

Return (Ezra 7-8)

Part 1

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[00:00:01] So shall we read together from chapter 7 of the book of Ezra, beginning at verse 6.

This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. And the king granted him all his requests according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him. And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethanyims, unto Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, [00:01:04] and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem according to the good hand of his God upon him. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

The last two verses of the chapter.

Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this into the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord, which is in Jerusalem. And hath extended mercy unto me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. [00:02:06] And I was strengthened as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

Passing on into chapter eight.

Verse seventeen.

And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Cassiphia. And I told them what they should say unto Iddo and to his brethren the Nethenims at the place Cassiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God. And by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, [00:03:04] of the sons of Malai, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Shearabiah with his sons and his brethren, eighteen, Hashebiah, and with him, Jesiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty. Also the Nethenims whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethenims, all of them were expressed by name. Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava that we might afflict ourselves before our God to seek of him a right way for us and for our little ones and for all our

substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way, [00:04:02] because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him, but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. So we fasted and besought our God for this, and he was entreated others. Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Shearabiah and Hashebiah, and ten of their brethren with them, and weighed unto them the silver and the gold and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king and his counsellors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered. I even weighed unto their hands six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels and a hundred talents, and of gold and a hundred talents, and twenty basins of gold of a thousand rams, [00:05:01] and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold. And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the Lord, the vessels are holy also, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers. Watch ye and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel at Jerusalem in the chambers of the house of the Lord. So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels to bring them to Jerusalem, unto the house of our God.

Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem, and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. [00:06:06] And we came to Jerusalem and abode there three days. Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Merimoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them was Josabed the son of Jeshua, and Noah the son of Benueh the Levite, by number and by weight of every one, and all the weight was written at that time. Also the children of those that had been carried away which were come out of the captivity offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats for a sin offering, all this was a burnt offering unto the Lord. [00:07:04] And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side of the river, and they furthered the people and the house of God. It has been well said, I think, that the day of Ezra was a day of return.

There was a return to the land, return to the God of Israel, Jehovah Elohim, there was a return to the divine center, and perhaps in a very touching manner, a return to the authority of the word of God.

[00:08:02] I think there's much that we can learn from that.

Isaiah, perhaps looking on to a future day, gives the principle when he says that a remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God.

These were a feeble folk in themselves, these that had responded to the proclamation of Cyrus, king of Persia, to make this journey up to Jerusalem. So many had got established now in Babylon, so many preferred an easy life rather than take this journey and to face difficulty in a land that was overrun and desolate.

[00:09:04] It was a challenge to their faith and to their confidence in Jehovah, but I say they were a very feeble lot.

When you read the total number, the whole congregation together was 42,303 score, besides servants and maids in the second chapter. Compare that with the 600,000 that came up with Moses

out of Egypt, or compare it with the 450,000 fighting men alone in the tribe of Judah in the palmy days of Solomon.

These were just a remnant, feeble, despicable in the eyes of the onlookers, the heathen nations, but to whom had they returned? [00:10:04] They had returned unto the mighty God.

God was on their side. God was with them. And it's beautiful to see that they began with God.

I don't want to encroach upon our brother's territory this afternoon, but they began with God and the first thing they did was not to set about putting up their own houses and making themselves comfortable, but they began with the altar of God. They set up the altar upon his bases.

That means, for one thing, that they placed themselves under the security of the wing of Jehovah. Yes, that was one thing. But it also implied that they put God first.

And it was God's interest that they put Paramount.

[00:11:06] And they began the serious matter of their corporate position, you see, as gathered around the name of Jehovah. And here it was that they could offer their sacrifices and meet together. Not yet the house of the Lord. It took some time, as we were reminded this afternoon. But there was the altar. There was the foundation. There was the basis laid for their corporate position, the center of their gathering. They had returned to the divine center.

They could look back to the palmy days of the kingdom of Solomon, when Solomon reigned from the river, even to the land of the Philistines, [00:12:04] and beyond, even unto Egypt, yes.

They could look back to that wonderful time of Solomon's glorious temple and to those wondrous days when the temple was dedicated and thousands of them met together to praise Jehovah. But now, what was it?

The city was destroyed, the temple was demolished, and everything around them was desolate, and their hearts might well quail within them.

Well, beloved friends, we too can look back. We can look back to Pentecost, when the Spirit of God was working in mighty power on this earth, [00:13:01] when thousands were brought in repentance to the feet of our Lord Jesus, when assemblies of God's people were established in the midst of paganism, and there was a mighty witness to the power of God. You say, it's all gone. We were reminded this afternoon, and it's perfectly true, that as far as the outward testimony is concerned, the Church of God is in ruins today, broken and desolate.

