



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 8:1-36

Topic

Before setting out for Jerusalem,
Ezra makes camp for three days by the river

Title

“Living In a Camp, Down by the River”

- Tony Bennett “left” his “heart in San Francisco”; but if *you’re* going there, “be sure to wear flowers in your hair.”
- “Chicago, Chicago” was Frank Sinatra’s “kind of town.”
- Billy Joel is always in a *New York State Of Mind*
- You can stand “on the corner in Winslow, Arizona...”
- We all *do* know “the way to San Jose.”
- So, *Vive Las Vegas.*

China Grove... El Paso... Jackson...
Woodstock... Lodi... Muskogee... Youngstown...
Monterey... Albuquerque... and Kansas City all
have songs. So do lots of other cities, both here
in the US and abroad.

There are a few songs about Jerusalem. The
one that comes to my mind is Darrell Mansfield's
ballad:

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
Why won't you believe in Him.
Don't you know; can't you see;
Your King is this man from Galilee*

In the Book of Psalms, there are fifteen *Songs of Ascent*. They are Psalm 120 through 134. Since Jerusalem is elevated, you *ascend* as you approach it. These psalms were sung by Jews as they *ascended* the road to Jerusalem to annually attend the three pilgrim festivals.

In our chapter, Ezra and a group of Israelites are returning to Jerusalem after decades of exile in Babylon. Do we doubt that they sang the *Songs of Ascent*?

One of them in particular, Psalm 121, reads in part like this: “I will lift up my eyes to the hills - From whence comes my help? My help *comes* from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth” (v1-2).

That pairs up nicely with Ezra 8:22,

Ezra 8:22 ... I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "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."

Whether he was directly thinking about it or not, Ezra's words capture the spirit of Psalm 121:1-2, “My help comes from the Lord.”

Where does *our* help come from? It comes from the Lord; but, if I'm honest, I sometimes - maybe even often - look to other *sources* and *resources* for my help.

The Lord as our help will be our theme as we read through chapter eight. I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 Since It Comes From The Lord, You Can Seek His Help, and #2 Since It Comes From The Lord, You Will See His Help.

#1 Since It Comes From The Lord, You Can Seek His Help

(v21-23)

When I was doing international travel for missions, I was paranoid about having my passport or money stolen. I tried every secret belt and wallet and undergarment on the market. Occasionally I'd forget to put daily spending money in my pocket, so when I had to pay for something, I'd have to practically undress in order to get to my pesos.

Ezra was leading a second wave of returnees to Jerusalem. They were transporting silver and gold, and precious articles. It's hard to get an exact value on their cargo, but commentators put it at a million dollars, if not several million.

Their journey was four months long, traversing 900 miles, through bandit territory. If I was in charge, and the king of Persia offered an armed military escort - I'd say "Yes!" in a heartbeat.

But in this case, **I'd be wrong.**

We're starting chronologically, in verses twenty-one through twenty three.

Ezr 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.

We'll see in verse fifteen that they were there three days. It was devoted to spiritual preparation for their journey - especially to fasting and prayer.

Attitudes regarding fasting are all over the place:

- Some folks talk about fasting as almost mystical - tapping into hidden spiritual power.
- Others tout the health benefits of regular fasting, caring little about its potential spiritual impact.

Fasting is almost always, in the Bible, coupled with prayer. I got to thinking about that. Bear with me while I try to develop a thought.

I do a lot of cooking now, and I can honestly tell you, I am the slowest cook on the planet. I get all my ingredients out, and measured. I set out all the pots and pans and utensils. They need to be arranged in order of use. My spices are prearranged alphabetically.

I clean up as I'm cooking, which further slows me down. And if you're watching me...
Fuggedaboutit.

In Bible times, it took a long, long, **long** time to prepare a meal.

Have you ever had Zarb? It's an authentic Bedouin BBQ meal. It takes 5-6 hours to prepare; *and that doesn't include butchering the chicken, pig, or cow.*

In Bible times, when you fasted, it literally freed up hours upon hours that would normally be spent cooking and eating. **You fasted in order to pray** - *not* as a discipline in and of itself.

