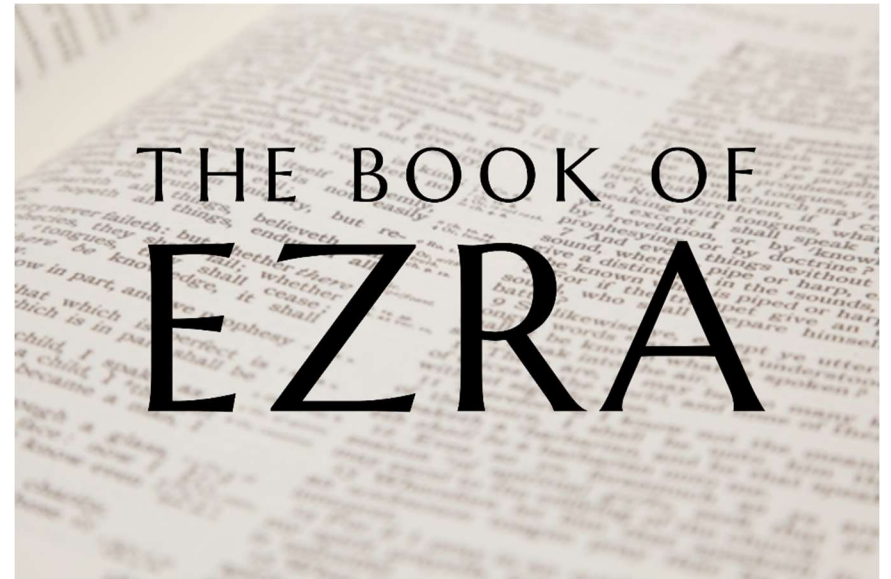


FAMILY WORSHIP BOOKLET



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 9:5-15 - Ezra's Prayer.

Upon learning that many Israelites have married worshippers of false gods, Ezra tears his clothing and fasted until evening as a sign of mourning and repentance. At the time of the evening sacrifice, he offers up a prayer to the LORD. He confesses that the LORD has been merciful and gracious. He has punished Israel for its sins with the exile He threatened to cause, should they have broken covenant with Him. Yet, He has also ended the exile and granted a measure of blessings. Though the Jewish people still live under the rule of a foreign power, they have been allowed to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. Despite these mercies, they have continued to break covenant with the LORD, especially in the matter of marriage to unbelievers.

Not every Israelite had committed the particular sin which brought about Ezra's prayer of confession - Ezra was certainly not guilty of it - but Ezra notes the guilt that is upon them all. He prays as if he, himself, is guilty of these particular sins. As a priest, he confesses humbly on behalf of the whole nation. Likewise, we may not, ourselves, be guilty of the sins we find the Church or the cultures in which we live has committed. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that Christians, as priests under Christ, intercede for the Church, the State and the culture, confessing the sins of these institutions and praying for God's mercy - both that He would forgive our sins and that He would grant reformation and restoration.

Q1. On behalf of whom does Ezra confess sins?

Q2. Why does he include himself in this confession?

Produced by Ottawa RPC to help family worship.
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Thursday - Ezra 9:1-4 - Marriage to Unbelievers.

Yesterday, we saw that Ezra's mission from Artaxerxes was accomplished. Today, we see that his mission from the LORD was just beginning. Recall from chapter 7 that Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, to obey it and to teach it to others. We noted back then that there was a special need for faithful preachers of God's Word in Judah, as the priests in Jerusalem in this period had grown lax in their responsibilities toward worship and teaching the Scriptures. As a result, the people have become faithless to the LORD and His covenants. We can learn more about these things from the Book of Malachi, for it was in this same general time period that God sent that prophet to call the people to repentance.

A problem encountered by Ezra (and Nehemiah after him), and denounced by the prophet Malachi, is that of intermarriage with unbelievers. Many of the Jews in the land have intermarried with other people groups - "the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands". In previous passages (like Ezra 6:21), we have seen that people born outside of the covenant could become Israelites through faith in the LORD. The problem we find here, then, is not that the bloodline of Israel is corrupted, but that several Israelites have not been faithful to marry within the covenant people. Throughout Scripture, we find that the LORD commands that believers, if they marry, must marry believers. Ezra learns that many Jews have ignored this and married idolaters. They have failed, therefore, to separate themselves from the "peoples of the lands with their abominations". Malachi points out that dire consequences follow when Israelites marry outside of the visible Church. For example, children of such marriages are raised by at least one idolatrous parent (see Malachi 2:10-16). Ezra is appalled at this state of affairs.

