

### EZRA

#### Lesson 14, Chapter 8

Thus far in Ezra we have traversed an uneven landscape full of details, dates, Kings and history. I applaud you for hanging in there. So before we begin Chapter 8 let's pause, take a deep breath, jump into our hot air balloon and float upward for a panoramic view that puts what we've covered up to this point in broad perspective. The most important feature that immediately catches our eyes is that Judah's exile experience is over and many Jews are now making their way back to Judah to re-establish their homeland and their Temple. The next thing we notice is that Ezra consists of two major divisions: the first division was chapters 1-6, and this was the period that dealt with the time before Ezra comes onto the scene and is during the time of the Temple reconstruction. Chapters 7 to the end of the book are then concerned with the time when the priest and Torah Teacher Ezra became the focus and happened well after the time when the Temple project was completed.

So if we construct a timeline, we find that the entire Book of Ezra encompasses a period of only about 80 years. The starting point then is the first year of the first King of the Media-Persian Empire, King Cyrus, which is 538 B.C. And the ending point is the 7<sup>th</sup> year of King Artaxerxes, a later King of Persia, which is 458 B.C. Let me also take just a moment to say that I misspoke last week when I said that the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes was 483 B.C. (not sure where that came from!). The significance of the first year of King Cyrus is that it was in this year that (after defeating Babylon and taking over their empire) he emancipated the Jews and urged them to return home to Judah. And indeed in Cyrus's first year we find that a Jewish leader named Zerubbabel led an exodus of several thousand folks that consisted of common Jewish citizens, Priests, and Levites, in a return to their homeland. However it should not escape us that while Judah is the Jews' homeland, it was still only one of many provinces that were part of, and under the authority of, the Persian Empire. Many of the Jews left their homes in parts of Persia to take up residence in the city of Jerusalem; others returned to reclaim hereditary land holdings in rural parts of Judah that they had lost when Nebuchadnezzar deported the bulk of the population of Judah to Babylon.

What is key to remember in the context to the Book of Ezra, and to everything that will happen from here forward in the Bible, is that no more than perhaps 5% of the exiled Jews ever returned home to Judah; the remainder chose of their own free wills to remain in the gentile world that was now the Persian Empire. And while the specific reasons for making such a choice were varied, the overriding factor was that most Jews alive at the time of Cyrus were born in captivity (they were born in the Babylonian Empire that had only recently been conquered by Media-Persia). For the majority of Jews the Persian Empire was home; the only home they had ever known.

And yet because only about 70 years had passed since Nebuchadnezzar first attacked Judah and sent the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of deportees to Babylon, and it would not be for as much as 20 years after that until yet another attack brought about the final wave of deportees that came close to emptying Judah of its Hebrew inhabitants, therefore there were many hundreds of elderly Jews alive at the end of their Babylonian captivity who still remembered the Holy Temple that Solomon had built in all its glory. But they also remembered the catastrophic day that this magnificent edifice, the House of God, the center of their religious lives, was destroyed. That devastating memory was seared into their psyche and into their souls and they were desperate to erase it. Thus when offered the opportunity by King Cyrus to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple, naturally it was the elderly who were the most zealous to go. But it was not the same with the younger Jews who had never seen the Temple or made a pilgrimage to it for a Biblical Feast. The younger generations never had the opportunity to take their firstborn sons to the Temple and redeem them as commanded by the Torah. They had never brought an animal sacrifice with them to atone for their sins and watched as a priest laid the butchered animal on the Altar. They had never been purified from uncleanness by entering a Mikveh under the watchful eye of a priest so that the living water they submerged under washed away their ritual defilements before God.

