

“The Pilgrim Life”

Ezra 8

July 12, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

On its surface, Ezra 8 is a simple story of a long journey. Ezra is the leader of a group of about 5000 Jews who decide to leave Babylon in order to return to Jerusalem, a journey of about a thousand miles that would require 4 months. If this chapter is just about the journey, the story is told in a very odd way, because only one verse of the 36 actually recounts the journey (v. 31). The majority of the chapter describes the preparations for the journey and the events occurring upon their arrival in Jerusalem.

There is something else going on in this chapter that is more significant than a simple travelogue. Ezra has chosen to tell his story in a way that describes this journey as a second exodus. Departing from Babylon to go to Jerusalem is akin to leaving Egypt for the Promised Land. Details are mentioned whose express purpose is to draw this link between the two stories. For example, Ezra is careful to mention the large number of gifts taken from Babylon to be used in the worship of the temple. Similarly, when Israel left Egypt, they were told to ask the Egyptians for gifts, and God opened the hearts of the Egyptians to give generously. Also, Ezra mentions the timing of their departure, on the twelfth day of the first month (v. 31). The first Passover, when Israel left Egypt, was on the fourteenth day of the first month (Exodus 12:6).

Why does Ezra make this link to the exodus in the way he tells his story? He does so because the exodus story is a pattern of the pilgrimage all of God's people are on, a journey from bondage to worship. It is a journey to our home with God. So this story from Ezra 8 is a story not just of historical interest, about an ancient people long since departed. It is your story too. We are on a journey to the Promised Land, our home with God forever. Our pilgrimage is not without challenges and threats, so much so that we would never make it apart from God's provision. 2020 is proving to be a particularly challenging year for many of us. We are living Ezra 8 right now, and I want to point out three important components of our pilgrimage from this chapter.

I. Planning for Pilgrimage

It is clear from our passage that Ezra is a careful planner. His first step is not to set out on the journey, but to gather the returning exiles for three days of prayer and planning. There were undoubtedly action-oriented people who grew impatient at this point, viewing these days as wasted. They might have

reasoned that this group of pilgrims could have been miles down the road to Jerusalem, but were instead just sitting there by the river. I refer to these people as the “Ready! Fire! Aim!” people.

Ezra was also a man of action, but he wisely believed that good planning was necessary before action was taken. So what happened during these three days of planning? Human nature being what it is, I’m sure that one of the challenges Ezra faced here is that some people over-packed significantly, trying to bring everything they had accumulated for several decades. There were probably others who brought too little, not thinking through clearly what might be needed on such a journey, and therefore becoming dependent on others. So there was probably some inventory assessment resulting in sending some people back to their homes to leave behind some things and others to go back home to get some essentials they had neglected to bring. I would also imagine that there needed to be a careful accounting of people and the development of some system to keep track of people lest some stragglers be left behind on the journey.

One of the results of Ezra’s planning that we are told about here is that it revealed a shortage of Levites. As a matter of fact, he had no Levites whatsoever, and this was not a small problem. Levites were the descendants of Levi whose lineage does not go back to Aaron. Aaron was also a descendant of Levi, but it was the line of Aaron that served as priests. Levites served in the temple in a variety of ways. When animals were sacrificed, there was a great deal of manual labor associated with that, and it was the Levites who performed this labor. Among their other duties were guarding the gates of the temple, providing the musical leadership for the songs of worship and general cleaning of the temple rooms and grounds. So their work was essential, demanding and non-glamorous. This is perhaps why initially no Levites offered to join these pilgrims on their journey back to Jerusalem. They had been living in Babylon for several decades by now, resulting in multiple generations of their family living there. Some had undoubtedly prospered there, and leaving Babylon for the rigors of this journey and work in the temple would have required a significant sacrifice.

