

Ezra 7-10

Return from Captivity (11)



T. M. AND SUSIE MOORE

A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Introduction to *Ezra 7-10*

The people to whom Ezra came had been released from captivity in Babylon. But that did not release them from their captivity to sin and self. They dawdled in constructing the temple, preferring to work on their own homes. They were briefly cowed by their enemies who made them stop working on the temple. And, rather than rejoice when the temple was finished, they grumbled because it was such a “small thing.”

They finally completed the temple, but temple worship still needed to be reinstated. This is why Ezra and his company came to Jerusalem. The people welcomed them gladly and rejoiced in celebration and worship with them, all the while knowing they were concealing an ugly secret from the servant of the Lord. No sooner had their great celebration ended than their ugly secret came to light.

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We hope you find this study instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Help on the Way

Return from Exile: Ezra 7-10 (1)

Pray Psalm 119.65-67.

You have dealt well with Your servant,
O LORD, according to Your word.
Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
For I believe Your commandments.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word.

Sing Psalm 119.65-67.

(Open My Eyes: *Open My Eyes that I May See*)

You have dealt well with me, O Lord, just as You promised in Your Word.
Teach me good judgment, help me to know all that I need to love You so.
Let Your commandments light my way. Send sweet affliction when I stray,
that I may walk Your holy way and keep Your Word.

Read and meditate on Ezra 7.1-10.

Preparation

1. Who was Ezra?

2. What had he prepared to do?

Meditation

The name “Ezra” derives from a Hebrew root that means “help.” So with Ezra’s coming to the still-captive (to selfish lusts) people of Jerusalem, help was truly on the way.

Ezra approached the Persian king to approve and fund his mission to Jerusalem (v. 6), but God helped him in this matter by preparing the king’s heart. Ezra was a descendant of Aaron and thus a priest in the line of Eleazar, who succeeded his father to the high priesthood (vv. 1-5). Ezra took with him to Jerusalem other priests and Levites. He must have heard either that worship leaders and teachers were in short supply or that those who were there weren’t getting the job done (v. 7).

It was a five-month journey, and “the good hand of his God” was upon him all the way (vv. 8, 9). Ezra had come to Jerusalem for one purpose. Having spent much time preparing His heart and poring over the Law of God, both to know it and do it, Ezra came to Jerusalem to teach, and specifically, to teach the statutes and ordinances of the Law of God (v. 10).

As we shall see, the people were not as ready to be helped as Ezra was to help. He would prevail for a season. But the people were still in captivity to themselves, and thus many of them would not be inclined to heed the words Ezra taught. More help would be needed later.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162.

Ezra’s life and message were exactly what the captive people needed for success.

Without his message and life, none of them, or us, will ever succeed in realizing the Kingdom of God.

Ezra 7-10

Every generation needs, for all its people who follow Jesus Christ, to replicate Ezra's goal: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to DO it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7.10).

"My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end" (Ps. 119.112 NIV).

"And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk. 12.20).

Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (Jn. 14.15).

Moses said, "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it is not a futile thing for you, because it is your life, and by this word you shall prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess" (Deut. 32.46, 47). Your Personal Mission Field.

But without following Ezra's example, we will be merely "sounding brass or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13.1). For how can we possibly love our neighbor if we don't first and foremost love our God, His Son Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and His Law?

Otherwise, help will never be on the way for us or those we are called to serve.

For reflection

1. How does Ezra's example and mission challenge you?
2. What "help" do you plan to bring to the people in your Personal Mission Field today?
3. How can you know the hand of God guiding and strengthening you throughout the day ahead?

By his name too, which means "helper," Ezra openly stands for the Lord. For it is he by whom alone the people of the faithful are constantly liberated from tribulations and, as though from captivity in Babylon to freedom in Jerusalem, are brought from the "confusion" of the vices to the "peace" and serenity of the virtues as they advance by the steps of meritorious deeds. The Venerable Bede (672-735), On Ezra and Nehemiah 2.9

Pray Psalm 119.68-72.

Praise God for His goodness and for His Word. Call on Him to grant you more to delight in His Word, to learn more of what He wants you to learn, and to trust in His Word throughout the day.

Sing Psalm 119.68-72.

(Open My Eyes: *Open My Eyes that I May See*)

Lord, You are good, and good You do; teach me that I may do good, too.
Wicked men my true pathway distort; I keep Your Word with all my heart.
Their heart is dark with sin's cruel blight, but in Your Law is my delight.
Let me not turn from Your sweet Light, nor from Your Word.

