

Lesson 11: Ezra 7:6 – 8:34

Ezra 7:6

6 this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

We are told in verse 6 that Ezra came from Babylon. Nehemiah, by contrast, came from Susa, which is where we found Queen Esther. Coming from Babylon meant that Ezra had lived with the great majority of exiled Jews, who seem to have concentrated in Babylon and the surrounding areas. (Although we know from the Elephantine Papyri that an entire colony of Jews lived in the south of Egypt.)

We are told that Ezra was a secretary skilled in the Law of Moses. The word “secretary” could refer to a Persian office or could simply refer to Ezra’s position as a priest and scribe among the Jews. If the former, it must refer to the position to which Ezra was appointed by King Artaxerxes when he was given the specific tasks we are about to see.

Not only was Ezra a secretary, he was a secretary “versed” or “skilled” in the law of Moses, or as the KJV reads, “a ready scribe in the law of Moses.” The Hebrew word translated “versed” or “ready” refers to a person of the highest efficiency or a professional of the highest order. The word “skilled” literally means “rapid.” Its use here suggests a quickness of grasp and an ease of movement through complex and complicated material.

We are also told in verse 6 that the favor of the Lord or the hand of the Lord was upon Ezra, which means that God had given his special favor to that person. This description also suggests that God had influenced the Persian king to act in sending Ezra back to Judah and granting all his requests. We are not told what Ezra requested, but likely he requested some or all of the things granted to him in the letter of Artaxerxes we are about to read.

Beginning with Ezra there arose in Israel a class of specialists (called scribes) who were teachers of the law. They studied, interpreted, and copied the scriptures, and came to be greatly revered by the people.

The prophets condemned those who handled the scriptures but did not know God (Jeremiah 2:8). Sadly that situation eventually came to be true of the scribes that followed Ezra. Prior to the exile, the priests were regarded as the guardians of the law, but after the exile that role

moved to the scribes. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra marked the point of this transition. By the time of Christ, the scribes had drifted far away from the model that Ezra left for them. In fact, they had drifted so far that when their long awaited Messiah arrived, they did not recognize him. Here is what they were like in Jesus' day:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (Luke 20:46-47)

That is *not* how they started. They had fallen far away from the standard that Ezra set for them.

Verses 7-9

7 And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. 8 And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him.

Ezra did not return to Jerusalem by himself, but instead he was accompanied by a group of Jews, including some from groups that we studied earlier—priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. The names of many of the returnees are given in Ezra 8.

Verses 7-8 tells us that the return occurred during the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, which was 458 BC, and verse 9 tells us that the journey lasted about three and a half months. A direct path from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 500 miles, but they likely took a longer route through Northern Syria to avoid the desert (which is further suggested by their arrival in mid-summer). The trip by the longer route could have been 800 to 900 miles. Covering that distances in 3½ months meant they averaged about 10 miles per day, which is about half the usual rate of 15 to 20 miles a day. The slower rate of travel was likely due to the children and elderly in their number as well as to the large amount of gold and silver they were carrying with them.

The journey would have been dangerous, particularly at this time due to the revolt that was occurring in Egypt and the general lawlessness

that accompanied the revolt. But they returned safely because, as verse 9 tells us, the good hand of God was on Ezra.

Verse 10

10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Verse 10 is a key verse in Ezra, and a key verse in the entire Bible. “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” All of Ezra’s actions in the remainder of this book that bears his name must be interpreted in light of this verse. Verse 10 shows us the secret of Ezra’s lasting influence.

The word “heart” in verse 10 means the whole of one’s being. Religion was not just a hobby to Ezra. Instead, Ezra had concentrated his whole life on the study of God’s law. But it was more than just study; verse 10 tells us that Ezra also practiced the law and taught the law.

“[Ezra] is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct, and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”
(Kidner)

In this one verse we have our own tasks when it comes to God’s word – we must study it, we must do it, and we must teach it. Those are the legs of a three-legged stool, and if we neglect any one of them, then the stool will topple. Or, as Revelation 2-3 describes it, our candlestick will be removed.

Many today fail to study the word at all, and sadly that is not just true of those out in the world but is increasingly true in the Lord’s church. We were once known as a people of the book, but I fear we are losing that reputation. What does it mean to be a people of the Book?

- It means that we love the word of God.
- It means that we live the word of God.
- It means that we study the word of God.

