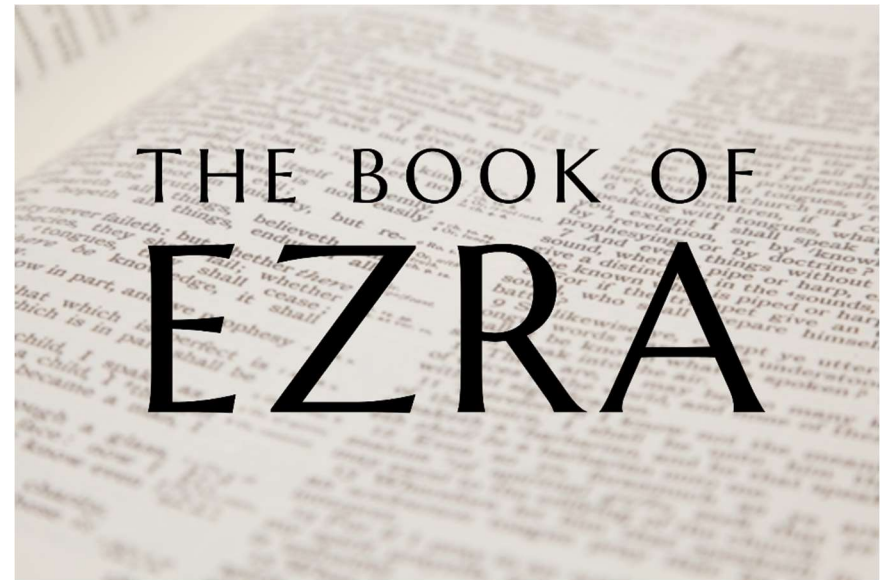


FAMILY WORSHIP BOOKLET



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 3:1-7 - Biblical Worship Re-Established

As the people settled again in the land the LORD had given to Israel, the time came for one of the great feasts during which the men of Israel were commanded to gather at the central site of worship - the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, which was to begin on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. No work had begun on the structure of the Temple, but the site had been cleared. It was possible, therefore, to build and consecrate a new altar of burnt offering (which would stand in the court of the Temple). Thus, under the leadership of Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel of the House of David, a new altar was built. From this point on, at least part of the sacrificial worship could take place according to the LORD's commands. The Feast of Booths was kept, the daily burnt offerings were carried out, the regular sacrifices took place at each new moon and the appointed feasts could be observed. They did not have to wait for the Temple to be rebuilt to do these things.

However, in order for the LORD's regulations concerning worship to be kept fully, a new Temple would have to be built. Without it, among other things, there could be no offering of incense to represent the prayers of the people, and no proper observance of the Day of Atonement. Therefore, funds gathered for the purpose of rebuilding the Temple were used to hire skilled workers and purchase the necessary materials.

It is important that we worship God. That we worship Him is far more important than whether our place of worship looks like a "church" or not. The Church is God's people, not an earthly building. As it expands into new communities, it will meet in homes, in store fronts and other convenient places. As a local body of believers grows and is organized, it will likely build a house of worship, but not having such a place is no excuse for neglecting the public worship of God.

Q 1. Do we need a church building in order to worship the LORD?

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Thursday - Ezra 2:64-70 - Ready to Work

Readers who are good at mathematics and who are careful to note such things may have noticed that there is a discrepancy between the totals of the numbers mentioned so far in this chapter and the total in verse sixty-four. Moreover, if we compare the parallel passage in Nehemiah 7, we find that Nehemiah's totals are different from Ezra's, though both say the whole assembly totalled 42,360. How do we account for this? As we piece together the information from Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, we find that each counts some families the other does not. This accounts for the differences in the numbers of specific families between the two books. Both books only specifically count families of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi. The remainder (10,777 individuals), therefore, must be people from the other tribes of Israel, bringing the total to 42,360 (on which both books agree).

The returning Israelites brought with them 7,337 non-Israelite servants, including 200 men and women trained to sing. This tells us that the returning Exiles, even in the midst of the hardships of migration and resettlement, were not impoverished, but enjoyed some luxuries. In fact, they were able to add their own freewill offerings to the funds already provided by Cyrus for the rebuilding of the Temple. God made sure the people were equipped with what they needed in order to begin construction on the Second Temple.

For us, today, as for the Israelites in Zerubbabel's time, it is not a sin for God's people to enjoy luxuries that are the fruits of our labours and of living in prosperous times. However, we should remember to follow their example and give to the LORD's work from what He has been so generous as to provide for our needs and enjoyments.

Q 1. Is it wrong to be prosperous?

