerxes king of Persia. The king and his seven counselors (men who held a hereditary position close to the king because they were of the families of the seven conspirators who overthrew the impostor, Smerdis, and placed Artaxerxes' grandfather, Darius, on the throne) were determined to support Ezra. According to this decree: 1) Ezra and any Israelite who wished to accompany him could move to Jerusalem; 2) the king and his counselors made donations to finance sacrifices on behalf of the king and his sons, and to beautify the Temple; 3) Ezra could raise revenues from the taxes of Babylonia and from freewill offerings; 4) the officials of the Province Beyond the River (roughly the modern-day countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel) were to provide treasure and goods for the Temple; 5) the Temple and the priests, Levites, and others who labored in it were to be tax-exempt; and 6) Ezra had authority to appoint magistrates and judges throughout the province to govern the worshippers of the LORD.

We saw back in chapter four that opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem resulted in Artaxerxes' command that construction on the walls cease. As the names of the adversaries in that passage are not the same as those who show up in Ezra's and Nehemiah's time, we must conclude that this occurred earlier in Artaxerxes' reign. The people of Ezra's day understood Artaxerxes' words recorded in verse eighteen to be a reversal of his previous command. The Jews could now rebuild the walls of Jerusalem - a project that would be finished under Nehemiah's leadership after further opposition. Thus, it is generally understood that this decree of Artaxerxes is the "word to restore and build Jerusalem" mentioned in Daniel 9:25. It was no coincidence, therefore, that so many Jews were looking for the coming of Messiah's Kingdom in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry, for this decree came in 458 or 457 B.C. As the LORD revealed to Daniel, 483 years later, this is when the public ministry of Jesus Christ began. Three and a half years after that, He put an end to sacrifices by offering Himself up as the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of His people. After another three and a half years, the Gospel went forth to the nations following the stoning of Stephen. The LORD is faithful to keep His promises.

Q1. What five things are found in the king's decree concerning Ezra and the Temple?

Q2. Why is the timing of this decree important?

Tuesday - Ezra 7:27-28 - Ezra's Praise.

The most common theme of Ezra is the theme of God's sovereignty. The LORD is in control of all things. As we have seen, He even uses the actions and intentions of mankind, whether noble or sinful, to accomplish His righteous will. Recognizing this, Ezra breaks forth into praise of the LORD. It was the LORD who put it into the heart of the king and his counselors to support the worship and to finance the beautifying of the Temple. It was the LORD who gave Ezra the courage to make his requests to the king and his officials. It was the LORD who guided and upheld Ezra as he gathered other Israelites to make the journey to Jerusalem with him.

As we consider the events recorded in Ezra, we find yet another remarkable providence. Back in chapter three, we read that the people rejoiced at the laying of the foundation of the second Temple. At the same time, many of the elders, who could remember the former glory of the first Temple, wept and mourned, for it did not appear that this new Temple could ever be as beautiful as the first one had been. However, we also noted that the prophet Zechariah had cautioned the people not to despise the day of small things. To their eyes, the new Temple might not have looked promising, but the LORD would accomplish great things with it. Of course, the greatest things for which that Temple was used involved the coming of Christ Jesus, but, as if to offer reassurance that He is able to keep His promises, the LORD provided for the beautifying of the Temple far beyond the expectations of the generation who saw its foundations laid.

If the LORD kept that promise to build His earthly Temple, surely, He will keep His promise, found in Matthew 16:18, to build His Church against which not even the gates of hell can prevail.

Q1. For what does Ezra praise the LORD?

Q2. What other remarkable providence do we find?

Wednesday - Ezra 8:1-14 - The Second Wave.

In today's reading, Ezra records the names of several leading Israelites who accompanied him from the lands of exile to Jerusalem. Many of these leaders bring with them significant numbers of men. As most of these likely brought wives and children with them, we can estimate that several thousand men, women, and children prepared to make the journey to Jerusalem. This represents the second major wave of Jews returning to Judah from exile.

The Babylonian Exile began in 605 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah and took many people from the leading families into captivity in Babylon. Among these were Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (otherwise known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). Later, in 597 B.C., another larger group of Jews were taken into captivity. Among them was the prophet Ezekiel, while Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem. Finally, in 586 B.C., the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and took all but a few of the remaining Jews into exile.

Just as the exile occurred in three major waves, there were also three major waves of people returning from the Babylonian Exile. The first took place under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua after 539 B.C. The second, recorded here, was led by Ezra around 458 B.C. A third will be led by Nehemiah a little over a decade later. This reveals something of the wondrous character of God. Not only did He keep His promise to end the Babylonian Exile, He did so in a manner that demonstrates orderliness and well-roundedness. We can only stand in awe of such a God.

Q1. How many waves of exiles were taken into captivity?

Q2. In what years did these events take place?

Q3. How many waves of Jews returned from exile?

Q4. Why is this remarkable?