And what is worse, perhaps, not only brokenness, characterizing the corporate testimony today, weakness, but individually, there's that complacency and indifference, there's that self-satisfaction, [00:14:01] there's that worldliness that is creeping in upon the people of God, and modernism is sapping the very foundations of the faith.

Yes, but we have returned to the mighty God.

And let us not forget that if the outward evidence of the power of Pentecost is not visible today, yet

the truth that was so powerfully declared at Pentecost is still for us to enjoy today.

And what was that? We read about the Apostles' Doctrine. That was what brought those assemblies together. They continued in the Apostles' Doctrine, and in fellowship, and the breaking of bread, and in prayers. [00:15:02] But what was the doctrine?

What was it?

The fact that the right hand of God was our risen Lord, a risen man in the glory of God, and a divine person here on earth, the Holy Spirit of God.

Those things are still true. Lay hold of them, my brethren, my sisters.

There's the wonderful power to be found in the fact that we seek in our measure to answer to God's purpose for us, and that our Lord, God's right hand, is glorified, and all the power of that risen Lord is made available to us in and through the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

[00:16:14] Now, some of us can remember, the older ones here, a brother whom we esteemed years ago, a brother George Cox of Luton. And I remember him saying, many years ago at Portsmouth, he was quoting something that he'd read that had struck him forcibly at the time. He said, There is no community that has ever been able to retain in its original freshness and power any truth that has been committed to it beyond that generation to which it was first committed. You see, blessing has been given, but blessing has slipped away in the second generation. [00:17:08] And where are we today? The second generation?

We're at the end of this present dispensation, end of the end of the church's history on earth. The Lord Jesus is about to appear.

And what we need is to get back to him.

And Jeremiah speaks of the seeking out the old paths wherein is the right way.

God does not change.

And God doesn't restore to its original power perhaps what he gave in the beginning.

[00:18:07] But God does restore. And if we on our part only turn to him and seek his face and desire to walk in accordance with his precious word, we shall find that the mighty God to whom we have returned is still the same. The same in his power and grace as was manifested when he brought his people up from Egypt and led them through the wilderness. Yes, God is the same.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Redeemer, is still the same. His compassion, his sympathy, his understanding, his mercy are still the same. [00:19:02] And it is for us to prove it in our individual lives as well as in our gathering together.

Now, as we read the book of Ezra and as we think of ourselves, we realize how quickly early zeal faded away.

It was so in the case of these returned captives from Babylon.

Soon they listened to the enemies that we were reminded of this afternoon.

Soon their eyes were off their mighty God.

They were taken up with their own things and they ceased to build. [00:20:03] And then it was that God intervened. Through lack of faith, their hands fell down and they gave up. But through the voice of the prophets, they were stirred up. It's beautiful to see that the same God who had stirred up Cyrus to put it into his heart to allow these Jewish people to make the journey up to Jerusalem, the same God stirred up these prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to exercise the people and to assure them of the Lord's presence with them. I think there's nothing more beautiful in the word of God than to listen to the voice of Haggai and Zechariah encouraging the people of God and pointing them on to the future and assuring them that the Lord was with them [00:21:06] no matter how difficult and trying the present circumstances might be. Listen to this.

I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts, according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you, fear ye not.

Wonderful assurance, that. A cluster of blessings, a threefold cord that cannot easily be broken. The Lord was with them, that despicable little remnant, taunted of their enemies, but God was with them and his word was still to be followed and to help them, to guide them. [00:22:04] And my spirit remaineth among you. Those things have not been removed from us. The Lord is still with us. The Lord's presence, we're gathered to his name. And his word we still have with all its refreshing power, all its cleansing effect, with all its guidance upon the difficulties of the modern pathway. His word remaineth and his spirit remaineth with us. Let us take courage. Let us follow the example of these returned exiles and let us seek to answer to the mind of God.

You see, just as these people, just a remnant of his people, [00:23:08] made this journey to seek to establish a witness for God in the wilderness of his land, so at the beginning of last century a remnant of his people were gathered out, out from the ecclesiastical confusion of Christendom to be gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus in all its simplicity and power. Well, let us value that and hold it fast.

Well, we were reminded that the building was completed, that we have in chapter 6, I think it is.

And it's beautiful to see that Ezra now comes forward.