Q1. What problem does Ezra encounter after his arrival at Jerusalem?

Q2. Why is this a problem?

Monday - Ezra 8:24-30 - Holy to the LORD.

As the people prepare to leave on the journey to Jerusalem, Ezra entrusts the offerings for the Temple to the oversight of twelve priests. This is an enormous responsibility as the amount of treasure is immense. The silver, alone, was over 25 (standard US) tons. Exhorting them to guard these treasures well, Ezra reminds the priests, "You are holy to the LORD". The fact that the priests are set apart for special service to God (which is what "holy" means) should make them all the more careful to watch over the treasures which are consecrated for service in the Temple, and to see them delivered safely there.

In I Peter 2:9, the Apostle Peter tells Christians, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession". From this and related passages, we learn the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers". Everyone whose trust is in Christ Jesus is a priest under His great High Priesthood. Thus, it is right to say of Christians, "You are holy to the LORD". Like the priests of Ezra's day, Christians are set apart from the world for God's special purposes. Also like them, we have been entrusted with a great treasure. Peter reminds us that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, etc., "That you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light". We have the treasures of Christ and of His glorious Gospel. These are far more valuable than silver or gold. We must guard them, not letting them be stolen or corrupted by human ideas and empty philosophies. We must deliver them, as it were, to their proper place. In other words, we must proclaim the Gospel to the world, that the hearts in which it rests may be gathered into the Temple of the Living God - the Church.

Q1. What does it mean that the priests are "holy to the LORD"?

Q2. How are Christians holy to the LORD?

Tuesday - Ezra 8:31-34 - The LORD's Gracious Protection.

We have read previously of the search for Levites to come along on this journey, as well as of the fast Ezra proclaimed. Between these events and the general organizing of the expedition, the people are encamped by the river Ahava for twelve days before setting out. As we learned back in chapter seven, the journey would take nearly four months to complete. This is not hard to understand when we consider that this included moving whole families, likely with household goods. Moreover, there were the many tons of treasures of which to keep account, haul, and guard.

When Ezra and his followers arrive at Jerusalem, they wait three days and then deliver the treasures to the Temple. This probably allowed time for the newly arrived priests and Levites to be consecrated before entering the Temple. According to Ezra's commission to them, they bring the silver, gold, and vessels to the Temple, where it is counted and weighed.

That they are able to arrive safely, and with all these treasures still intact, is a testimony to the LORD's gracious protection, and His answer to their prayers. In fact, the language of verse 31 suggests that they did encounter trouble on the way. It could be that bandits attempted to raid Ezra's caravan, but any such attempts failed. Thus, Ezra could declare of God, "He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes along the way".

We have no guarantee from God that we will not see danger in this world. Christians are often mistreated and even killed for the sake of Christ and His Gospel. Nevertheless, He does promise to bring His Church through the dangers of this world and gather His people finally in His heavenly Jerusalem. History is rife with the accounts of Christians who, with their eyes fixed firmly on the world to come, have accomplished astounding things for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom, despite great danger and opposition.

Q1. How do these events testify to the LORD's gracious protection?

Q2. What encouragement might we take from this?

Wednesday - Ezra 8:35-36 - Mission Accomplished.

In a matter of a few months, Ezra has obtained permission from Artaxerxes king of Persia to gather exiled Jews and lead them back to Jerusalem, gained financial support for his enterprise, organized the expedition, made the arduous journey, and brought the treasures into the Temple. The last two verses of chapter 8 demonstrate the completion of Ezra's endeavors so far. Burnt offerings are brought for all the tribes of Israel, symbolizing the end of the time of exile. The other offerings would have included those which Artaxerxes requested be made on his behalf. Beyond this, the returning exiles delivered Artaxerxes' messages to the governor and other officials of the Persian government in the region, who then "aided the people and the house of God". Thus, the end of chapter 8 offers us a picture of complete success. Ezra has followed through with his instructions from the Persian king, and he has been careful to do so in a way that was also faithful to the LORD. The journey to Jerusalem is over and his mission from King Artaxerxes is accomplished.

From this part of Ezra's testimony, we can learn a valuable lesson. We have noted before that the LORD is pleased to use His earthly servants as His means of accomplishing His will. This is no less true of us, today, than it was of Ezra. When we, like Ezra, are faithful to follow through with the tasks before us in a manner that honors the LORD, we will find success in our mission of advancing the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world.

Q1. How does the end of Ezra 8 offer us a picture of success?

Q2. What lesson might we learn from this?