- It means that we know the word of God.
- It means that we teach the word of God.
- It means that we proclaim the word of God.
- It means that we delight in the word of God.
- It means that we memorize the word of God.
- It means that we instruct our children in the word of God.
- It means that we respond to temptations by recalling and by quoting the word of God.
- It means that we understand the power and relevance of the word of God in our modern world. We know it is not a dead letter.
- It means that our preachers and our leaders and our teachers are Bible scholars.
- It means that we quote the Bible in our speech and quote it on our signs.
- It means that the word of our God is our standard in everything that we do.
- It means that we put the word of God ahead of our own popularity. (Ezra certainly did that, as we will see in the closing chapters of this book.)
- It means that we, like the noble Bereans, compare all that we hear (or sing!) with the word of God.
- It means that if the price of peace is compromising the word of God, then that price is too high.
- It means that our sermons are not about football or television shows, but rather begin with the phrase “Please open your Bibles to...” and are focused on the word of God.
- It means that our list of Bible classes is a list of Bible books.
- It means that our pulpits and classes ring with the word of God rather than ring as “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”

That is what it means to be a people of the Book! The denominations have largely cast the Bible away – but that must never be true of the Lord’s church.

“Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: **because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts**, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 5:24)

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” (Hosea 4:6) What you don’t know can destroy you!

Many who study, fail to do what the word commands them to do. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.” (1 John 5:3) “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Obedience is what happens when study and love come together.

Ezra loved God’s word and he loved God’s people. And because he loved both, Ezra told God’s people what they needed to hear. “Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.” (R. L. Whiteside)

What must our own attitude be toward God’s word? Ezra 7:10 tells us. We must set our heart to study it, and to do it, and to teach it. God’s word cannot be just an afterthought to us or a weekend hobby to us. Our entire life – both individually and as a congregation – must be centered on the word of God. When we move away from God’s word, we move away from God. When we neglect God’s word, we neglect God. When we fail to love God’s word, we fail to love God.

If we are no longer seen as a people of the book, then what is the answer to that problem? Verse 10 gives us the answer – “Ezra had set his heart.” The answer is **focus!** Ezra had devoted himself to God’s word – to studying it, to obeying it, to teaching it. In short, Ezra was focused on God’s word! Absent focus we will accomplish nothing, and that is not just true in our service to God. Excellence and achievement in any area demand focus.

We live in the Age of Distraction, and it shows. If we are mediocre and lackluster in our service, then it is likely because we are

distracted by other concerns. “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” (Matthew 13:22) “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:21) If you want to know what is important to us, look at what we are focused on – if you want to know where our treasure is, look for our heart. (See additional verses on the handout.)

Ezra was focused on God. He was focused on his mission. He was focused on God’s word. And just look at what he accomplished for God and for God’s people. Let’s notice the focus of Ezra as we study these chapters.

Verses 11-26

Ezra 7:11 This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: 12 “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now 13 I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand, 15 and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. 17 With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. 19 The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king’s treasury. 21 “And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, 22 up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 23 Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. 24 We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to

impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God. 25 “And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. 26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.”

Verses 11-26 contain a letter from King Artaxerxes. As with the other letters by Persian kings that we have seen in this book, some question the authenticity of this letter. As before, they say that the letter is too Jewish to have come from the pen of a Persian king. They also complain that the letter gives powers to Ezra to that are much more extensive than one would expect. But, as before, the answer is simple – the king undoubtedly had some help in writing the letter. In fact, Ezra himself was likely responsible for much of this letter, and then the letter was later sanctioned by the king. We should also note that the letter is not entirely Jewish but also includes some Persian terms such as “king of kings” in verse 12 and “seven counselors” in verse 14 (the latter being something we also saw in Esther).

This letter does not just send Ezra off on a mission. Instead, the letter sends Ezra off on a mission with the funds and resources he needed to accomplish that task. The king’s letter contains five stipulations: (1) It authorizes Ezra and those with him to go to Jerusalem to see that God’s law was observed. (2) It provides a grant to buy sacrifices and temple vessels. (3) It commands the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra. (4) It frees all the temple officials from taxation. (5) It authorizes Ezra to set up a judicial system.

Ezra, like Joseph many years before, had authority in a foreign government, and, like Joseph, that authority was part of God’s providence in using Ezra to fulfill God’s purposes for his people.