So up in Babylon the system that the Jews had formerly relied upon (the Temple and Priesthood) to keep them in good stead with God was no longer operative. It was the priests who had long ago been assigned the duty to teach and enforce the Law of Moses, and they alone had the divine right to perform the atoning and sanctifying rituals that were critical if a Jew hoped to maintain harmony with Yehoveh. Thus up in Babylon the knowledge of the Torah, which had already greatly diminished for many years prior to Nebuchadnezzar invading Judah, nearly vanished. What remained were Jewish cultural traditions and customs; but along with it new ways were created to deal with the impossible situation of having no means to atone or purify. This was a conundrum that the Lord fully intended the Jews to experience, because that was as much the point of their exile as was the loss of their homes and homeland. These newly contrived ways, while seemingly pious and in and of themselves not necessarily bad things, were nonetheless manmade. And therefore these new ways accomplished little (in God's eyes) except to make the captive Jews feel less uncomfortable

but more religious in their foreign surroundings. Prayer replaced animal sacrifice. Houses of meeting and worship were created in lieu of the Temple gatherings. Much later these new houses would be called synagogues. Non-priests or at least non-practicing priests became the new worship and religious leaders. These new ways were the beginning of Judaism and in some cases the end of actual Torah observance.

That first group of returned Jews led by Zerubbabel dedicated themselves to rebuilding the Temple, but their efforts were frustrated by the locals who consisted of the handful of Jews that had somehow avoided deportation by the Babylonians, of foreigners who had moved in and taken over the fields and orchards and vineyards that the deported Jews left behind, and of a mixed breed of Jews who had intermarried with these foreigners. But the most vocal group who resisted the rebuilding effort was the Samaritans. Together these various opposition groups harassed and threatened and boycotted and complained to the Persian authorities and thus Zerubbabel was only able to lay the foundation for the new Temple before all work was brought to a standstill for many years.

But God was not pleased with the lack of perseverance, sincerity and faithfulness exhibited by the returned Jews towards rebuilding His House. Their fears and discomforts were excuses and not legitimate reasons for the delay. These same Jews that had abandoned the Temple rebuilding efforts instead focused their time and energy and wealth on building their own houses; and we hear that some of the homes they built for themselves were lavish. The Lord responded by sending two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to warn and to encourage the people to get back to work and build His House. His message was clear and unequivocal: there would be no fellowship between the Jewish people and their God without the Temple.

A key principle was re-established through God's prophets: Return to Me and I'll return to you. Please notice what is said here because it is so very important to every worshipper of the God of Israel and especially for those who might have fallen away. When we distance ourselves from God, it becomes OUR responsibility to reverse course and to return back to Him. God will not chase us down. God will not impose Himself on us. It is we who must yield, turn around and return to Him and ask to come home. And the Lord says that for those who sincerely do that, He will accept us back.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this principle, no sweeter story told, than when we

read of a rash young Jewish man who rebelled against his father, left home and lost everything, saw his error, and returned home hoping he would be accepted. Let's pause and read this familiar parable because even though this is a famous New Testament story, like all principles found in the New Testament it was much earlier established in the Tanakh, the Old Testament.

### **READ LUKE 15:11 – 32**

Return to Me, and I will return to you. The prodigal son was not chased down by a frantic and distraught father; the father waited patiently for the son to change and return to him. If the son had never had a change of heart and been deeply humbled; if he had not taken up a contrite journey of repentance and return to his father, no reconciliation would have ever taken place. But when he did come back in humility and sincerity, his father opened his arms, welcomed him and celebrated. It is precisely that same way for us and will remain so forever. We must make the first move; we must make the journey back to God and at times the road may be unpleasant, uncomfortable and cost us everything. But make no mistake: He will not journey to us.

But what does "returning to God" mean; what does it look like? Does it mean to simply feel differently in our heart? Does it mean to change our intentions so that our thoughts are godly and no longer rebellious? Does it mean to read our Bibles, pray and wait for God to change our circumstances? While those things are certainly important and valid, it is ultimately our **ACTIONS** that reflect our true intentions and inner selves to God. It is our **ACTIONS** that are the catalyst for being re-accepted by the Lord. We can't think one way and act another. Those Jewish returnees, who, like Zerubbabel, longed in their hearts to rebuild the Temple, lacked the trust and sincerity to actually **DO** it. So, says God, all the blessings that come from a renewed relationship with Him shall be withheld. And what action did He require of the Jews for blessing to be unleashed? To rebuild the Temple regardless of the personal risks involved.

Thankfully Zerubbabel and the Jewish leadership paid heed to Haggai and Zechariah. They ignored the threats, obeyed and believed God. They believed that blessings, and not more trouble, would be the result of rebuilding the Temple. And t because the Temple was the symbol and the place of fellowship between God and His people they completed their work and the Temple was inaugurated into service in 515 B.C., or about 25 years after their initial return.