[00:24:04] I'd like to say a little bit about Ezra's journey because he was a man of God. We read of him that he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.

We read that he had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments. He was a vessel meat for the master's use.

Prepared of God, he had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and not merely to become acquainted with the word of God. Well, I have no doubt about that because as a ready scribe, [00:25:02] he had written it out for the benefit of others time and time again. But it isn't intellectual acquaintance with the scriptures that we need. We need to be doers of the word and not hearers only. And Ezra had prepared his heart not only to seek out the law but to do it. Maybe that's our

failing today. Maybe we have been brought up to be well acquainted with the word of God. But are we prepared to follow it?

And in the history of Ezra, the book of Ezra, it's very striking to see how they were dependent upon the word of God. They got back to the authority of the scriptures. They saw to it that all their feasts and all their services, [00:26:06] all that they did, the whole of their corporate worship was governed by the word of God. And that's a very important principle indeed. But let us say a little about this journey of Ezra.

Our brother said this afternoon it was one of his favorite portions, it's certainly one of mine, because I think it's very instructive. I think we can see here much that is for our guidance and encouragement in a day like the present.

Because you see Ezra had with him a band of faithful followers [00:27:07] but they were entrusted with a great treasure.

It details it here, doesn't it, in one of our chapters. In chapter 8 I think it is. It speaks of, in verse 26, chapter 8, 650 talents of silver, silver vessels and hundred talents, and of gold and hundred talents, twenty basins of gold, a thousand rams, and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold. That was a great treasure. Remember years ago setting down to work it out in our money.

I made it well up to a million pounds.

[00:28:04] What it would be in these days of inflation I don't know. It was a mighty treasure they had.

And they were going to carry it up. And to their great concern was to pass it on intact, safe and secure to those who were waiting to receive it at Jerusalem. It was a great responsibility.

It's a lovely little incident in itself and surpassed in the word of God perhaps for its beauty and its literary grace as one has put it. But what does it mean to us?

Hasn't God entrusted a treasure to each one of us?

[00:29:04] Hasn't he given us something that we can value? Something that we can hold fast? Something that we shall be called upon to give up, hand over, buy and buy? Beloved friends, what was it that Paul said to Timothy?

Hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me, that good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us. And again he says to Timothy, Oh Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust.

Does the Lord say that to us today? Oh young brother, oh young sister, hold fast, keep diligently, hold it and value it, [00:30:03] what the Lord has entrusted to you. I'm sure that he does.

We have the word to Philadelphia, have we not? Hold fast what thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

That's in view of the Lord's coming, he says, behold I come quickly. In view of the nearness of my

return, behold fast what I have put in trust, put you in trust to keep.

This treasure was not for building the temple exactly, not for founding it, not for laying the foundation or building up the structure. It was, as we have in verse 27, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. [00:31:05] It's a beautiful thought, isn't it? That we can adorn, as it were, the building of God, that we have that which adds beauty to it.

The truth that God has revealed to us, above all, as we were reminded I think this afternoon, what God has shown us of his blessed son, that is treasure indeed, isn't it? All the preciousness of Christ, what he is to us, what he is to God, the perfection of his work, the glorious of his person, there is treasure that we need to hold fast because the enemy is busy. And, as we were reminded, the enemy was busy in Ezra's day [00:32:03] and Ezra knew where to seek his power and his strength.

And so, as we read here, three days he waited before he began the journey. Was he too fearful to make a beginning?

He was aware of the responsibility but he knew where his resource lay and he turned to God.

He proclaimed a fast there at the river of Hava that we might afflict ourselves before our God to seek of him a right way for us and for our little ones and for all our substance.

God was entreated of him and the right way was found because it was God's way.

[00:33:02] But three days without moving a step forward, was he wasting his time? Ah, he was drawing his power.

He was spreading out his case before the Lord and he was drawing upon those infinite resources that are ever available to you and to me in all our weakness, in all our need. And it wasn't until they had taken their true place before their God and their independence and humiliation that they were prepared to go forward.

Ezra was ashamed, he says, to require the king because he boasted of the Lord's presence with them and that his guard was sufficient [00:34:04] and he was ashamed to ask for an armed escort as he was entitled to do had he wished. He would prefer not to lean on an arm of flesh but on the mighty arm of God.

And God didn't disappoint him and he was entreated of us.

But Ezra appoints those to help him and it's interesting here to notice verse 24 even the names of his company are given to us but the two chiefs, Cherubiah and Hashabiah. Well now, it's interesting to notice the meaning of those names. Cherubiah means God is the originator [00:35:01] and Hashabiah, God is associated.

