

AUGUST 9

Ezra 8:21-9:15

Ezra 8:21-36

This section is pretty straightforward. What things do you see here? There was real danger traveling in those times, but then it wasn't the James gang, it was more like Ali Baba. The worry was heightened by the value of what they were carrying. They literally had tons of stuff.

Vs. 21-23 Notice that the fasting wasn't just for the trip. It also had to do with the heightened sense of danger and putting God on the line to protect them. Fasting is very specific to what a person is seeking from God, and it involves humbling oneself. Being proud in fasting sort of cancels itself out. Isn't it interesting what Ezra told Artaxerxes in v. 22? That message of accountability before God is a part of the gospel. Ezra wanted to fully trust the Lord as a testimony to Artaxerxes. When Nehemiah came, albeit on a different kind of mission, he took soldiers. He knew he would need the muscle and Persian presence in Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Ezra's mission was about honoring God and showing He was sufficient.

Vs. 24-30 This would have been a huge caravan with big wagons carrying tons of stuff. It is interesting that Ezra divided the gold and vessels among the 12 families of priests. They counted it out before they left, and they counted it again when they arrived. I guess Ezra's motto was, "In God we trust, all others get counted twice."

Vs. 31-34 According to Ezra 7:9, the trip took four months. You couldn't travel straight west because of the desert, so you had to follow what they called the "fertile crescent;" that is, you went north and west along the rivers and then headed south into Israel. It is interesting that they rested for three days before getting down to business. I imagine that those who walked were tired, but in great shape.

Vs. 35-36 This had to have been a very special and solemn experience for many of the returnees. It was the first time in their lives they were in Israel. This would have been true of Ezra. Their sacrifice mirrors their devotion and thanks to the Lord.

V. 36 Then they handed over the official papers to the Persian governors. These papers would have contained the letter from Artaxerxes with the commands that provided materials, money and food. Also, Ezra was given a lot of power.

Ezra 9

Vs. 1-2 It sort of makes you wonder why, if the officials knew there was a problem, they didn't take care of it themselves. The message of 1 and 2 Chronicles showed that godly leaders organized and led the people in worship. After Zerubbabel and Joshua were gone, the next generation hadn't continued to focus on remaining devoted to God. But now Ezra came on the scene. Not only did he have the authority of God and the willingness to go to the wall over this issue, but he also had the authority of the Persian king behind him. If the chief men had not agreed, Ezra could have appealed to the king and forced the Jewish leaders to comply.

Regarding this intermarriage, it is good to note that Israelite men could marry outside of Israel; but those women had to give themselves to worship Yahweh only, like Ruth did. When you see all the foreign women who "ruled" Solomon, you realize that they only *added* Yahweh to their list of "gods to worship." They continued to worship pagan gods. Verse 1 indicates that these women were still worshipping the gods of their countries. It doesn't say that the men had worshipped with them, but the next generation certainly would have been lost.

Vs. 3-5 You have to go back to Moses and Aaron to understand this reaction. Sin isn't just personal; it affects the entire group. For Ezra, this was like watching a child walk out in front of a car. His reaction to this sin wasn't extreme; it was a proper reaction to this breach of faith,

particularly knowing that the people had just returned from exile because of these kinds of sins. In a way, in our cultures our reaction to sin might be extreme in its indifference and tolerance. Sin is very serious. Anyway, Ezra might look like a nut-case, but I think he had a good estimation of the problem and its consequences.

Vs. 6-15 What a great talk with the Lord. What speaks to you in this prayer? This was a totally legitimate use of "OMG." Verses 8-9 show that Ezra had a humble, honest understanding of their situation.

V. 15 What is amazing is that this admission wasn't just Ezra's heart, but many of the people were sensing the same thing. That was a miracle.

The book of Ezra concludes tomorrow and this situation seems to be the main event in Ezra's life. God used him for this crisis in the life of Israel. We always think that success in ministry is a constantly rising peak before us. What if God's "use" for us is just one event? This idea seems to be at odds with the expectations we and others put on us, but whose expectations are we to live by? The Lord is the one we follow. If we are pleasing Him every day in the harvest, who cares what we or others think? You notice in Acts that we never hear anymore of most of the other apostles Jesus chose, like Thomas, Matthew, Phillip, Andrew, Simon the Zealot, James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus who was apparently the son of James the son of Alphaeus. How come we don't hear of these guys? Is it because they were failures? Not at all. God makes His choice in how we are used based on His purpose, not ours. We won't hear much more about Ezra. He is in the book of Nehemiah, and he was probably the guy God used to prepare the people to follow Nehemiah, but there are no more big events. Living for Christ, striving to reach the lost and make disciples, has to be our only expectation in the harvest; and really, our expectations have to be so simple and complete that they are only about Jesus.

