

February 19

Scriptures: Read Ezra 7 & 8

Key Verse: “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10)

Overview

From this point in the book, after giving the background material (chapters 1-6), Ezra begins to deal with his own work from a personal perspective. Thus far, Ezra has shown how God arranged the circumstances to bring His people back into the land (chapters 1, 2), and how He overruled in history to bring about the completion of the Temple (chapters 3-6). He now presents his priestly lineage, traced back to Aaron through Zadok and Eleazar, to establish his authority to lead and teach the Law. His great-grandfather, Hilkiah, was the high priest who found the book of the Law during the restoration of the Temple under Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:14). Ezra’s mission and main goal in returning was to teach the Law of God to the people. It appears that over the many years since the dedication of the Temple (6:16-18), the people’s spirituality had diminished, but because God loved His people, He sent Ezra, just the right person to help (“help” is the meaning of his name), strengthen, encourage, and refresh their spirits.

Ezra was zealous to follow the Law of the Lord and sought Him with a pure heart. He determined to not only learn the Law but “do it” by putting the Law into practice in his everyday life. To serve God and have spiritual growth, a believer must be committed to God’s Holy Word and be consistent in living it out; this is a prerequisite for every teacher or preacher of the Word of God (key verse, 7:10). Ezra was therefore a noble and worthy teacher, and he was committed to instructing the people that they might understand God’s word (cf. Nehemiah 8:8,12; Matthew 5:19).

The decree of king Artaxerxes is truly amazing. Once again, the Lord stirred the heart of a king to show favour to His people. Ezra may have had an official position in the court of king Artaxerxes; also, it appears that he guided the king in the contents of this royal decree, for it specifically states Ezra’s true purpose and desire in going — to teach God’s Law (7:6, 25). The king commissioned Ezra to evaluate the condition of Jerusalem and Judah according to the Law of his God (7:13), which is the only valid way to evaluate spirituality. Artaxerxes also commissioned Ezra to establish a judicial system based upon the Law of God, and he gave Ezra the authority to inflict punishments upon those who would break the Law. The King knew Ezra was capable, since it was clear that he had God-given wisdom (7:25-26).

With great generosity, Artaxerxes provided money for Ezra to take with him to beautify the Temple and provide for the many sacrifices to God. He even made the stipulation that his officials over that region were to supply Ezra with whatever he needed, which they did (8:36). He also ordered that priests, Levites, and any others who worked in the Temple service were to be exempt from paying taxes. Artaxerxes stated that one of his reasons for showing such kindness to the Jews was to avert God’s wrath from himself and his sons (7:23;8:22b).

Ezra acknowledged that the Lord was the cause for these blessings, and he recognized his total dependence upon Him (7:27-28). Ezra had witnessed to Artaxerxes about the greatness of his almighty God, and he put his words into practice by not asking to be accompanied by soldiers; for if he did, he would be ashamed, because it would mean his God did not have the power to protect them (8:22). Raids on caravans, however, were a common thing, especially if they were carrying much wealth, as with Ezra. Ezra knew that if they were not accompanied by soldiers, they had to depend totally on God for their protection. No wonder Ezra called for much prayer and fasting, but the Lord proved Himself faithful and saved them from enemies and raiders (8:23, 31).

Their journey was about 1,450 kilometers (900 miles) and it took them four months to finally reach Jerusalem. What a thrill it must have been for them, having been born in captivity, to see the Holy City of their God, which they had heard so much about from their parents; and it must have been especially thrilling for the Levites and priests to see the Temple of the Lord and be able to participate in the service to God to which they had been called. With great joy, they worshipped the Lord and sacrificed to Him upon His altar.

Prayer

Lord, thank You for Your servants that You've given us as leaders in our church. Bless them all, and may we follow them with confidence as they faithfully follow You.