That represents many needless years of pain, frustration, and lack of blessing.

It was several years after this time, around 480 B.C. that we hear of the story of Esther, which is essentially the story of the Diaspora Jews in the Persian Empire. We'll certainly not review the situation that forms the basis for the story except to say this: in Esther's day, around 35 or 40 years after the Temple had been rebuilt and was put back into operation, around 95% of the Jewish population still lived outside of Judah by their own choice. No doubt while the Jews of Judah were being heavily influenced by the Temple and Priesthood; and so however they practiced their religion it was very different than what was being practiced by the bulk of the Jews throughout other parts of the Persian Empire. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what was being taught and observed during the time of Esther, but her story and the book of the Bible named for her give us some pretty good clues.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing we find is that nowhere, not once, in the Book of Esther is God mentioned. It is true that in the Greek version of the Bible entire new sections were added to Esther with the Lord made front and center. But it has long been known that these were late additions and they were added because this omission was troubling, if not embarrassing, to Jewish religious leaders that an entire book of Holy Scripture would not call upon the name of the God of Israel. However I say this tells us a great deal about the mindset of the Diaspora Jews of that era. In fact in the Book of Esther, even in Daniel (who lived through the Babylonian period and on into the first part of the Persian period, just before the time of Esther) we do not hear of any of the Biblical Feasts or Holy Days being celebrated (not even somewhat) or of the Sabbath being observed.

Thus the story of Esther is framed in a way that has the Jewish people of the Persian Empire delivered from the vicious hands of the anti-Semitic Haman by the Jewess Esther and her elder relative Mordecai who had found favor within the Persian royal court. The story is written in the style of comical irony because no explanation is given as to why Haman was defeated in his genocidal plans except that everything he thought was a slam-dunk to give him power and favor with the king turned upside down at the last minute due to the cleverness of Queen Esther. Even when Esther was considering the potentially fatal move of appearing uninvited before the King (her husband) that she might plead for the lives of her people, she sent out word for the Jews in Susa to fast for 3 days; but there was no mention of prayer, or fasting "unto the Lord", or any such thing. Granted, we tend to read the word "prayer" into it when we read her instruction to fast, but it is not there and by no means can we be certain that the fast was in connection with prayer. And when the story concludes, and Haman and his family are executed, and Mordechai is promoted, and the Jewish people are allowed to take up arms and

defend themselves, no credit whatsoever is directed towards the God of Israel. In fact, this improbable victory is celebrated by the creation of a new holiday: Purim. And of course, Purim is NOT a God-ordained feast or celebration, but rather is a manmade observance somewhat like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. There is certainly nothing wrong with creating what is essentially a manmade national holiday; however when it seems as though it is manmade holidays that are celebrated at the same time that the God-ordained Biblical ones are set aside, then it reveals a disturbing mindset and trend.

The reality is that according to all reasonably verifiable historical and Biblical records, by Esther's day the Jews of the Diaspora had little knowledge of God's Word; they preferred to go by whatever traditions and celebrations that their leadership invented. To our knowledge they didn't observe any of God's feasts or the Sabbath; they had a desire to assimilate to one level or another into whatever gentile culture they lived in; and living in the land that God had set aside for them through Abraham was secondary to their own desires of living within whatever stability their family had established in whatever land they were currently settled. Torah observance and adhering to the Law of Moses had become so diluted with new traditions and customs that it would be difficult to categorize exactly what to call it. For lack of a better term I call it early Judaism.

So a couple of weeks ago as we turned the page of our Bibles from Ezra chapter 6 to chapter 7, around 20 years or so have passed since the story of Esther. Ezra was alive and apparently residing in Babel during the great threat against the Jewish people that is the thrust of the Book of Esther. And while that danger would certainly have mattered to him, what we also see is that he was also obviously aware that the practice of the Jewish religion throughout the Persian Empire had become greatly compromised. Thus he had devoted himself to studying the Torah until he had become its foremost expert. And when he compared what he read to what he observed around him, and to what he had heard was going on at the Temple in Jerusalem, he determined to find a way to institute reforms. And interestingly, he decided that the reforms had to begin with himself and with the Priesthood. Since we don't know much about Ezra before he journeyed back to Judah in 458 B.C., we don't know whether he had tried to reform the practices of Judaism in the Diaspora, but it's hard to imagine that he didn't.

