

AUGUST 8

Ezra 7:1-8:20

Finally, Ezra enters his own story today. Just as an overview, let me remind us of a couple of things.

First, Ezra will be leading a second “return” of people to Jerusalem, but this is a full 80 years after the first return under Zerubbabel and 57 years after Zerubbabel finished building the temple. Everything Ezra has written up until now is review. Ezra will never meet Zerubbabel in Jerusalem or on earth.

Second, Artaxerxes is the son of Xerxes (Ahasuerus). Xerxes is the guy who married a young Jewish girl named Esther. Esther probably wasn't Artaxerxes' mother; but Artaxerxes knows her and Mordecai well, and he has lived during the time God saved the Jews through Esther. Xerxes, the father, issued a decree in all of Persia that the Jews would be a favored people. This might explain some of his upcoming actions.

Third, Ezra's king, Artaxerxes, had commanded that the work on the city be stopped. It was stopped by force. I've speculated that this might have been during the time that Xerxes, his father, was warring against the Greeks and Artaxerxes was in charge of domestic affairs. Artaxerxes now seems very favorable toward Ezra and allowing the Jews to worship in the temple, but not to rebuild the city. Still, he seems impressed by Ezra. In fourteen years, Artaxerxes will have a very dear and trusted cupbearer (probably like the head butler of his palace and household security). Because of his love and trust for Nehemiah, he will send him to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Fourth, Ezra's main purpose for the book is about to begin. He has recapped the grace of God in rebuilding the temple, now he will tell of the grace of God in saving the people from corruption and enabling them to actually worship God at the temple. In every generation, even today with us, God raises up leaders to refocus His people on following Him in His purpose.

Remember to look at the charts.

Ezra 7

Vs. 1-6 This is Ezra's genealogy. Notice the phrase regarding the hand of God, and see how often you find it. Ezra was apparently a man of note. Notice that Ezra was from Babylon. This might be important since Daniel and his friends were key spiritual leaders in that area. Ezra would not have known Daniel, but he would have been raised in the schools that Daniel and his friends brought into being.

Vs. 7-10 This is a summary of the trip. You can tell by the tone of what is said, that the emphasis of this movement of people to Jerusalem would have very strong spiritual overtones.

It is hard to say when Artaxerxes actually stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It was certainly before this event with Ezra, since this was in his seventh year. Actually, he also seems strangely and amazingly “favorable” to Ezra and to the Jews and the spiritual emphasis of this mission. You wonder how Artaxerxes came to hear of Ezra.

I'm just speculating here. Usually a king co-reigned with his son, often for a decade or more. Since Xerxes (Ahasuerus), Artaxerxes' father, was busy holding parties and losing 2 million men to the Greeks, Artaxerxes was probably taking care of domestic matters. He could have issued the decree to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem during the Persian invasion of Greece and before all the problems of the book of Esther. Then, when the events of Esther took place, this would have been a major event in the entire Persian Empire that brought an end to Jewish animosity and also brought great national favor to the Jews. After Esther, the Jews became an honored people in Persia; and Mordecai, Esther's uncle, became a very important and trusted aide to

Xerxes in Susa. I would think this would account for the change in Artaxerxes's attitude. It was probably someone like Mordecai who brought Ezra to the king's attention. Later, Artaxerxes will be unusually kind to Nehemiah.

Vs. 11-26 This letter is a testimony to the grace of God. Once we read Daniel, a letter like this will make much more sense. Verse 11 seems like the king's estimation of Ezra. This entire letter was a binding, legal document in the Persian Empire and could not be altered.

Vs. 21-24 All of this provision would be necessary to accomplish what Ezra had to do. If the priests and Levites were to serve the people, they needed to be supported with food and money. Notice that there were no taxes levied against the priests or Levites. Their service and leadership in Israel was necessary, so they would not be burdened. We'll see in the book of Nehemiah that supporting these men was a major challenge.

Vs. 27-28 The question to ask is, "How did God put this into the heart of the king?" Again, reading Daniel will give us some perspective on how active God was in that mid-eastern world on behalf of His people. And too, the events of Esther had occurred just before this. Through all of this history, the spiritually perceptive saw the *steadfast love* of the Lord guiding them through this time. Notice here that Ezra is now writing himself into the narrative in the first person.

Ezra 8:1-20

Vs. 1-14 These are the people who went with Ezra. At this point, very few were Levites. There would be about 4-5 thousand people going with Ezra. Notice that Ezra was clearly the leader of this venture.

Vs. 15-20 Ezra had the company of travelers gather and camp north of Babylon. This way they could organize and see who would be going, even to the point of checking their genealogies. At this point, Ezra noted that there weren't many Levites. The Levites had no possession in Israel and their primary ministry revolved around the temple. They would be utterly dependent on the Lord and the generosity and spiritual focus of God's people. For the Levites, poverty was always around the corner. Following the Lord always takes faith.