All my afflictions, Lord, I turn to You that I Your Law may learn.
Teach me to hold Your Word in my heart, never from its true way to part.
Your Law is better far to me than any wealth could ever be;
open my eyes and let me see more of Your Word!

2 A Little Help for His Friend

Pray Psalm 148.11-14.

Kings of the earth and all peoples;
Princes and all judges of the earth;
Both young men and maidens;
Old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
For His name alone is exalted;
His glory *is* above the earth and heaven.
And He has exalted the horn of His people,
The praise of all His saints—
Of the children of Israel,
A people near to Him.
Praise the LORD!

Sing Psalm 148.11-14.

(Hendon: *Take My Life and Let It Be*)

Kings of earth and peoples all, young men, maidens, on Him call!
Old men, children, princes, kings, bring to God your offerings.
Bring to God your offerings.

For His people He has raised His salvation: God be praised!
All whom Jesus Christ brings near praise their Savior, ever dear,
praise their Savior, ever dear!

Read Ezra 7.11-28; meditate on verse 23, 27, 28.

Preparation

1. Why did Artaxerxes write such a generous letter?
2. What did Ezra understand about why this came to pass?

Meditation

The letter was signed by Artaxerxes, but it's pretty clear he had some "help" in composing it. Ezra knew what needed to be done to free the people in Jerusalem from their captivity to self. It was not enough that the temple had been completed—disappointing "small thing" that it was. God's people needed to get reoriented to Him, and the way to do that is through proper worship. This is what Ezra intended to accomplish by coming to Jerusalem.

Artaxerxes gave free rein to all the priests and Levites who wished to return, and he promised to pay all their expenses and furnish them with whatever they needed to reestablish right worship (vv. 13-17). He lavished them with gifts for the temple (vv. 18-23) and called on the governors of the region to provide whatever resources were necessary. He also invested Ezra with the authority to appoint judges and to teach the Law of God to all people "who *are in the region* beyond the River" (v. 25). And he meant business (v. 26).

The king was perhaps hoping to get on the good side of the Lord in doing all this (v. 23). His motives may not have been entirely pure, but this is a clear example of those who do not know the Lord "feigning obedience" to Him because of His favor upon His people (cf. Pss. 66.3; 81.15). Ezra, on the other hand, knew where all these decisions and provisions were coming from, and he blessed God for all His sovereign goodness (vv. 28, 29). God truly honors those who keep and teach His Law (Matt. 5.17-19).

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Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Artaxerxes wrote: "I issue a decree that all those of the people...who volunteer to go up...may go with you" (Ezra 7.13).

Ezra said: "So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me" (Ezra 7.28).

Between the volunteering and the gathering, all the people whom God wanted to go to Jerusalem, went.

Some of us who are believers volunteered and some were gathered. Either way, we rejoice to participate in the present Kingdom now and the Kingdom eternal hereafter. The Bible is full of examples of both, as is life now.

"Your people shall be volunteers in the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness..." (Ps. 110.3).

As Paul wrote to Philemon regarding Onesimus, "...that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary" (Philem. 1.14).

"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm..." (Is. 40.11).

"The LORD God who gathers the outcasts..." (Is. 56.8).

None of us was ever forced into the Kingdom.

Regardless of the means of our salvation, we all rejoice to be going to Jerusalem with Ezra, to "prepare our hearts to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances..." (Ezra 7.10) in our Personal Mission Field.

We are the volunteers and the gathered of today.

Let us set out together, as one (Jn. 17.11) to "beautify the house of the LORD"! (Ezra 7.27)

For reflection

1. When you "volunteered" to follow Jesus, who were the people involved in your being "gathered" to Him? Give thanks to God for these people, and, if you can, send them a note, praising Him for them.

2. In your Personal Mission Field, are there people who yet need to be gathered to the Lord? What is your role in this?

3. Whom will you encourage today to volunteer themselves to go forth and gather God's chosen ones to Himself?

To beautify the house of the Lord is a reference to the reestablishment of moral, spiritual, and religious life. I was encouraged: With renewed vigor, Ezra gathered leading men of Israel to return to Jerusalem with him. Earl Radmacher (1933-2014), NKJV Study Bible Notes on Ezra 7.27, 28

Pray Psalm 148.1-7.

Pray that God will give you many reasons to praise Him today, and that He will make your heart ready to do so at every moment.