Ezra was himself a priest with verifiable lineage going back to Eleazar and Aaron. So it makes sense that he determined he could make the most impact by reforming the Temple and the Priesthood and to deal with the Jewish society in and around the capital of the Jewish religion, Jerusalem. After all, most of those Jewish folks had left an established life behind and made the long and arduous journey back to Jerusalem where living was going to be more difficult.

Thus what motivated most of them was religious zealousness, even if some of the doctrines they clung to and observed had become watered down or even perversely altered.

So in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, Ezra somehow gained the confidence of the King and was able to obtain near carte blanche to venture to Judah, investigate the religious practices of the Temple and Priesthood, establish the Law of Moses as the civil and religious law for Jews throughout the entire satrapy of Beyond the River, and to appoint judges and officers in order to decide cases and prosecute violators. In addition a great treasure trove of voluntary gifts of gold and silver were given to Ezra by the King and his court and others to be used at the Temple in Jerusalem. What we also see from Ezra as he determined to take many Priests, Levites, and Temple workers back with him is that he essentially put together a takeover team loyal to him. He would go to Jerusalem with his team of Priests and Levites and he would now have the ability to influence the Temple operations as he saw fit.

So up to the beginning of chapter 8 of Ezra we first see the zealousness of a group of Jews to rebuild the Temple and re-establish the Priesthood, as well as the struggles it took to achieve it. But then because of the long lapse between the exile to Babylon along with the destruction of Solomon's Temple, and the time the Priesthood was once again up and running in Jerusalem, much had been lost as regards knowing God's Word. Common practices that had become part of everyday Jewish life up in Babylon accompanied the returning Jews (including the priests) and so those practices became entangled with proper Torah observance. There is no evidence that there was evil intent on the part of the priests; it is probably fair to say that their ignorance of the Torah was the main culprit. The doctrines created up in Babylon seemed right to them; why should they change them just because they rebuilt the Temple? Besides: the goal of rebuilding the Temple was to re-establish fellowship with God and to revitalize the main symbol of their Jewish religion. They accomplished that goal.

But Ezra's aim was different. He saw that while the intent might be good, the practice of the Jewish religion was not. Accepted social customs ruled the day more than God's laws and commandments; even for the Priesthood. Yet, it had become so "normal" that no one, not even the religious leadership, seemed to notice. No one stopped to examine their practices and beliefs and to compare them against the Word of God to see if what they believed and observed was correct. No one but Ezra. And what he found set him off on a movement to replace manmade doctrine with Holy Truth.

It is 458 B.C. as we open Ezra chapter 8. King Artaxerxes' letter of authorization in hand, Ezra organizes his trip to Jerusalem.

### **READ EZRA CHAPTER 8 all**

Before we descend in our balloon back to earth and we get into studying the details of this chapter, we've spent so much time with the historical I'd like to pivot towards the spiritual. What we've seen up to now in Ezra becomes amplified in chapter 8 as a God-principle rises from these inspired words that goes unnoticed if we don't look for it. That God-principle is this: God's grace is brought about on this earth by means of a co-operative venture with human beings. That sounds so simple that perhaps we can kind of slough it off by borrowing the familiar words from the Geico television commercial that begins with: "Everybody knows that". And while it is true that our human deeds and actions do not save us, and that all salvation is through God's grace, the other part of that equation is that it is human beings who are authorized and commanded to bring the message of God's grace to other human beings.

And how this works is nearly impossible to fathom let alone describe. Some kind of mysterious sequence is initiated when God makes a sovereign decision to place His word of truth inside a non-Believer, and then a Believing human is used to speak the Gospel to that same person. In a reaction somewhat like mixing the two parts of epoxy glue together, the truth is activated and it solidifies. Both ingredients are needed, and yet both ingredients are inactive and not useable in the physical world until they are mixed. It is intentionally designed so that one part works co-operatively with the other part. So a Believer speaks the Gospel truth as a kind of catalyst to the already spiritually (but invisibly) prepared non-Believer and presto! We have another member of the Kingdom of God!

