

BOOK OF EZRA
THE WORK THAT GOD BLESSES
EZRA 8:1-36

Introduction

Jesus told his disciples in *Matthew 16:18*, “*I will build My church*”!
Paul said in *Ephesians 5:25* that, “*Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it...*”

I hope that you want what I want for our Church—For it to be a work that God truly blesses! Now understand that I’m not interested in doing whatever is necessary to draw a big crowd! I’m not talking about drawing a big crowd because that’s not necessarily the same as truly having God’s blessing!

Listen, I’m not here to entertain! God didn’t call me to be a great storyteller or a comedian or a clown! God called me to proclaim His precious Word! And I want to shepherd a flock that loves God and hungers and thirsts after Him in a real way!

I want the LORD to be at work in our midst in unmistakable ways so that there is no doubt but that He is the One who deserves all the glory! I want to remove every hindrance that would block God’s hand of blessing and I want to add every quality that would bring His blessing on this Church—His Church!

Just as Ezra testified to King Artaxerxes (8:22), “*The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him....*”, I want all of us to be a people that seek the LORD! Amen?!

In the last two Sunday School lessons on Ezra 7 we looked at the life that God blesses. **This week I want us to look at the work that God blesses!**

This chapter gives the account of the journey of about 5,000 exiles (including women and children) from Babylon to Jerusalem. The phrase, “*the hand of our God,*” which we saw in **7:6, 9, and 28**, occurs three more times: **8:18, 22, and 31**.

We learn three ingredients in the work that God blesses:

God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him **by humble faith, by integrity and good stewardship, and by God-centered worship!**

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Honoring God is the major thrust of the chapter!

Ezra refused to accept an armed escort from the king because he had told the king how God would protect His people (8:22).

So these people **put their faith on the line** by traveling through a what was a robber-infested desert with no human protection.

Also, Ezra wanted to **honor God by a strict accounting** of the silver, gold, and other resources that they were transporting to Jerusalem.

And, the reason that these people were making this difficult and dangerous journey was to **honor God by worshiping at His house**.

I. FIRST WE SEE THAT GOD BLESSES THE WORK THAT SEEKS TO HONOR HIM BY HUMBLE FAITH!

Ezra’s faith in the Lord shines through in two ways:

- 1) In the roster of people who were willing to commit themselves to this difficult enterprise; and,
- 2) In making the journey without armed protection.

A. We Honor God By Trusting Him To Raise Up Godly, Qualified Leaders And People For The Work!

It was one thing for Ezra to go and ask the king’s permission to lead a delegation of people back to Jerusalem.

But it was quite another thing for him to actually get volunteers to commit to giving up their comfortable situations in Babylon and to make the move back to an uncertain future in Israel.

The list of names (**8:1-14**) begins with priestly families (**8:2**), then those from the royal line of David (**8:2b-3a**), followed by 12 “lay” families (**8:3b-14**), which may be representative of all Israel. The number of men listed is 1,496, plus the 18 heads of families, totaling 1,514.

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Adding in the 258 Levites and temple servants assembled later (8:15-20) brings the total to 1,772. The women and children would bring the group to around 5,000. Compare that to the almost 50,000 on the first return!

One significant fact about the list is that everyone, except for Joab (8:9) is connected to the pioneers who had first returned 80 years before!

That implies that the original challenge to return, back in the days of Cyrus, had had a very mixed response, resulting in dividing individual clans or families!

The phrase “*the last sons*” (8:13) may indicate that these descendants represented the final members of that clan residing in Babylon.

But that fact that clans were split up points both to the comfortable lifestyle in Babylon that **contributed to the spiritual indifference of returning; and to the faith and commitment of those who did return.**

It was no small task to organize a pilgrimage of 5,000 people, including children, across 900-1000 miles of hostile desert.

The group began on the first day of the first month (7:9), but they paused for three days at a canal that runs to Ahava (8:15).

And as Ezra took stock of things, he discovered that there were **no Levites present. Understand that there were three groups of priests in Israel**, all descended from Levi: (1) the high priest; (2) ordinary priests; and, (3) **the Levites, the lowest order, who cared for the service of the sanctuary. And then there were the temple servants (8:20, “Nethinims”)** who assisted the Levites in their tasks.