Sing Psalm 148.1-7.

(Hendon: *Take My Life and Let It Be*)

Praise the Lord, from heaven praise! To the heights His goodness raise!

Angels, all you heav'nly hosts, let of Him be all your boasts,

let of Him be all your boasts!

Ezra 7-10

Praise Him, sun, moon, shining lights, brilliant stars that light the nights!
Praise Him, heav'ns for all His love, and you waters far above,
and you waters far above!

Praise Him who created all by His Word and mighty call!
All things His decree obey; thus they shall not pass away.
Thus they shall not pass away.

Let all creatures, everything, God's great praises loudly sing!
His Name only brims with worth, far above both heav'n and earth,
far above both heav'n and earth!

3 Depending on God

Pray Psalm 20.1-3.

May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble;
May the name of the God of Jacob defend you;
May He send you help from the sanctuary,
And strengthen you out of Zion;
May He remember all your offerings,
And accept your burnt sacrifice.
Selab

Sing Psalm 20.1-3.

(St. Leonard's: *May the Mind of Christ My Savior*)

Jesus, Savior, hear my pleading, set me safely, Lord, on high.
Help me by Your gracious leading and receive my cry.

May You by Your Church support me; gladly, Lord, receive my praise.
May my thanks a good report be with You all my days.

Read Ezra 8.1-23; meditate on verses 21-23.

Preparation

1. *Why did Ezra proclaim a fast?*

2. *Where did he turn for guidance and safety?*

Meditation

Ezra gathered the company of priests and Levites who would return with him to set the worship of God in order in Jerusalem. They camped for three days “by the river that flows to Ahava” while he prepared them for the journey and made sure he had all the folks he needed (vv. 1-15). Finding no Levites in the mix, he sent for their representatives to provide Levites for the service of the temple (vv. 15-17). God moved among the Levites and sent to Ezra just the men he needed (vv. 18-20).

So far, so good. Ezra proclaimed a fast that the people might humble themselves to seek the Lord for the journey (v. 21). He refused to ask the king for armed protection, since he had boasted so confidently in the Lord's provision (v. 22). They needed guidance, and they would doubtless require protection against bandits and other ne'er-do-wells who patrolled the highways. But Ezra resolved to trust the Lord, insisting that He would show them the way (v. 21) and “His power and His wrath *are* against all those who forsake Him” (v. 22). So they fasted and prayed, and God answered their prayer (v. 23).

Ezra's heart was captive to the Lord and His Law, and he firmly believed that God would take care of those who had volunteered to serve Him and whom He had gathered for His work. When our hearts are fully captive to God, we will not be anxious or afraid; rather, we will demonstrate our faith through prayer, worship, and daily obedience, thanking God for His many blessings and looking to Him for all our needs.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

“When our hearts are fully captive to God, we will not be anxious or afraid; rather, we will demonstrate our faith through...” You name it. Anything that we are concerned about, that we can do nothing about, that is totally in God's loving hands, we must trust Him with. And we must trust Him in such a way that our faith is obvious to Him.

In Hebrews 11, God spells out as clearly as He possibly can, to our human minds, what faith is:

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (v. 1). And even before we get into the heroes of the faith—those martyrs that were stoned and sawn in two and did not lose their faith in God even then—we read about God’s faithful, first on the list: “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (v. 3). So, we who believe that God made the world in six days, just as He said He did, and that He created everything out of nothing (Gen. 1.1-2.3), are first on the list of those who have faith.

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (v.6). So, bring it on! The harder it is to believe, the more credit we get for our faith. “Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him” (Prov. 30.5). “The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever” (Ps. 119.160).

Our daughter Ashley is a schoolteacher, and this year she has the privilege of teaching her own son, George, in the combined 5th and 6th grade class. Recently, she gave an assignment in a course entitled *Answers in Genesis*, that entailed reading Job 40 and 41—which describes in detail the behemoth and Leviathan—and then writing about some of the characteristics of these beasts. George wrote without hesitation, and full of trust and faith, believing that God’s Word is absolutely true: “it can open doors with its face, they stick together, and it sneezes a flashlight”. Dear, sweet George. George loves God and believes Him. Every word. No questions asked. I want faith like that! And God wants me to have faith just like that. Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” (Mk. 10.15).

Ezra also trusted God. He trusted Him with the well-being of all those going back to Jerusalem. He trusted God that He would take care of them and all their needs. And God did exactly that. “The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him.” “So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer” (Ezra 8.22, 23).