So in those two names was their whole history told out. God the originator, God the one who associated a poor, weak remnant with himself.

What had they to fear if the mighty God was linked with them in their enterprise? My thoughts travel on to the first chapter of Colossians and there is a wonderful chapter that outlines the personal

glories of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what we read about him, our blessed Lord and Savior. By him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible [00:36:04] whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers all things were created by him and for him.

God is the great originator.

But what do we read still further? He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead that in all things he might have preeminence.

God is associated.

The one to whom we are associated, beloved friends, by infinite grace is the one by whom all things were created, the mighty creator of all. Yes, but that same blessed one is the head of his body, the church.

[00:37:06] And that church is precious in his eyes. He views every member of that church as the one for whom he laid down his life and shed his precious blood. And soon, as we were reminded, he is going to have that church complete in heavenly glory very soon.

God the originator, God is associated.

Well, follow the instructions that Ezra gives to these men.

He says, ye are holy unto the Lord. The vessels are holy also, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers. Watch ye and keep them until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites [00:38:08] and the chief of the fathers of Israel at Jerusalem in the chambers of the house of the Lord. They had a mighty charge, mighty responsibility to keep this vast deposit of treasure to hand it over untarnished and intact at the end of the journey. Our responsibility is equally great, but what a privilege to value what God has given to us, to hold it fast, and to seek to render it at the end.

Because the journey is drawing to an end. I've no doubt that Ezra and his party were sustained at the thought that soon the journey will come to an end. [00:39:05] Their eyes were not on the difficulties of the roadway or of their enemies lurking around them. Their eyes were on the goal, the end of the journey. So often in the history of God's people across the wilderness, they were occupied with the difficulties of the pathway and they fell to murmuring and complaining. God looks for worship, for praise and adoration from our hearts. And it is only as we have our eye upon himself, the risen Lord, and as we realize that there is a prize to be won.

I was thinking of the Apostle Paul and the third of Philippians. [00:40:01] He says, forgetting the things which are behind, reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Yes, the journey here will come to an end.

Our responsibility will cease when we are at home in our Lord's presence.

But there will be the reckoning to be considered.

We shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. That's not to fill our hearts with alarm. It's to

urge us on to greater zeal and faithfulness. As an amateur horticulturalist, I find myself occasionally going to flower shows.

[00:41:05] And I go round not merely to admire the efforts that the skilled gardeners have put in, but I like to read the comments by the judges.

I like to read what they have to say. I stand before an exhibit, maybe a beautiful bouquet of flowers, a basket arranged so artistically, or a vase of flowers. I say, well, this must be a first prize effort. No, there's something the judge has to say that spoils it.

It's not, perhaps, according to the rules. Or maybe there's something here that is lacking. Maybe something is overdone. And the judge says, now, if you put that right, your effort will be better next time. [00:42:04] I love to read his or her, maybe, comments on this.

And I think, well, at the assessment seat of Christ, all that we've done, all our service will be reviewed, and we shall see things through his eyes and know exactly where we failed. And we shall see things that we've done, perhaps, and we were proud of, the Lord has said, no, that's not acceptable, because you were seeking your own glory. And something else, perhaps, that we've thought nothing of, the Lord gives a first place there, because it was done for him. Well, perhaps that will be something in the future [00:43:03] to urge us on now to greater zeal for Christ.

I said at the beginning that Esdras day was a day of return.

I'd like to finish with a question. Accept it as a challenge to your heart as I accept it to mine. Have we no return to make?

No return to first principles, no return to first love, no return to the one who stands rejected outside the camp of this world religion, [00:44:01] the one who bids us go to him bearing his reproach. I say, have we no return to make?

Let us follow the example of Ezra, that we turn to God's words, become diligent readers of it, but not merely to read it, but to say that we carry it out, to be doers of God's word and not hearers only.

To say that we prepare our hearts like Ezra to serve the Lord, to value his word and as faithful stewards of all that wondrous truth that he's entrusted to us.

[00:45:04] I intended to enlarge a little upon the deposit of truth that has been given to us, but when I just mentioned briefly the inspiration of the scriptures, the Lord's Supper, the assembly as the bride of Christ, the one body and its living head, the indwelling spirit of God and his presence in the church of God today, the second coming of Christ, the millennial kingdom of the future, all this forms part of the wondrous deposit of truth that is your responsibility and mine to keep and to value and to see that we answer to it in this day in which our lot is cast. May God help us so to do.