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It may be that none from these two groups (Levites and Nethinims) had joined this group **because of both the hardship of returning and also the bottom of the ladder status of their tasks at the temple.**

But, even though their jobs were not as glamorous as that of the priests, they were essential if the priests were to be freed up to do their work.

So Ezra selected nine leaders, along with two men called “*men of understanding*” (8:16) and sent them to Iddo the chief, the leading man at what was apparently a group of Levites.

He briefed this delegation on what they should say (8:17). Now look at the result in 8:18-19!

Also, 220 temple servants were persuaded to accompany them! (8:20) These 258 men and their families had very short notice to make the decision to return, to pack up and join the waiting group, which started out across the desert on the twelfth day of the first month (8:31).

We see Ezra’s humble trust in God in his thankful acknowledgement that these men joined the group because of “the good hand of our God upon us.” He recognized that God had to put it on the hearts of His people to be willing to serve, even in the tasks that were not so flashy.

Three observations about this:

1. **God’s work requires workers as well as leaders!**
If you have leaders without adequate numbers of workers, the leaders will have too much to do, and thus will be hindered from giving proper leadership. (Too many chiefs and not enough indians!)

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If you have workers but inadequate numbers of leaders, the workers will not have the direction and understanding of the work that is needed.

In other words, all the parts of the body of Christ are necessary for the proper functioning of the whole. If you are a believer in Christ, you're a part of His body, the Church, and you have a ministry where He wants you to serve.

Workers are just as vital to the Lord's work as leaders. Which part of your body would you like to do without? Every part of the body of Christ is crucial!

That point was easy. Now for a more controversial point:

2. Primary leaders in the Lord's work should be male!

This list numbers the men, omitting the women and children. They are called "*the chief of their fathers.*" (8:1)

Ezra knew the structure of his society well enough to direct his appeal to the heads of families (7:28; 8:1), knowing that in most cases if they came they would bring their groups with them.

Modern Church strategy often tends to reverse this, going after the children first, to the neglect of husbands and fathers.

The New Testament is clear that the office and role of elder, bishop, pastor is limited to men! (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)

Also it is clear that women are not to function as teachers over men. (1 Tim. 2:11-15) In the home, husbands are to be the heads of their families. (Eph. 5:22-6:4) This does not mean that those in leadership should lord it over the Church or that husbands should bark orders to their families.

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Rather, it means we should be examples of the self-sacrificing servant love of our Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Pet. 5:1-5; Eph. 5:25)

Being the leaders means that we are accountable to the Lord for the direction of His Church and as husbands we will answer to Him for the spiritual direction of our families.

We should not surrender to our culture by adopting and advocating the ideas and principles of equal rights and opportunities for all in the Church or home!

3. Leaders must be both godly in character and qualified by gift and training! The men whom Ezra sent are called "*chief men*" and "*men of understanding.*" (8:16)

Also, when Ezra entrusts these men with the gold and silver that they are to safely transport to Jerusalem, he reminds them, "*Ye are holy unto the Lord.*" (8:28)

Ezra was not threatened, but rather was thankful (8:18) that the Lord raised up godly, qualified men to serve in leadership positions along with him.

It is not wise to entrust the leadership of the LORD's Church to any other than those qualified by both gift and training.

We should not put men into places of leadership that glaringly lack the proper Biblical qualifications or integrity!

God will bless the work that honors Him by trusting Him to raise up godly, qualified leaders and workers!

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**B. We Honor God By Trusting Him To Protect Our Work
And Our Families From The Enemy! (8:21-23; 31)**

It's interesting that later Nehemiah, who was also a man of faith, accepted the king's protection for his trip! (*Neh. 2:9*)

There is no indication that he was sinning or lacking in faith for so doing. This raises an interesting question, which I can only touch on: When is it wrong to use human means in addition to trusting the Lord?

I think that the normal pattern is to **trust God while thankfully using the means that He provides.**

You pray for protection on the highways, but you fasten your seat belt and drive carefully.

You pray for healing, but you go to the doctor and take the prescribed medicine.

You pray for a job, but you prepare a resume, dress appropriately, and go for job interviews.

God normally expects us to use the means He provides, along with faith in Him.

But sometimes using human means will lead us away from trust in the Lord, or it would be a poor witness to unbelievers. Often, this is an individual matter before the Lord.