I’m with George and George’s unquestioning faith. Fully captive to God. Fully believing His Word. Trying to please Him through absolute faith...sneezing flashlights and all!

For reflection

1. Ezra wanted to trust in God completely for the journey and all its needs. Why do you suppose that was so important to him?
2. What does it mean for you to trust God—to cling to His every word—for all your daily activities? How does God see you trusting Him?
3. Whom will you encourage today to greater trust and delight in God’s Word?

All our concerns about ourselves, our families, and our estates, it is our wisdom and duty, by prayer to commit to God, and to leave the care of them with him. And, on some occasions, we should decline advantages which are within our reach, lest we should cause others to stumble, and so our God be dishonored. Let us ask wisdom of God, that we may know how to use or to refuse lawful things. We shall be no losers by venturing, suffering, or giving up for the Lord’s sake. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ezra 8.21-23

Pray Psalm 20.4-9.

Seek the Lord’s will and purpose for this day. Thank and praise Him for His salvation, and resolve to trust Him for all your needs. Thank Him that He hears and will answer your prayers.

Sing Psalm 20.4-9.

(St. Leonard’s: *May the Mind of Christ My Savior*)

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Grant my every earnest longing. Let my counsel be fulfilled.
May I joyous song be strong in, living in Your will.

In Your Name we raise our banners; Lord, fulfill our every prayer.
Saved are we in glorious manner, free from every care.

Answer from Your holy heaven, save us by Your mighty hand!
Some to earthly boasts are given; in Your grace we stand.

They have bowed and fallen, Savior, while we rise and stand upright.
Grant to us Your royal favor, hear us day and night.

4 Safe Arrival

Pray Psalm 96.8-10.

Give to the LORD the glory *due* His name;
Bring an offering, and come into His courts.
Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!
Tremble before Him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns;
The world also is firmly established,
It shall not be moved;
He shall judge the peoples righteously.”

Sing Psalm 96.8-10.

(Mit Freuden Zart: *Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns Above*)

Bring offerings sweet to Him, our Lord, in holy garments praise Him!
Tremble before Him, all the earth; among the nations raise Him!
The earth is fixed, it will not move; the peoples will His justice prove.
Exalt the Lord and praise Him.

Read Ezra 8.1-36; meditate on verses 31-36.

Preparation

1. What did Ezra do with the silver, gold, and other articles?
2. What did the faithful people do once Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem?

Meditation

Ezra chose twelve “leaders of the priests” and divided among the “the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offering for the house of our God” (v. 24). Why do this? Why not just chuck it all in the back of a wagon and place a guard over it? I can think of at least two reasons. First, if the caravan should be attacked, the offering gifts would be dispersed and therefore might not all be lost. Second, Ezra demonstrated a level of trust with these leaders, who knew that, upon arrival, they would have to give an accounting for the gifts entrusted to them (vv. 26-30, 33, 34). He also used these gifts to remind the priests that both they and these offerings were holy—set aside for the Lord’s purposes only (vv. 28, 29).

Upon arrival in Jerusalem the caravan stayed in isolation for three days. No doubt they used a good portion of that time praising and thanking God for a safe trip and deliverance from enemies (v. 31). On the fourth day all the gifts were gathered, accounted for, and written down (vv. 33, 34).

Then a great celebration was offered, welcoming the caravan to Jerusalem in what looked like a genuine act of worship (v. 35). Copies of the king’s orders were distributed to local leaders, and they ponied up what the king required to help support the effort to restore true worship to the temple (v. 36). Everything seemed to be going so well.

But not everything was as it seemed.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

God did not want the people of Israel to be captive to anyone financially.
He prepared them monetarily beforehand for the work set ahead of them.
“Prepare your outside work, make it fit for yourself in the field; and afterward build your house” (Prov.

24.27).

And He told them to weigh all the gold and silver, accounting for each piece, and to write it all down in a ledger so they could keep good fiscal records of how it was used. “Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds; for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations” (Prov. 27.23, 24).

He did not want them to be worried about money or concerned about how they would care for the temple and its workers; or to be under the thumb of anyone because of poor handling of their resources. “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Prov. 22.7).