Why did the king send Ezra on this mission? We have already mentioned one reason—God wanted the king to send Ezra on the mission. But there may have also been a reason in the king’s mind that had to do with what was going on elsewhere in his kingdom. As we have mentioned, there was a rebellion in Egypt at this time. Thus, Artaxerxes likely wanted to know what was going on in the neighboring area of Palestine, and he wanted to make the people there happy and satisfied with his reign to keep the rebellion from

spreading. Ezra was given these special powers so that he could accomplish that task.

The introduction to the letter in verse 11 is written in Hebrew, while the letter itself in verses 12-26 is written in Aramaic.

In verse 14, Ezra is told by the king to go to Judah to see if the Jews there are living according to the Law of God. No reason is given for this order, and most likely it originated from Ezra himself because that is what he wanted to do and that is what he knew God wanted him to do. Some suggests that Ezra may have received reports from Judah that distressed him and caused him to want to travel there and initiate reforms. Artaxerxes naturally saw Judah as an area that could be easily influenced by Egypt, and so he likely had concerns of his own that something nefarious was happening there.

The phrase “the law of your God which is in your hand” in verse 14 confirms that this was a written law, not just an oral law.

The sacrifices and offerings in verse 17 also most likely came from the pen of Ezra as he composed the letter on the king’s behalf. We should keep in mind that the exiled Jews were not able to keep these sacrifices while they were separated from the temple, and thus there was no doubt a large sacrifice whenever groups returned.

The vessels in verse 19 may have been some that were overlooked when the captured vessels were returned by Cyrus in Ezra 1. But it is also possible that these vessels were new.

In verses 21-24, the king addresses the treasurers whom Ezra would encounter on his trip to Judah. This letter would serve both as Ezra’s introduction to them and as a command to them from the king to give Ezra whatever he required.

The Babylonian “talent” in verse 22 was 60 minas, with a mina being 60 shekels. (The Babylonians used a Base-60 number system, the remnants of which we can still see today – 60 minutes in an hour, 360 degrees in a circle. How did they arrive at such a base? Most bases can be traced back to the human hand – our own Base-10 being the best example. But a single hand gives us Base-5, and the 3 joints on the 4 fingers of that hand give us Base-12. Most believe that Base-60 came from an early merger of two groups of people – one using Base-5 and one using Base-12.) A talent was about 75 pounds, so the 100 talents in verse 22 would have been nearly 4 tons of silver!

In verse 23, we see a concern by the king that the wrath of God not fall upon him, or his realm, or his sons. We have seen that concern before in this book expressed by a king, and it was common in the polytheistic world in which they lived. (Recall from 6:10 that Darius likewise asked for prayers for his well being and for that of his sons.) Thus the king was motivated by his own personal interest to see that the activities were done in the proper manner to avoid offending the God of Israel.

In verse 24, the exemption of the temple officials from taxation is known from other ancient sources to have been a Persian policy.

In verse 25, the king's attention returns to Ezra. The king instructs Ezra to teach the law to those who do not know it, and he also instructs Ezra to appoint magistrates and judges to enforce the law. We know that Ezra did not need a command to teach because verse 10 told us that Ezra had already set his heart to teach the law. We know from extra-Biblical sources that Persian kings were concerned that each of their subject peoples take seriously their own laws, presumably so that they would also take seriously the laws of Persia.

In verse 26, the king refers to both the law of God and the law of the king, and he prescribes severe punishments for those who disobey either law. This power to inflict penalties, and the confiscation in particular, was later invoked in the divorce proceedings we will see in Chapter 10. (See 10:8.)

The second Aramaic part of Ezra ends in verse 26, and the remainder of the book is in Hebrew.

Verses 27-28

27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, 28 and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

With verses 27-28, we are suddenly made very much aware of Ezra the man as his own voice breaks into the narrative with, as one commentator said, "a grateful delight which time has done nothing to diminish." Ezra will take up the history himself in the first person until the end of Chapter 9. Nehemiah, like Ezra, will do much of his own narration in the next book.

Verse 27 tells us that God moved the king to beautify or adorn the temple. The Hebrew word for “adorn” is also found in Isaiah and in the Psalms, where each time God is the subject of the verb. In Isaiah 60:7, 13, the object of the verb is the temple, in Isaiah 55:5 and 60:9, the object is the people of God, and in Psalm 149:4 the object is the meek. The use of the word in Isaiah to refer to the temple are of particular interest here and have caused some to conclude that this return marked the event prophesied by Isaiah. But we know from our earlier study of Isaiah that those final chapters of Isaiah pointed to a later day than Ezra’s day in which the temple would be perfectly adorned by the servant.