Anyone who has leadership responsibility in the church can identify with the challenge facing Ezra. We often encounter a similar situation in which volunteers go lacking, even though the work is essential. The temptation when that happens is simply to give up. Ezra doesn’t do that. He considered what his best strategy for recruitment might be, and decided to enlist the help of other men of influence. He names them all in verse 16 and then sends these men to a man named Iddo and his brothers. Apparently, Iddo and his brothers had some special connection to the Levites. Iddo is asked to approach the Levites and is even told what to say as he does so. The strategy works, and Ezra is quick to give the credit to God. Their recruitment success was accomplished **“by the good hand of God”** (v. 18).

Let's pause for an application before moving on. Like Ezra, we are all on a pilgrimage to the Promised Land, to heaven. And like Ezra, we face challenges such as his challenge of a lack of Levites. Planning is an essential part of our pilgrimage. What does that planning look like? Very often, it is simply making a decision about a next step to take. I frequently find myself asking people the question, "Is there some step God is calling you to take as you deal with the challenge you are facing?" When that question is answered after prayerful consideration and getting good counsel, it almost always brings hope as progress is made. So what challenge are you facing now? Is there some step God is calling you to take?

II. Praying for Pilgrimage

Before their departure, Ezra calls for a time of prayer and fasting, **"that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods"** (v. 21). The need for prayer was all the greater because the journey would be made without the armed guards that would normally be expected for someone of Ezra's standing, especially when we recall that Ezra had the king's authorization for this trip. Ezra goes on to explain why the king's soldiers would not be accompanying them. It seems that Ezra had been witnessing to King Artaxerxes, telling him, **"The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him"** (v. 22). In other words, as Matthew Henry summarizes this, "Those who seek God are safe under the shadow of his wings, even in their greatest dangers, but...those who forsake him are continually exposed, even when they are most secure." His witness to King Artaxerxes was a bold witness, claiming essentially that Israel's God is the true God, superior to the Persian god. In giving such witness to the king, Ezra has painted himself into a corner. How can he now ask Artaxerxes for a military escort when he has so boldly said that God would protect his people? So for the sake of his witness to the king, he refuses to make such a request.

It is striking that in just a few years, Nehemiah will come to the opposite conclusion. When he was preparing to depart Persia and lead another group back to Jerusalem, he specifically asked for a military escort (Neh. 2:7-9). Was Nehemiah guilty of not trusting God in this matter? I don't think so. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were mature and gifted leaders who trusted God. Each made the decision he thought best at that time and in his particular set of circumstances. This should be a lesson to us today, a lesson not to canonize our own conclusions. Do you know the word "canonize"? A canon is a rule, so to canonize something means to make it a rule for everyone. It would be a mistake for us to make Ezra's practice here a rule and say that when God's people face danger we should never ask for help from unbelievers, but should instead just trust God.

Christians frequently differ on important issues, but we are called not to pass judgment on other Christians who might come to different conclusions on these issues that are not threatening to the core of the faith. There is an example of this in the New Testament in the issue of Christians deciding whether it was right to eat meat that had been offered to pagan idols. Paul told them not to pass judgment on other Christians because of the decisions they made about this eating of meat. He said, **“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls”** (Romans 14:4). When it doesn’t concern a matter that is clearly commanded in the Bible, Christians are called to be civil and to show tolerance for others who might come to different conclusions. These would include matters like schooling choices for our children, political candidates to receive our votes, and myriad lifestyle decisions from clothing to vacations to the cars we drive. Don’t canonize your conclusions and make them a rule for everyone else.

Ezra’s conclusion that he should not ask for a military escort did leave him and his entire company vulnerable. They were carrying a large amount of treasure, and such news would have been impossible to hide. It was a long journey, offering many opportunities for brigands to attack. The one verse that describes the journey does give indication that they experienced threats along the way, but God **“delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way”** (v. 31). And their only defense against these threats was the hand of God. It is prayer that moves the hand of God, **“so we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty”** (v. 23).

So in this pilgrim life we are currently living, we plan and we trust God. Both are essential. We trust in the Lord and faithfully follow through on the God-given responsibilities we have.

III. The Destination of our Pilgrimage

The arrival of Ezra’s company in Jerusalem provides us with another parallel to the exodus event. The text records that they waited three days there before doing anything, reminiscent of the three days the Israelites spent on the banks of the Jordan River just before crossing it into the Promised Land (Josh. 3:2). After three days, Ezra’s party offered burnt offerings in worship to the Lord.