How many churches today are captive to the world because of financial constraints?
How many preachers compromise their message because they don’t want to offend the givers?
How many church leaders don’t enforce church discipline because they don’t want to offend and lose their members’ giving to another more lenient church?
How many pastors don’t talk about tithing because, well, that might offend too?
How many pastors have been found with their fingers in the till because they want more of everything?
How many church leaders are guilty of paying their pastors a pittance, making their lives fiscally difficult?

Money is a testing point. Personal and corporate financial captivity is a miserable situation to be in. God does not want that for His people or His Church. He wants us to be financially responsible, obedient believers; and to trust Him fully. It is a both/and business. We are not to be “greedy for money” (1 Tim. 3.3), always keeping in mind that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness...” (1 Tim. 6.10). “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13.5).

The hand of our God is upon us. He has delivered us from death and given us eternal life in His Kingdom now and forever (Ezra 8.31). We will do well to trust God about all our needs—personal and communal—and work hard to “weigh the silver, gold, and articles” (Ezra 8.33) we are responsible for.

“So they gave support to the people and the house of God” (Ezra 8.36).
Free to be Captive to God alone.

For reflection

1. Besides money, what are some other things we become captive to that keep us from the work of the Lord?
2. How can you know when you’re falling into captivity to anything other than Jesus?
3. What is our responsibility to one another in the body of Christ for keeping our focus on Jesus and not on things that take us away from Him?

After three days’ rest, the returnees deposited their treasury in the temple (see Neh. 2:11). Four men—two priests and two Levites—counted and weighed everything. A written inventory was then put on file. Earl Radmacher (1933-2014), NKJV Study Bible Note on Ezra 8.33, 34

Pray Psalm 96.1-7, 11-13.

Give thanks and praise to God for His great salvation, that He watches over and shepherds you day by day, and that Jesus is coming again soon to take us to be with Him forever.

Sing Psalm 96.1-7, 11-13.

(Mit Freuden Zart: *Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns Above*)

Sing to the Lord! O, bless His Name! All nations tell His glory!

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Salvation's tidings loud proclaim; let earth rehearse His story!
For God is greatly to be praised; His throne above all gods is raised.
Fear Him, and sing His glory!

All other gods are idols vain—the Lord created heaven.
Splendor and strength with Him obtain; to Him be glory given!
All fam'lies, praise this mighty Lord! Give strength and glory to His Word.
Exalt the Lord of heaven.

Let heaven sing with lusty voice; let earth and sea sing sweetly!
Let fields and trees in Him rejoice, for He is coming swiftly
to judge the world in righteousness, the peoples in His faithfulness.
He comes; exalt Him greatly!

5 Carried Away Captive (Again)

Pray Psalm 40.4, 5

Blessed is that man who makes the LORD his trust,
And does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies.
Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works
Which You have done;
And Your thoughts toward us
Cannot be recounted to You in order;
If I would declare and speak of them,
They are more than can be numbered.

Sing Psalm 40.4, 5.

(Dix: *For the Beauty of the Earth*)

Blessed are all who trust in You, turning both from lies and pride.
Countless wonders, Lord, You do, and Your thoughts with us abide.
Lord, Your worth who can declare? None with You can e'er compare.

Read Ezra 9.1-15; meditate on verse 4-9.

Preparation

1. What problem was brought to Ezra's attention?
2. How did Ezra describe the people who were guilty?

Meditation

Who were these people who had intermarried with pagans? People up and down the social scale of Jerusalem—everyday Joes, priests, Levites. They were all the same people who had just celebrated before the Lord and made offerings to Him! And the rulers of the people—the judges who were supposed to help them live within the Law of God—were the chief offenders (v. 2)!

Ezra made it clear this would not do (v. 3). The people of Israel were captive still (v. 4)—to their own desires and comforts and convenience. They built the temple and worshipped God, but they had forsaken His Law and given in to the lusts of the flesh (vv. 5-7). They needed revival (v. 8), and only God could give it to them. They were no better off than those who had sinned and been taken captive by foreign nations. And even though God had delivered a remnant and given them “a peg in His holy place” (v. 8), still they turned from His Law and enslaved themselves to the flesh.

Ezra confessed on behalf of all the people, including himself among those in need of repentance (v. 15). He had not married a pagan wife, but he was one with the people of God and took their sins upon himself. Ezra thus serves as a type of Christ by bearing the sins of God's people upon himself and seeking mercy and revival for them.

People who are captive to sin deceive themselves into thinking their worship is acceptable to God. It is not. Our captive churches today need repentance from sin and the mercy of God to revive us, lest we be consumed by His wrath (v. 14).