Ezra 8

Verses 1-14

Ezra 8:1 These are the heads of their fathers’ houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king: 2 Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush. 3 Of the sons of Shecaniah, who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered 150 men. 4 Of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him 200 men. 5 Of the sons of Zattu, Shecaniah the son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 men. 6 Of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men. 7 Of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men. 8 Of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him 80 men. 9 Of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men. 10 Of the sons of Bani, Shelomith the son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 men. 11 Of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah, the son of Bebai, and with him 28 men. 12 Of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 men. 13 Of the sons of Adonikam, those who came later, their names being Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men. 14 Of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with them 70 men.

As with almost every list in the Bible, some commentators doubt the authenticity of this one. The reason for their doubt is that the list contains only 12 families, and they argue that means it was contrived to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. There are at least four problems with that argument. First, by their logic, had their actually been only 12 families, then the author would have had to alter the list, thereby making it unauthentic, to convince the critics that the list is authentic! Second, nowhere does the text say that the 12 families represents the twelve tribes. Third, if the symbol is intended, then Ezra likely chose

only 12 families to accompany him for that reason. Fourth, there are really more than 12 families mentioned because verse 2 includes an additional three families (although they are not listed by number as are the following 12).

We saw a similar list in Ezra 2 with regard to the first return under Cyrus, but there are a few differences. Here the priestly families (Phinehas and Ithamar in verse 2) are mentioned first, while in Ezra 2 the priestly families were mentioned last. Also, the priests here follow the Aaronite lineage, while the Ezra 2 priests follow the Zadokite lineage. Phinehas was the son of Aaron's third son, Eleazar, and Ithamar was Aaron's fourth son. (Exodus 6:23-25)

Another difference between this list and the one in Ezra 2 is that this list includes a descendant of King David in verse 2: "Of the sons of David, Hattush." From 1 Chronicles 3, we can deduce that Hattush was in the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. Dating Zerubbabel's birth around 560 BC, and taking a generation to be about 25 years, we get a date of around 460 BC, which is very close to 458 BC, the date of this return.

If we compare the family names in verses 4-14 with the names in 2:3-15, we find that almost all are present on both lists. What that means is that in most every case families are being reunited as exiles returning now are meeting family members and descendants of family members who had returned 80 years earlier.

Commentaries disagree about the meaning of the phrase "those who came later" or "those who are last" in verse 13. Most likely it simply means that these three family heads were the last ones from the family to migrate to Judah and that others had migrated earlier.

As for why this list is given, you can refer to our earlier comments about the list in Ezra 2. The Bible contains lists of honor and lists of shame. Here we see the former. In Chapter 10 we will see the latter.

Verses 15-20

Ezra 8:15 I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi. 16 Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, 17 and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God. 18 And by the good hand of our

God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18; 19 also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20; 20 besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name.

Ezra 7:6-8 briefly mentioned Ezra's departure from Babylon, but here we are given more details. The returnees assembled at the Ahava River, which was most likely a canal of the Euphrates, and they camped there for 3 days, which is a common period of time when beginning or ending a journey. (See 8:32 and Neh. 2:11.)

One thing that happened during those three days was that Ezra reviewed the people, and what he discovers is that there were no Levites among them. As we discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the Levites may not have been very numerous at this time.

Ezra then sends 11 men (which, not being 12, should make the critics happy) to go find some Levites. The 11 men include 9 leaders or family heads and 2 interpreters. The leaders were no doubt intended to use their influence to convince some Levites to join them, whereas the interpreters (or men of insight) were likely meant to use the law to persuade the Levites to accompany them to Jerusalem. Ezra sent leaders and diplomats, and he told them what to say. Ezra knew this mission was important, and so he left nothing to chance.

Verse 17 mentions "Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia." Who was Iddo and where was Casiphia? Casiphia is related to the word "silver" and may have been named after a guild of silversmiths. Most likely a school was located there, and Iddo was the head of the school. As for Casiphia, it is curious that the text makes a point of calling it a "place." (Unless you are using the NIV, which for some reason failed to translate that word. Makes you wonder what else it dropped...) Some argue that the Hebrew word translated "place" actually refers to a sanctuary or a synagogue, which would further support the idea that this was a school.

