

Oct 31st 2010: Why I am Still A Believer series: Ezra 7:1-10
God's Hand Upon My Life

Those of you who were here last Sunday will recall that our focus then was on Elijah. A tough, blunt, outside sort of guy who faithfully served the Lord. He was God's chosen prophet at a time when God's people were in disarray, separated into two Nations, but still their own masters in their own land.

This morning we move forward several centuries till we meet Ezra, and the contrast between him and Elijah is immense. Their names both begin with E and they are both faithful servants of the Lord, but there the similarities end. Ezra was a priest of God and a scholar of the Law. He was more white collar than blue collar. A preacher rather than a fiery prophet. More of an inside person than an outside adventurer.

Yet having said all that about Ezra, it is obvious from what is written concerning him in the Bible that when God told him to return to Jerusalem from Babylon, Ezra was prepared to move out of his comfort zone and do just that, despite the risk involved and the change of lifestyle it demanded.

You see back in 586 BC God's people had finally been completely conquered by Nebuchadnezzar who had taken them back to Babylon and into exile. As far as the enemies of the Jews were concerned the Nation of Israel was no more. Then in 539 BC Babylon was captured by the Persian Empire under Cyrus who in 538 BC passed an edict allowing the Jews to return to their own land and to rebuild the Temple there.

Zerubbabel took the first group back in 538 and by 516 the Temple has been rebuilt and the land inhabited again, but still many Jews remain in Babylon. The situation in Jerusalem is not good or safe. The walls remain broken down and the enemies are strong and persistent. Then in 458 BC, some 58 years later, we first hear of Ezra. He is still living in Babylon and Jerusalem is still a very unsafe and chaotic place. Probably a little like Afghanistan is today. The walls are still down. The population is still subject to increasing terrorist style attacks from the people around them. They lack strong spiritual leaders and their worship of God is being polluted by the absence of the knowledge of the law and what God requires of His people.

The Jews are free to leave Babylon and return to their own land but not many are doing so. They are comfortable and established in the safe cities of Babylon while Jerusalem is a war zone. But Ezra knows that God needs him in Jerusalem.

So in Ezra chapter 7 we read that this scholar, Ezra. This man of great learning who can trace his pedigree as a priest right back to Aaron, the first priest of God. This teacher who we are told: (Ezra 7:6) was—“**well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given**”.

Applies for the help from the king of Babylon that would enable him to return to Jerusalem where he can be God’s instrument. And he knows it won’t be easy. Yet he is prepared to go.

For Ezra the Lord’s call upon his life was so paramount that he was willing to go way outside of his comfort zone to do whatever God wanted of him. And as I thought about that this week I stopped to thank God for those from this congregation who have been prepared to act in a similar way. Those like Jan, who lead our service today. When she sensed God calling her to go on Impact Africa she knew that to obey His calling was to go way outside of her comfort zone, but like Ezra she went. And now God has called her into another venture that will no doubt be just as demanding. And there are many others I could mention who like Ezra were not really the adventurous type, but when God says go it’s easier in the long run to obey Him, than feel miserable because we said no.

So Ezra says ‘Yes’ to God and his journey takes him and those who go with him exactly 4 months. They carry with them a treasure of gold, silver and precious articles that had been donated by the king and by the Jews who remained in Babylon, for the house of God in Jerusalem. Ezra knows that they will be riding through countryside populated by bandits and enemies but he explains to us in Ezra 7:22

I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him."

So Ezra divides all the wealth they are carrying amongst the members of his party and they journey along a dangerous route to a dangerous place trusting at all times in the Lord.

When they get to Jerusalem Ezra discovers that things on the spiritual front are a lot worse than he ever expected. The people's lack of knowledge concerning the law of God has led them into a place of impurity and compromise with their heathen neighbours, and even their religious leaders are living corrupt lives. And Ezra is a broken man because of this, for he immediately joins himself with God's people in Jerusalem, and aligns himself with their sinfulness. And out of his brokenness he goes to God in prayer, right there in front of the Temple, and he prays aloud, confessing before God the people's sins as though they were his own with tears and weeping. Ezra 9:13 gives us the beginning of his prayer:

Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed:

"O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

Then as he prayed the crowds started to gather. And the people hearing his prayer were convicted by the Spirit and began to weep about their sin. And one of the leaders came to Ezra and confessed before him that they had sinned and encouraged Ezra to gather all the people together so that they could publicly repent and renew, as a nation, their covenant with God. So 3 days later they came en masse to Ezra, and they all stood in the rain as Ezra spoke God's word to them. And they confessed with weeping their sins, renewed their covenant with the Lord, and committed themselves to the hard action that was now required in order that they, as a Nation, would once more walk in the way of God.

The fruit of Ezra's obedience came, but not before he had endured the pain and heartache of ministry. And that is not usual for God's servants. Just because a person responds to the call of God and moves out of their comfort zone in order to serve Him, it doesn't follow that things will then go smoothly for them. Talk to anyone in this congregation who has answered a calling from God to go on a mission trip to Africa, or to go to Cambodia, or to commit themselves to Bible College, or to serve in a ministry that takes great faith to do so, and they will tell you of the let downs they met on the way. But the perseverance of faith that we see so clearly here in Ezra leads eventually to the blessing of God.

So Ezra's life and ministry progressed for God, and there is so much more that could be recounted about it. But our interest this morning is in his response to that question that we have already presented to Abraham, Job, and Elijah. The question about why he is still a follower of God.

For we know that Ezra has left a life of comfort and prosperity in Babylon to travel to the war zone of Jerusalem. We know that his ministry has caused him much heartache and pain and, despite the fruit he has seen, has made him very unpopular with some powerful Jewish leaders as well as the heathen enemies of the Jewish nation. We know that Ezra is at peace about who he is and where he is serving the Lord, but we also know that life is tough for him. So the answer he gives is one we want to hear.

And I reckon, from my reading of Ezra's words in this book that bears his name; a book that most scholars believe that he wrote—that he would turn to us and say, "I'm still a believer because I know that the hand of God is upon my life in all I do".

Look with me at chapter 7 where Ezra first mentions his own involvement and verse 6

"this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him."

Then look a little further in the same chapter at verse 9

"He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him."

Then continue on a till you come to the final two verses, 27-28

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way ²⁸ and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me."

Then turn to chapter 8:18

Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 men;

And then the verse we have already looked at, 8:22, which is Ezra's own words of testimony to a heathen king:-

I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him."

And then finally turn to 8:31

On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way.

It is just so obvious. Ezra knew that God's hand was upon him and that knowledge alone would have kept him following the Lord.

As a believer in Jesus do you need to be reminder this morning that the gracious hand of the Lord is always upon you. Whatever you do and go through. His hand is never removed from your life. That's why Ezra could respond so positively to God's call, despite the hardships that went with it, and it's exactly the same for us.

And this morning, if you are yet to wholeheartedly decide to follow Jesus, then let this be yet another reason for doing so. For when you place your 'now' and your eternal future in His hand, that's where it stays. For the all powerful almighty God has promised to keep you, to guard you, and to love you forever.

As Jesus said in John 10:29

²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Let us truly praise God anew this morning for such an assurance and seek to trust Him beyond our own comfort zone because of this so special promise.