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

“You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them, nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son” (Deut. 7.2, 3). And the reason for this mandate? “...lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God” (Deut. 20.18).

Those were the standards God set down for His people. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. No equivocating, no extenuating circumstances, no pragmatic needs were a cause to disobey God's laws.

Well, hmmm. If we should put onto the scales of justice, God's Law on one side, and our behaviors (personal and communal) on the other, which way would it fall for us today? Would it just completely topple over? Would we tremble and be astonished at our shortcomings and overt sins? (Ezra 9.3, 4) Would we confess our sins? Would we be too ashamed and humiliated to lift up our faces to God? (Ezra 9.6) Or would we just go merrily on our way thinking God is surely different now than He was then? After all, there's grace and all that.

And yes, thank you God, grace is a thing, and without it we could not be saved (Eph. 2.8, 9). But we dare not ever ignore His Law, mistakenly thinking that He and His rules have changed. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13.8). "For I am the LORD, I do not change..." (Mal. 3.6).

Unless we are standing firm in our faith, daily in God's Word, confessing our sins, and walking intentionally in the way that pleases God, we will assuredly find ourselves captive to the enemy in one way or another. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10.12 NIV)

Every day we must dress for the battle, resisting the enemy who longs to captivate us, and step out protected and ready to serve. "But to do this, you will need the strong belt of truth and the breastplate of God's approval. Wear shoes that are able to speed you on as you preach the Good News of peace with God. In every battle you will need faith as your shield to stop the fiery arrows aimed at you by Satan. And you will need the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Pray all the time. Ask God for anything in line with the Holy Spirit's wishes. Plead with Him, reminding Him of your needs, and keep praying earnestly for all Christians everywhere" (Eph. 6.14-18 TLB).

Doing this will determine our pathway. He will enable us to not be carried away captive now or in the future. Even if we have been captives in the past, God is a God of new beginnings (Lam. 3.21-24) and will strengthen us to do His Law and His will, whenever we beseech Him honestly and humbly to do so.

Carried away captive to Him.

For reflection

1. What do you see as evidence that many believers today are more captive to the culture than the Lord?
2. Do you see any of these tendencies in yourself? What should you do if you do see yourself this way?
3. What is your responsibility to your fellow believers to help them keep from falling into captivity to the culture and the times?

There is not a surer or sadder presage of ruin, than turning to sin, after great judgments, and great deliverances. Every one in the church of God, has to wonder that he has not wearied out the Lord's patience, and brought destruction upon himself. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ezra 9.5-15

Pray Psalm 40.1-4, 6-10.

Confess your sins to the Lord and call on Him to set your feet firmly in His path. Offer up your day to the Lord and trust in Him to keep you from sin, guide you in His way, and hide His Word in your heart. Be ready to talk to people about Jesus as the Lord gives opportunity.

Sing Psalm 40.1-4, 6-10.

(Dix: *For the Beauty of the Earth*)

I waited patiently for God; He inclined and heard my cry,

Ezra 7-10

lifted me up above the sod, set me on a Rock on high!
New songs in my mouth He gave; may He through me many save.

Off'rings You do not require—open now my ears, O Lord.
What from me do You desire? Firm delight to do Your Word.
Take my life in ev'ry part; write Your Law upon my heart.

Lord, Your truth will I proclaim to Your people gathered 'round,
nor will I my lips restrain—let Your precious ways resound!
Of Your saving grace and Word I would speak, most loving Lord.

6 Hard Repentance

Pray Psalm 132.13-18.

For the LORD has chosen Zion;
He has desired *it* for His dwelling place:
“This is My resting place forever;
Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
I will abundantly bless her provision;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.
I will also clothe her priests with salvation,
And her saints shall shout aloud for joy.
There I will make the horn of David grow;
I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.
His enemies I will clothe with shame,
But upon Himself His crown shall flourish.”

Sing Psalm 132.13-18.

(Finlandia: *Be Still, My Soul*)

God dwells among us, and He will forever,
to meet our needs and clothe us with His grace.
He has to us sent Jesus Christ, our Savior,
and made us His eternal resting-place.
His foes are banished from His Presence ever,
but we shall reign with Him before His face.

Read Ezra 10.1-44; meditate on verses 12-17.