1 Corinthians 5

This is another of those great chapters. Sometimes you hear some great truth or point of Scripture mixed into a message and years later you try to remember where it was. You know it's in the Bible, but you don't know where to start looking. As you read these chapters in 1 Corinthians, you will find a lot of these truths hidden within the pages in their original context. Here, we not only have teaching on church discipline, but some great teaching and understanding about the Lord.

In chapter 5 you need to think of the dynamics involved here. This church was largely Jewish, meaning that most of the people had lived under the laws and traditions of Judaism and Pharisaism. When they came to Christ, many of them discarded this cultural background in an extreme way. This church was also very open to different cultures. They were located in a large cosmopolitan city. The temptation would be that without the restraints of Judaism, they would flow into the freedom of their surrounding culture. Finally, as in any group of people, it is hard to stand firm in the middle of differing opinions. Like Ezra, Paul was a trusted authority who could say a strong word on these issues.

Vs. 1-2 The "infraction" was that a man was having a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Notice it doesn't say "his father's widow." Apparently the father was alive and still married to her. What was amazing here is that the church not only didn't know how to deal with the situation, they were proud of their inaction and apparently they were proud, actually boastful, of their high-minded reasoning for their indecision. Paul wasn't so tolerant. This kind of relationship was forbidden in the law. They were free from the law because of Christ, but their moral reasoning was definitely getting messed up. And remember, these were believers.

Vs. 3-5 This is Paul's clearest explanation of "delivering" someone to Satan. The best way to understand the destruction of the flesh and the spirit being saved is an example like the prodigal son. His "flesh was destroyed," in that he suffered as a result of his sin and being away from his

father's influence and protection. Suffering like this brought him to his right mind and he was saved. As we've seen before, the word "saved" has a broad range of meaning. This isn't saved as in salvation, but saved in terms of seeing truth and escaping the influence of Satan and the damage from sin.

Vs. 6-8 Since these people were Jews, Paul used the illustration of leaven, which was a big deal for them, especially around the time of the Passover. Notice that the reason to cleanse out the sin is because Christ has died for our sins and we've been saved. Paul says that every day ought to be a festival of joy and gratitude. There isn't a good reason to tolerate sin if your heart is full of gratefulness to God for His salvation.

Vs. 9-13 So, if the point wasn't clear enough, Paul explained something he wrote to them in that lost Corinthian letter. What do you think of this? The list in v. 10 seems very easy to understand, except that we don't seem to see idolatry, greed or robbing anymore. Paul is saying that if these things are part of a person's lifestyle, they are not believing. Jesus has to make a change or He is not there. As believers, we shouldn't play around with things that identify those whom God will judge.

We cannot leave the world, but we can strongly encourage people to walk with Christ. We don't need to be pharisaical in the church, but obvious sin needs to be dealt with. John also mentioned something like this in 2 John 1:7-11. It isn't the sin outside the church that is of greatest danger to us; it is what we tolerate in the church in the name of brotherhood and tolerance that can hurt us.

This might not be the "fun" stuff of discipleship, and I'm sure this wasn't the high point of ministry for Paul either. However, if we are going to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit in the harvest and so proving to be disciples of Jesus, we have to address sin, whether it is actions or attitudes, in the church. Isn't it interesting that we would have this chapter in Corinthians and the reading in Ezra on the same day?

Psalm 31:1-8

There was an old Blood, Sweat and Tears song that had this line, “I’ve been down so long, the bottom looks like up.” David had a lot of days like that. Imagine being on the run like “The Fugitive” (a TV show in the States) for 10 years, except Israel was much smaller. David did a lot of crying out, and over and over again the Lord assured him with small “salvations” and reminders that He was watching and helping. The “big” deliverance didn’t come for a while, but in v. 7 David slowly gained total confidence. And did you notice the line that Jesus quotes when He’s on the cross? It was the last thing He said.

Vs. 1-2 This desperateness was what God used to train David. Some people would have just become bitter. I notice too that this sounds a bit like Paul. In the first chapter of Philippians, Paul talks about his assurance that God would not let him be put to shame.

Vs. 3-5 David was still in danger, but the Lord had become David's only hope and salvation. Note v. 5. Did you ever think that Jesus' final words were a quotation of Scripture? I never did.

V. 6 This seems like a verse that transitions between both parts of the psalm. How could anyone put their hope in a thing, when there was a living God who heard, who made promises, and who could be trusted?

Vs. 7-8 Here again is what David learned as God allowed his heart to be tested. David learned God's steadfast, loyal love. David perceived that God was hearing his heart as evidenced by the number of times, and by the unique ways, God had rescued him.

Proverbs 21:1-2

I usually understand “king” as “the spiritual person in Christ.” These verses seem to be saying that even in our decisions, God is sovereignly directing us. The spiritual follower of Christ would welcome that. Thankfully, even though we think we are right, God weighs our hearts. The Spirit intercedes for us and He directs us.