There are cases of fasting without prayer, and praying without fasting. But freeing up time to pray by fasting is something to consider.

Ezr 8:22 For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "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."

If they really believed that their help was from the Lord, an armed escort would be, at best, a poor testimony. At worst, it would give some credit for their exodus to the power of Persia.

Later in this Second Temple story, Nehemiah will lead a third return, and he *will* have an escort. But for Ezra - it would have been sin.

Ezr 8:23 So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

They “fasted” to “entreat” God in “prayer.” We’ll see in the verses surrounding these how God “answered.”

These verses, and Psalm 121, are for and about God’s chosen people, Israel. We are not Israel; but they are for and about us, too, in that they reveal God’s providence for all those He loves in any dispensation.

God is your help - always. **Trouble is, His idea of help isn't always what we think it should be.**

We're the church, and we live in the Church Age between the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost until the resurrection and rapture of the church. A main characteristic of the Church Age, for believers, is **suffering**:

- Jesus promised His Church Age followers, “In the world you will have **tribulation**” (John 16:33).
- The apostle Paul wrote, “I now rejoice in my **sufferings** for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the **afflictions** of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church...” (Colossians 1:24).
- Second Timothy 3:12 “... All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will **suffer** persecution.”

Because we who are in Christ are His “body” on the earth, in one sense it is as if Jesus never left. We can therefore expect to suffer many hardships just for being in Christ.

As well, we will suffer from the normal consequences of living in a world ruled by the god of this age, Satan.

I - we - are called upon to endure sufferings, to go through them, with God's hand upon us. His "help" in this age is His abundant grace.

Wait on the Lord in your suffering. Don't concoct your own plan to alleviate or avoid it. Trust in the Word... In prayer... In the fellowship of the saints.

You have the Comforter - God the Holy Spirit - living within you.

- It may be God will provide an escort, an army - like He did for Nehemiah.
- It's more likely He wants you to be like Ezra and give testimony to His strength in your weakness.

#2 Since It Comes From The Lord, You Will See His Help

(v1-20 & 24-36)

When you need somebody's Help!

It's not just anybody's Help!

So you seek the Lord, and I'm saying, based on His promises, *you will **see** His help.* Ezra did.

Ezr 8:1 These *are* the heads of their fathers' *houses*, and *this is* the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of King Artaxerxes:

Israel was a tribal society. Many of the laws and customs that are strange to us are necessary to maintain tribal inheritances. In the church, if your brother dies childless, you don't go to his widow - to your sister-in-law - and have a child with his name. But in Israel, you did; it was necessary.

We're going to skip reading the names in verses two through fourteen. By most calculations, based on the numbers given in those verses for the men who returned, estimating the women

and little ones, the entire group numbered five thousand.

Ezr 8:2 of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush;

Ezr 8:3 of the sons of Shecaniah, of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah; and registered with him *were* one hundred and fifty males;

Ezr 8:4 of the sons of Pahath-Moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred males;

Ezr 8:5 of the sons of Shechaniah, Ben-Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males;

Ezr 8:6 of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males;

Ezr 8:7 of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males;

Ezr 8:8 of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him eighty males;

Ezr 8:9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males;

Ezr 8:10 of the sons of Shelomith, Ben-Josiphiah, and with him one hundred and sixty males;

Ezr 8:11 of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males;

Ezr 8:12 of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred and ten males;

Ezr 8:13 of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names *are* these - Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah - and with them sixty males;

Ezr 8:14 also of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud, and with them seventy males.

✎ Ezr 8:15 Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there.

Implied is that this return was voluntary. No one from the tribe of Levi volunteered. We shouldn't speculate on why.

Since Ezra was going to the Second Temple to initiate reforms, he'd need Levites who could perform services in the Temple.

Ezr 8:16 Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leaders; also for Joiarib and Elnathan, men of understanding.

Ezr 8:17 And I gave them a command for Iddo the chief man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say to Iddo *and* his brethren the Nethinim at the place Casiphia - that they should bring us servants for the house of our God.