Prepare

1. What had to be done?
2. How was it done?

Meditation

Let's begin at the end of this chapter, verses 18-44. Here we see that the captivity to pagan ways had seeped into every stratum of society—priests, Levites, singers, and all the rest. Recording their names must have been part of the deal reached during those two months of negotiating (vv. 16, 17). It was appropriate to do so, for these people had sinned against the Lord and the nation. Everyone in Jerusalem, Benjamin, and Judah (v. 9) had been affected by the compromise and sin of their neighbors. Public sins require public confessions.

Ezra was duly grieved at the extent of the sin (v. 1). His lamentation seems to have affected those who had sinned, for they came together and confessed their transgression, declaring their intention to put things right (vv. 2, 3). But what about those wives and children who were being sent away? That seems a hard repentance, at least for them. Where would they go? What would they do? Their lives from this point forward would be difficult, to be sure. Sin often leaves lasting scars, which is why it's best we hate it and refuse to engage in it. While we don't know for sure, my sense is that God would have provided for these women and children, just as He had done for Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21.1-21).

Ezra did not soft-pedal their sin (v. 10) nor the hard repentance it would require (v. 11). It would take time to accomplish this decision (vv. 12-17), but the people obeyed, and the work was done. Had they finally broken free of their captivity to self and the surrounding culture? Not by a long shot, as we shall see.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162.

Sin leaves lasting scars, if not always on someone else, most assuredly, always on us.

It is not something to be toyed with nor ignored. We must face it head-on and rid it from our hearts.

As Ezra instructed the penitent:

1. Make confession to the LORD.
2. Do His will.
3. Separate yourself from your sin. (Ezra 10.11).

We are told the same:

1. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
2. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1.8, 9).
3. Submit to God.
4. Resist the devil.
5. Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts.
6. Lament and mourn and weep.
7. Humble yourselves in the sight of God (Jms. 4.7-10).
8. Come out from among them and be separate, says the LORD.

Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.

I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty (1 Cor. 6.17; Is. 52.11; Ez. 20.34, 41; 2 Sam. 7.14).

What we should long for as Christians, is that goodness and mercy follow in our wake, all the days of our lives (Ps. 23.6), and not grossness and mayhem. What a mess those Israelites left in their wake!

We do not want to be guilty of the same. Yes, I am sure all of us have done things to others—sinful, hurtful things—that we would love to undo. These we can confess to our forgiving heavenly Father.

He does not want us to be ineffectual because of them. He just does not want us to repeatedly repeat them.

Peter denied Jesus three times (Jn. 13.38; 18.27). And three times, Jesus gave him the opportunity to profess his love to Him, be forgiven, and then sent on assignment, free from the guilt of his previous sins, to henceforth live effectively in the Kingdom of God (Jn. 21.15-22). Never to deny Him again.

We commit the same sins our forebears did. But we can experience the same forgiveness, as well. Hard repentance is needed. But glorious forgiveness, and new chances are given every day, to love and serve the LORD obediently and effectively; separated and turned from those things that so easily beset us (Heb. 12.1).

For reflection

1. What causes us to be in a position of being vulnerable to sin?
2. What can you do to help your fellow believers recognize and resist temptation?
3. What can you do to anticipate temptation and prepare to resist it?

There is hope concerning people, when they are convinced, not only that it is good to part with their sins, but that it is necessary; we must do it, or we are undone. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Ezra 10.6-14*

Pray Psalm 132.8-12.

As you are in the Presence of God, are you aware of anything in your life of which you need to repent? Claim the promise of forgiveness. Confess your sins and declare your repentance. Then look to Jesus to heal and

renew.

Sing Psalm 132.8-12

(Finlandia: *Be Still, My Soul*)

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place.
Your holy Presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus' grace,
and we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David's sake, turn not away Your face,
but look upon us in Your holy light.

Remember, Lord, the oath You swore to David.
Do not turn back, do not deny Your Word:
"One of your sons, with your throne I will favor,
and He shall keep My cov'nant evermore,
and walk within My testimonies ever.
Thus He shall ever rule as Israel's Lord."

7 Taking Captivity Captive

Pray Psalm 78.32-37.

In spite of this they still sinned,
And did not believe in His wondrous works.
Therefore their days He consumed in futility,
And their years in fear.
When He slew them, then they sought Him;
And they returned and sought earnestly for God.
Then they remembered that God *was* their rock,
And the Most High God their Redeemer.
Nevertheless they flattered Him with their mouth,
And they lied to Him with their tongue;
For their heart was not steadfast with Him,
Nor were they faithful in His covenant.

Sing Psalm 78.32-37.