For example, George Muller believed that it would not demonstrate faith in the Lord and thus not honor Him to advertise the financial needs of his orphanages.

I'm sure that he was obeying God in the way he operated, making his needs known only to God in prayer.

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Yet others have revealed the needs of their ministries to God's people, while trusting God and asking Him to provide! We just need to be sure that we're seeking to honor God and that we are consciously trusting Him!

Our text shows that as God's people seeking to do God's work, we need to recognize that there are enemies and ambushes along the way (8:31), and because of this we desperately need "*God's hand over us*" to protect us.

The enemy is seeking to destroy us and our little ones (8:21) by tearing apart families and by bringing down Church leaders.

I know of many men, formerly in the ministry, who have brought dishonor to God and His church through divorce or moral failure.

Satan is especially targeting leaders. Knowing that there are enemies and ambushes along the way, we must humble ourselves and seek God's protection through prayer, and in special times of need, through fasting. God will bless His work through us when we seek to honor Him by humble faith!

*FIRST WE'VE SEEN THAT GOD BLESSES THE WORK THAT
SEEKS TO HONOR HIM BY HUMBLE FAITH!*

**II. SECOND WE SEE THAT GOD BLESSES THE WORK THAT
SEEKS TO HONOR HIM BY INTEGRITY AND GOOD
STEWARDSHIP! (8:25-30)**

Ezra was concerned to give a report back to the king that the entire amount was delivered to Jerusalem without any of it being skimmed off through greed and corruption or wasted.

He parceled the items out by weight and let them know that they were accountable to deliver that amount to God's house in Jerusalem.

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When they got there, everything was numbered and weighed, recording the numbers! (8:33-34)

Paul was the same way with handling the gift for the poor in Jerusalem!
2 Corinthians 8:21 Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.

If we do not follow proper accounting procedures, it exposes workers to temptation and to accusations.

We need to be scrupulous in matters of financial integrity, even on small matters. We need to insure that the work here is honorable, not only in the Lord's sight, but also in the sight of men.

Jesus said, Luke 16:10 He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much! 11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?

The matter of integrity extends beyond financial integrity to the whole of a man's character. Ezra was a man of moral integrity. That is one reason that God's hand of blessing was upon him.

So, WE'VE SEEN THAT GOD BLESSES THE WORK THAT SEEKS TO HONOR HIM 1) BY HUMBLE FAITH AND 2) BY INTEGRITY AND GOOD STEWARDSHIP!

III. LASTLY, WE SEE THAT GOD BLESSES THE WORK THAT SEEKS TO HONOR HIM BY GOD-CENTERED WORSHIP!

The whole aim of moving 5,000 people across 900 miles of desert was to worship God by offering sacrifices at His temple in Jerusalem! (8:35)

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Our chapter repeats the phrase, "*the house of [our] God [or the LORD]*" six times in reference to the temple! (8:17, 25, 29, 30, 33, 36)

Worshiping God at His house was so important to these exiles that they were willing to suffer hardship, danger, and great inconvenience to move back to Israel!

As soon as they got back to Jerusalem, rested, and accounted for the items for the temple, they offered sacrifices to the Lord!

The sin-offerings availed as an atonement for the sins of all Israel, and the burnt-offerings typified the surrender of the entire nation to the service of the Lord!

We know that the entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered Himself on the cross as the atonement for our sins.

So you could say this was a Christ-Centered worship!

Our worship must always focus on Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, and coming again!

As Paul put it in Galatians 6:14 But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

If we exalt Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross, God will honor His work in this Church.

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Conclusion

God's people in Ezra's day were far from perfect. In the next chapter, we will see how Ezra was appalled to learn that both the people and the priests had corrupted themselves by intermarrying with the peoples of the land.

We'll see later when we get to the book of Nehemiah that he had to deal with further problems just a few years later! (Nehemiah 13)

There will never be a perfect Church on this earth before Christ returns!
We all are prone to the influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil!

Corruption forms on us as easily as rust on a nail or rot on wood left out in the rain!

But just because the Church may not be perfect does not mean that it cannot be good.

We can be a holy people before the Lord.

We can seek Him.

We can experience His blessing on His work here if we will seek to honor Him by humble faith, integrity and good stewardship, and through God-centered (Christ-centered) worship.

I encourage you to join me in laboring to make this Church a work that God truly blesses!