Ezr 8:18 Then, by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, with his sons and brothers, eighteen men;

Ezr 8:19 and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty men;

Ezr 8:20 also of the Nethinim, whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinim. All of them were designated by name.

In some cases, if there are no volunteers, then the work doesn't get done. In the case of the Ezra exodus - that was not an option. Ezra therefore organized the leadership, and chose two guys to represent the situation. Without coercion, their pre-mission mission yielded a capable leader, thirty-eight Levites, and two hundred twenty Nethinim - servants for the Levites.

It's usually better to volunteer on your own; but you sometimes need to mention the need, so that a servant will come forward.

✎ Ezr 8:24 And I separated twelve of the leaders of the priests - Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them -

Ezr 8:25 and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel *who were* present, had offered.

Ezr 8:26 I weighed into their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, silver articles *weighing* one hundred talents, one hundred talents of gold,

Ezr 8:27 twenty gold basins *worth* a thousand drachmas, and two vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold.

A million dollars? Millions? That would make me nervous on a walk through treacherous territory. These guys stepped-up, trusting (like Ezra) that their help would come from the Lord.

Ezr 8:28 And I said to them, "You *are* holy to the LORD; the articles *are* holy also; and the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.

Ezr 8:29 Watch and keep *them* until you weigh *them* before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' *houses* of Israel in Jerusalem, *in* the chambers of the house of the LORD."

Ezr 8:30 So the priests and the Levites received the silver and the gold and the articles by weight, to bring *them* to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

“Holy” doesn’t mean sinless. It means *set apart*. His people were considered precious to God - like we think silver and gold is precious. You, too, are God’s precious possession.

Ezr 8:31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth *day* of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.

If you are looking for a travelogue, all you get is verse thirty-one.

Four months of camping and moving are totally skipped-over, serving to emphasize that God made sure nothing happened along the way.

Ezr 8:32 So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days.

After the long, arduous trip, they had jet lag. Or, I guess, jog-lag.

Ezr 8:33 Now on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him *was* Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them *were* the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui,

Ezr 8:34 with the number *and* weight of everything. All the weight was written down at that time.

Ezra was a guy for accurate numbers, and for inventories. It's an encouragement to not be sloppy in our serving the Lord. (So don't look in my office).

Ezr 8:35 The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats *as* a sin offering. All *this was* a burnt offering to the LORD.

They did what was prescribed by the Law of Moses. While they were glad to do it - to offer sacrifices - I'm glad that, thanks to Jesus, the only thing **we** offer is ourselves as living sacrifices.

Ezr 8:36 And they delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps and the governors *in the region* beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God.

This was the final item on this particular list. To quote President Bush: “Mission accomplished.”

In the case of the returnees:

- You see them responding obediently to Ezra’s call to fast and pray.
- You see them helped at the camp as God provides hundreds of Levites and Nethinim.
- You see individuals step-up to carry the precious metals and objects.
- You see them arriving safe and sound at their destination.
- You see that they have favor among the Gentiles.

For us, I think the most important lesson - the thing to “see” (by faith) - is the brevity of verse thirty-one. Let’s read it again.

Ezr 8:31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth *day* of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.

They left for Jerusalem. They arrived at Jerusalem. God defeated any schemes of the enemy along their road.

You who are in Christ are on a journey to the New Jerusalem - the city that will come down out of Heaven, Whose builder and maker is God. When you die, or are raptured, you will arrive in the New Jerusalem.

The trials, the afflictions, the sufferings we think so much about now on the journey, won't be worth a mention.

Satan, sin, death - Even though defeated by Jesus at the Cross and by His resurrection, they can ambush you in the Church Age.

But as you set your affections on things above,
and remain heavenly minded, “the things of
earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His
glory and grace.”

*We will meet in the Golden City
in the New Jerusalem
All our pain and all our tears will be no more*

*We will stand with the hosts of Heaven
and cry “Holy is the Lamb”
We will worship and adore You evermore*