For us as disciples reading this, we need to be alert to the fact that God is always working. In that ancient world, God was doing huge things behind the scenes. In our world, in our lives, where we live, God is still working and doing things we can't see; but we should be looking for these things and expecting His working as we follow Christ in the harvest. I think this is what abiding in Christ means.

1 Corinthians 4

This is a pretty cool chapter, especially when Paul "vents." (No pun intended)

Vs. 1-5 Notice that Paul was being criticized and judged. Do you see how Paul politely "fires back" at his critics? The critics were pointing out problems with Paul's service and poisoning the minds of the Corinthians.

Vs. 6-7 Apparently Paul and Apollos had already discussed these matters of comparisons. In chapter 16 Paul says that he tried to convince Apollos to visit Corinth, but Apollos wasn't for it. Both of them seem to have understood what the false apostles were trying to do by creating pride in the hearts of the church people.

What are the things that are written that we *go beyond*, that are meant to keep us from pride? Look at Romans 12:3. God assigns us our faith and our gifts. The church in Corinth had lots of pride because of the gifts, thinking they had superior insight. This pride affected all areas of the life of the church.

Vs. 7-13 These are fantastic verses where, I think, Paul gets a little emotional. If you want to try this, read the verses out loud several times and sort of act them out, like you were in a movie.

After a few times you get into them and get some understanding for how Paul might have dictated them.

Apparently the Corinthians were being told they were complete and no longer needed someone like Paul. Paul wasn't ready to give up.

V. 9 The *spectacle* in view here is when Roman soldiers marched their victims through the streets of Rome and led them into the coliseum to their death for the entertainment of the spectators.

Vs. 11-13 This is a fantastic recruitment ad for becoming a disciple, following Christ in the harvest. This is very close to what Jesus said His disciples would need to live through. Although all of the eleven who were with Jesus are said to have suffered martyrs' deaths, Paul is the only one we see living the life of suffering in following Christ. Much of Jesus' teaching to His disciples became true and visible in Paul.

Vs. 14-21 You could read these verses out loud too.

V. 15 is sort of sarcastic. Paul had begun this church and led many to Christ. These other teachers put themselves forward as *guides*, who were improving on what they said Paul had ineptly begun. They had *countless guides in Christ*, but only one father. In a perfect world, no one cares for you like your father. Paul was their "father" as in the worker who God used to bring the church to life, not in the sense of being their priest. All believers were directed toward the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

V. 16 This is one of two places in the letter where Paul will tell the people to imitate him (11:1). As disciples, who make disciples, this should also be our charge to those we lead. Our responsibility is to be mature in Christ and become imitators of Christ.

V. 17 The critics apparently went after Timothy. Notice the words, *everywhere in every church*. Back in chapter 1 Paul says something like this, and there will be a few other mentions of churches everywhere. This must have had something to do with an accusation against Paul, that he was teaching them things he wasn't teaching elsewhere. The implication was that Paul was holding them back. This is what the serpent told Eve in the garden, that God was holding them back from being all that they could be.

Vs. 18-21 I wonder what that fight would have looked like. I'm sure writing this was no fun for Paul.

Unfortunately, what we are reading here is the "norm" for following our Lord in the harvest. Most of the resistance and hindrance that I have seen has come from within the church, not from outside. Part of being a proven disciple requires dealing with the resistant and immature in the church, working through the church to reach the lost and make disciples, who make disciples. Since the Lord doesn't give us the option of giving up on church, we need to allow our love for Christ and obedience in following Him, to take us through the conflicts. We need to come to the place where we find likeminded believers who we can work with to see people saved and see disciples made.

Psalm 30

A couple of things are interesting in this psalm. Notice that David alternates between crying out to God and his desire to praise the Lord.

Vs. 1-3 This was probably written by David at the end of his life to be sung at the dedication of the temple. David did a lot of preparation for the temple, so having his praise heard at that event meant writing this song of testimony. In his long years as king he had many remembrances of God's deliverance during the long years of running and hiding. David had sinned and failed people around him, yet his heart's passion was to exalt and praise God publicly.

Vs. 4-5 This is the summary of David's life with the Lord, waiting for His deliverance and learning of His steadfast love.

Vs. 6-10 David did become comfortable. The last instance of this led him to number the people and bring judgment down on his people. Yet through all of his problems, God forgave and saved him.

V. 9 This “logic” is used several times in Psalms. It’s like, “How can I praise your name among men when I’m dead. You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you? So save me!”

Vs. 11-12 are the high point and v. 12 really should be at the heart of every disciple. Our glory is to sing His praise for His mercy, steadfast love and deliverance.

Proverbs 20:28-30

How would you put all three of these verses together?

I see *steadfast love* as something that is proven to us by God over all the years of our crying out and learning to wait on Him. That comes with experience, time, and maturity, and hopefully with age. Young men can glory in their strength and endurance, but maturity with Christ brings a different kind of strength and endurance. We learn to appreciate the rebuke and allow it to tame our rebellious hearts and the body of death so that we can follow Christ better.