Ezra's plan is successful, and verses 18-19 tell us that two independent Levitical families decide to accompany them to Jerusalem. The total number of returning Levites is given as 38, which further supports the idea that there were not many Levites in Babylon at this time.

Recall from our earlier lessons that the Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. Because they had no land inheritance, they lived in 48 Levitical cities and were supported by tithes. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

Verse 20 tells us that 220 temple servants also accompanied them. As we have discussed, the role of the temple servants was to assist the Levites, and having such a large number may have been a factor in convincing these Levites to join them on their return.

Ezra had a list of their names, but that list is not given here. The purpose of the list was two-fold – to serve as a roll call on the trip back, and the record and confirm the Jewish ancestries of those who returned.

Verses 21-23

Ezra 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. 22 For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” 23 So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

Verses 21-22 describe the preparations for the journey. First, the people fast, and unlike the fasts we saw in Esther, this one is accompanied by a prayer. Specifically, the people ask God to grant them a safe journey, literally a “straight road.”

When the Pilgrims left England for America in 1620, Ezra 8:21 was the text of the last sermon they heard before departing on their voyage.

The word “children” in verse 21 reminds us that entire families were returning, but the Hebrew word can refer to anyone who was weak, including the aged.

The reference to “our goods” is a reminder that the road was unsafe due to bandits and the nearby Egyptian rebellion. This danger is highlighted in verse 22, where Ezra explains why he did not ask the king for a band of soldiers to accompany them. He had told the King that God would protect them, and so to ask for soldiers would have indicated a lack of faith on his part.

Would have asking for troops indicated a lack of faith on Ezra's part? Perhaps – but I am reminded of the story of the man who was in a flood, and stranded on the roof of his house, as the waters were rising. A man came by on a canoe and offered to help, but the man refused, saying, "God will provide." Another person came by in a boat and offered to help, but again the man refused, saying, "God will provide." Then a helicopter came by and offered to help, but for the third time the man refused, saying, "God would provide." The waters eventually rose above him and he drowned. In Heaven, he asked God, "Why didn't you help me? I had faith in you." God replied, "I sent you a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter ... what more did you want?"

In any event, God answered their prayers – and they arrived safely without the troops.

Some commentators try to pit Ezra against Nehemiah, and they point to these verses as a jab by Ezra against Nehemiah, who travelled with a military escort in Nehemiah 2:9. (And, if so, Nehemiah would likely have responded with a story similar to the one given above!) But the two missions were different. Ezra's mission was religious, whereas Nehemiah was sent as a political official, a governor, to Judah. He was likely given no choice about having a military escort.

Verses 24-30

Ezra 8:24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them. 25 And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered. 26 I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver, and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold, 27 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold. 28 And I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers. 29 Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the LORD." 30 So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.

A better translation of verse 24 is "twelve men as well as Sherebiah and Hashabiah and with them from their kinsmen, ten men" because it is clear from 8:18-19 that Sherebiah and Hashabiah were Levites. Thus, Ezra chose 12 priests and 12 Levites. This choice confirms Ezra

was fond of the number 12, which likely explains why he chose 12 families earlier.

Verses 25-27 describe a tremendous amount of wealth, and as usual some doubt its authenticity. But, as we have already seen, the Persian kings had tremendous wealth and enjoyed displaying it. Ezra carefully weighs the silver and gold to make sure that none of it was lost. The priests and the Levites were told to “guard them and keep them” until they were weighed again in Jerusalem.

This great wealth also reminds us of Ezra’s decision not to use a military escort – a decision that must have astonished the king and the other Persians in view of the great treasure they were carrying.

Verses 31-34

Ezra 8:31 Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way. 32 We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days. 33 On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Meremoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui. 34 The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

Verse 31 helps us with the chronology. On the first day of the first month, the exiles assembled at the river. (This is the official beginning of the journey per Ezra 7:9.) They stayed there for 3 days while Ezra discovered the lack of Levites. They searched and found the Levites, and then arrived back at the river. On the 12th day of the first month, the caravan began its journey from the river to Jerusalem. Ezra 7:9 tells us they arrived on the first day of the fifth month.

Verse 31 tells us that they were delivered from enemies and ambushes along the way. The Hebrew used does not mean that unsuccessful ambushes occurred, but more likely means that God prevented the ambushes from happening at all. The 900 miles trek is described with only four words—“We came to Jerusalem.”

After resting for three days, the first thing they did was weigh the silver and the gold to confirm that none was missing.