What actually happened? Why did the Lord choose to do it that way? I've heard those questions asked in Bible study groups numerous times. Why not accomplish the same thing some other way? Why can't the Lord just do the whole thing Himself rather like using Super Glue (you just poke a hole in the top of the tube, squeeze and use it as is)? Isn't that closer to the definition we often have in our minds of what it means that something was accomplished



by God's grace? That humans played no role whatsoever? Yet instead the Father has decided that to bring salvation to each person on this planet He would use the most unreliable, most inclined to fail tool in His holy tool box: other human beings.

There is no greater example of this than in the Lord Yeshua Himself. The Apostle John says in <sup>CJB</sup> **John 1:14 *The Word became a human being (became flesh) and lived with us, and we saw his Sh'khinah, the Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.*** Christ is the ultimate expression of the God-principle of God's grace operating hand in hand with human effort. Only unlike all of us mere mortals, Christ was some kind of impossible to explain amalgam of 100% humanity with 100% deity. And while we will never attain that, we are expected to operate as though we can. As human beings (Believing human beings) we are supposed to always be available as God's catalyst ready to be added to His spiritual epoxy as He applies it individual by individual.

Yeshua used a different analogy to make the same point:

### **Matthew 9:35-38 CJB**

<sup>35</sup> ***Yeshua went about all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and weakness.***

<sup>36</sup> ***When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harried and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.***

<sup>37</sup> ***Then he said to his talmidim, "The harvest is rich, but the workers are few.***

<sup>38</sup> ***Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers to gather in his harvest."***

The harvest was spiritually prepared as an act of God's grace; but He also deemed that it was NOT to be gathered except by human workers. A co-operative venture between God and humans.

Dear fellow Believers, in addition to YOU being God's workers to bring in the harvest of prepared souls, and to YOU being God's catalyst to make spiritual glue, it is also up to us to right the wrongs when our Judeo-Christian institutions have broken down and drifted away from the truth into some kind of mixed-up religion that reflects mankind's mind but sets the Lord's truth aside. Humans created the problems and humans are to correct the problems.

### **Matthew 15:1-3 CJB**

***CJB Matthew 15:1 Then some P'rushim and Torah-teachers from Yerushalayim came to Yeshua and asked him,***

***<sup>2</sup> "Why is it that your talmidim break the Tradition of the Elders? They don't do n'tilat-yadayim before they eat!"***

***<sup>3</sup> He answered, "Indeed, why do you break the command of God by your tradition?"***

In co-operation with God's grace and in obedience to His Holy Spirit the vehicle that the Lord has chosen to reveal the truth that the entire Bible is alive and well, that His laws and commands are (as He said) righteous, just and forever; and that Israel was, is, and shall always be His precious treasure, are human beings. Although the Lord could chose to use His legions of angels to bring this truth to His worshippers, He has chosen instead to use human Believers. This alone demonstrates the enormous value and tremendous responsibility that God places in humanity.

Ezra, by the unction of the Holy Spirit, co-operated with God's grace. Ezra, despite the Jewish

social norms and customs of his day, decided to go back to God's Word, the Torah, and find out for himself what it said. He took what he learned to heart, and he changed and he knew that something had gone terribly wrong in the religion that the Jews were presently practicing. It's not that they didn't love God; it's not that they had chosen a different God. But due to their false beliefs, wrong doctrines, and incorrect observances God was not pleased with them, and so all that the Lord wanted to do through them could not be accomplished.

So Ezra assembled a team of those who were willing to leave behind the comforts of all they had known, the ease of not troubling their minds with having to unlearn wrong things in order to relearn right things, and of course they would have to contend with the heartbreaking protests of family and friends as they began a life changing journey that necessarily left the majority behind. As we'll discover next time, the journey was long, hard, and terribly dangerous. But Ezra trusted God so much that he declined an offer of a military escort; rather he decided that if this really was of God then they had nothing to worry about (whether they succeeded in getting there or they didn't).

Thus the recorded words taken directly from Ezra's memoirs as he prepared for his coming journey were:

***So I took courage, since the hand of ADONAI my God was on me, and I gathered together out of Isra'el key men to go up with me.***

We'll begin next week by going through this interesting list of these key men of Israel who signed up to go on this important mission with Ezra back to Judah.