Q2. How should we use the wealth the LORD has given?

Monday - Ezra 2:36-42 - Priests and Levites

Today, we continue with the count of people returning to Judah from the Babylonian Exile. Verses thirty-six through thirty-nine tell us about the priestly houses. During the Old Covenant period, only descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, were allowed to be priests in God's Temple. By the 530s B.C., it had been nearly nine-hundred years since Aaron and his sons were consecrated to the priestly office. That means there were several branches of the family. Here we find four subsets of the sons of Aaron listed among the returning exiles, including a total of 4,289 priests who would be able to serve in a new Temple.

While the priests were from the family of Aaron of the tribe of Levi, the rest of the men of that tribe had other responsibilities in connection with Temple worship. In verses forty through forty-two, we find a count of men of some other families from the tribe of Levi, including those who would be singers and gatekeepers in a restored Temple. It is worth noting that the singers mentioned here are "sons of Asaph". Asaph lived in the time of King David, who appointed him to direct the singing of praises when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem. He wrote at least twelve of the Psalms (50, 73-83).

Just as we saw in chapter one that the LORD was faithful to provide the necessary funds to re-establish the Temple, we see today that He also was faithful to provide the necessary priests and worship leaders. Even in our day, He continues to provide the materials and servants necessary for the expansion of His Kingdom and continuation of His worship.

Q1. Why is it important that priests and other Levites return from the Babylonian Exile?

Q2. Who was Asaph?

Tuesday - Ezra 2:43-58 - Servants of the Temple and of Solomon

We have seen that the LORD not only provided the material means to re-establish Temple worship, He also provided the priests and Levites who would lead and support that worship. Starting at Ezra 2:43, we see that He provided other support staff as well. Since Ezra has just mentioned the Levite singers and gatekeepers, we might be tempted to think these are more families of Levites. However, the word translated as "servants" in most modern translations (it appears as "the Nethinims" in the KJV and "the Nethinim" in the NKJV) carries the meaning of "slave" or "bondservant". Therefore, it is best to understand these to be the descendants of the Gibeonites who, by deception, made covenant with Israel in the days of Joshua (as told in Joshua 9), and were made hewers of wood and drawers of water for Israel. After Solomon built the Temple, they performed these menial tasks in support of the public worship. Despite their Canaanite background, we see these Temple servants included in the list of returning Jewish Exiles. Citizenship in God's covenant people has always been more a matter of faith than of bloodline (think of Rahab or Ruth). Here we find descendants of Canaanites included in a list of families of God's Covenant People. Similarly, we also find a list of families descended from Solomon's servants, many of whom were also foreign-born. Nevertheless, these families are listed among the people of Israel.

Descendants of non-Israelite peoples, who became Israelite by confession of the LORD as God in the Old Testament period, are the forerunners of the Gentiles who, like wild olive branches grafted onto a cultivated olive tree, are grafted onto the tree of Israel through faith in Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul makes clear in Galatians 3, a child of Abraham is not one who merely shares the blood of Abraham but one who shares his faith in the promises of God fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

Q 1. From whom are these Temple servants descended?

Q2. Why is this important?

Wednesday - Ezra 2:59-63 - Excluded from the Priesthood

With the returning Exiles also came people who could not prove their Israelite heritage. While, as we saw yesterday, descendants of Gentiles could be counted as Israelites by faith, we also need to note the importance of property rights in Old Testament Israel. If a man could not prove his lineage, he could not lay claim to the property allotted to his ancestors. Verses fifty-nine through sixty list several families or groups who could not verify their Israelite ancestry (the records having probably been lost in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple or mislaid in the decades since then). This being the case, they could not immediately receive property in the land.

An even more serious consequence of lost records was that the claims of some, to be descended from the priests, could not be verified. Since God is never pleased when His people take liberties in matters of worship, the governor (probably Zerubbabel) wisely advised that these men be excluded from the rights, privileges and responsibilities of the priesthood for the time being. Once the altar to the LORD was re-established and a High Priest consecrated, he would be able to determine the legitimacy of the claims of these families by consulting the Urim and Thummim - stones kept in the High Priest's breastplate which could be used to discover the LORD's will in particular matters.

As in the days of Zerubbabel, it is important that we keep track of who is part of God's visible Church by carefully keeping records. It is of even greater importance that we take care in regard to matters of worship, always doing things as God has revealed He wants them done and being careful to place in positions of leadership only those men who can demonstrate that they are properly qualified.

Q1. Why were these families excluded from rights of property and priesthood?

Q2. What lessons do we learn in regard to worship and leadership in the Church?