(Foundation: *How Firm a Foundation*)

When troubled, they turned to the Lord's loving face;
He met them and showed them His marvelous grace.
They spoke of their love for Him, yet in their heart
of His holy cov'nant they wanted no part.

Review Ezra 7-10; meditate on Ezra 8.25-9.3.

Preparation

1. How would you describe the contrast that appears in these meditation verses?
2. How did Ezra respond to this situation?

Meditation

In two places Scripture refers to God “taking captivity captive.” The first is in Psalm 68.18, where David recalls how God delivered Israel from Egypt and took them captive to Himself. The second—an echo and restatement of Psalm 68.18—is in Ephesians 4.8. Here, however, Paul used David’s words to refer to the exaltation of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and all His gifts. Thus God has taken captive to Himself all those who were formerly captive to the devil and his lies.

The people to whom Ezra came had been released from captivity in Babylon. But that did not release them from their captivity to sin and self. They dawdled in constructing the temple, preferring to work on their own homes. They were briefly cowed by their enemies who made them stop working on the temple. And, rather than rejoice when the temple was finished, they grumbled because it was such a “small thing.”

They finally completed the temple, but temple worship still needed to be reinstated. This is why Ezra and his company came to Jerusalem. The people welcomed them gladly and rejoiced in celebration and worship with them, all the while knowing they were concealing an ugly secret from the servant of the Lord. No sooner had their great celebration ended than their ugly secret came to light. It took two months to negotiate terms of repentance that Ezra then administered.

The people had been released from captivity in Babylon and Persia, but they were still captive to self and sin. They would need a Redeemer greater than Haggai, Zechariah, Jeshua, Zerubbabel, Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah to finally break out of sin into the true Kingdom of the Lord. Happily, Jesus came to “proclaim liberty to the captives” (Lk. 4.18), and that includes you and me. The Lord Jesus has set us free. Let us no

more live in captivity to the world and its sinful ways.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

“Yet I AM the LORD your God ever since the land of Egypt,
and you shall know no God but Me; for there is no Savior besides Me...
I will be your King” (Hos. 13.4, 10).

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,
who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8.1).

No longer captive to sin: now freely captive to Jesus Christ—forgiven by Him.
Our hearts bubbling over, full of appreciation and love—we praise Him:

*My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign;
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*

*I love Thee, because Thou hast first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*
(Featherstone, 1862/Gordon, 1876)

Resigned from sin, pardoned to serve;
captivated, we raise our voices to You—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:
“We love You!” Right now, and always...to the very end (Ps. 119.112).

For reflection

1. We are either captive to sin and self or to God and Christ. Explain.
2. Obviously, it's possible to go to church, worship the Lord, talk the Christian talk, and still be captive to sin. How can you know if that's where you are?
3. What can you do to firm up your captivity to Jesus? How should others see that you are captive Him?

Many corruptions lurk out of the view of the most careful rulers. Some of the people disobeyed the express command of God, which forbade all marriages with the heathen, Deuteronomy ch 7. Disbelief of God's all-sufficiency, is at the bottom of the sorry shifts we make to help ourselves. They exposed themselves and their children to the peril of idolatry, that had ruined their church and nation. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ezra 9.1-4

Pray Psalm 78.1-7.

Thank the Lord for His faithful record of His unfaithful people. Pray that you will learn what God intends from the experience of those who returned from exile. Call on the Lord to take your heart captive day by day, and to use you in making His Good News known.

Sing Psalm 78.1-7.

(Foundation: *How Firm a Foundation*)

Give ear, O my people, attend to my word,
dark sayings and parables sent from the Lord,
things we have before by our fathers been told,
which we would not dare from our children withhold.

Ezra 7-10

The glorious deeds of our God in His might,
and all of the works He has done in our sight,
together with all of the words of His Law,
would we on ourselves and our children bestow.

Lord, let all our children arise and declare
the truth of the Lord every day, everywhere,
and set all their hopes in God's wonderful Word,
and never forget all the works of the Lord.

Ezra 7-10

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How did Ezra and his companions beautify the temple of the Lord? Our bodies are a temple to the Lord, and so are our churches. What are you doing to beautify each of these?
2. Why must we resist every temptation to compromise with the unbelieving world?
3. How can you know when you have fallen into some kind of compromise with the unbelieving world? What should you do then?
4. What is repentance, and why is it so important in the life of faith?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this installment in our study, "Return from Exile"?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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