The Bible is filled with stories that explain to us the meaning of all the important words of the Bible. One of the most important words in the Bible is the word “salvation,” and the exodus story is the main one used to explain that word. It teaches us that salvation is *from* something and *to* something. Salvation is *from* the bondage of sin. The people of Israel were trapped by the power of Pharaoh. No human deliverer was adequate. Do you remember the

result of Moses' early attempts to deliver his people? He went to Pharaoh and said, "God says, 'Let my people go.'" Instead of letting them go, Pharaoh concluded that all this talk about being let go arose because they weren't busy enough. So he ordered that their quota of bricks be maintained but that they be required to forage for their own straw required to make those bricks instead of supplying it to them himself. It was an impossible task. That's the way bondage to sin feels. It is a powerful enemy like Pharaoh. We cannot deliver ourselves, and no other human can do so. But Israel was delivered, by the death of a lamb, the Passover Lamb. We are delivered from the power of sin, too, by the death of the lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, our Lord Jesus.

The exodus story also teaches that we are delivered *to* something. Moses told Pharaoh, "God says, 'Let my people go that they may serve me.'" The word "serve" means to worship. Salvation doesn't mean that we are freed up simply to do what we want to do. That would mean that we are still in bondage to our own sinful nature. True freedom occurs as we are enabled to do what we were created for, and that is to love and worship God. As I've said many times in the past, God doesn't ask us to worship him because of a need within God. Rather, he asks us to worship him because of a need within us. Salvation is not a "Get out of Hell Free" card. It is being saved to worship. That is the destination of our pilgrimage, just as it was for Ezra's company.

This worship is pictured well by the activity of these returned exiles. They "**offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel**" (v. 35). The Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer writes helpfully about the meaning of the burnt offering. "The burnt offering is the offering which expresses holding nothing back from the Lord: hence its Hebrew, *olah*, the going up, so called because the sacrificial beast in its entirety was consumed on the altar and ascended in smoke." This is our destination, our heaven, our purpose.

We can only do this because God has first offered himself to us. He is the offering for sin that frees us from sin's bondage. He has given himself completely to us.

CONCLUSION:

There is a scene from the old movie *Ben Hur* that summarizes well this goal of our salvation. Ben Hur was a slave of the Romans, forced to man an oar in the belly of one of those big Roman ships propelled by several dozen rowers. In one scene, a Roman officer comes aboard to motivate and lecture these slaves. His concluding words to them are "Row well and live." If you perform well, you will live. There are many living under that bondage. The gospel says, "Jesus has performed well for you. Trust him and live." And to live is to worship and love well. That is our destination as pilgrims.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Ezra 8

1. What is the longest trip you've ever taken or the longest time you've been away from your home? What challenges do you imagine Ezra faced as he planned for a trip of about a thousand miles, taking four months, and including around 5000 people?
2. Ezra met these challenges with good planning and prayer. What is a challenge you are facing in your life right now? Is there a step God might be calling you to take to address that challenge?
3. Ezra decided not to ask the king for a military escort, while in just a few years, Nehemiah will make a different decision and ask the king for just that (Neh. 2:7-9). Were they both right, both wrong, or one of them right and the other wrong?
4. It was mentioned in the sermon that we all have a tendency to "canonize" our own conclusions. That is, we make a rule that others should do just as we've done in various situations. This difference between Ezra and Nehemiah teaches us that we should not do that in areas where the Bible doesn't speak clearly. We are not to judge others for different decisions they might make. How do you see that applying in our day?
5. In these two areas of planning and trusting God, most of us are naturally better at one of those than the other. What happens if you are emphasize planning to the exclusion of trusting? What happens if you emphasize trusting to the exclusion of planning? Which are you more naturally prone to?
6. The destination of our pilgrimage is worship, indicated by the fact that they worship upon their arrival in Jerusalem. What does that teach us and how does that apply to your life right now?