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Sermon Manuscript: Ezra 8 17 April 2017

**Operation: The Journey Home**

**Ezra 8**

**Topic:** Trust and depend on God’s provision, for answers and protection.

**Subject:** The way that Christians should respond when they needed God’s providence, protections and answers

**Complement:** is by trusting and depending on Him.

**Purpose:** The listeners will respond with trust and dependence when they need God’s providence, answers and protection

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| **Intro:**  1: Arouse interest | Ticking a checklist (talking to self):  “Hmmm… Dr. Rick asked me to organize a class retreat. What should I do? Which one do I need to do first? I need people willingly to join this trip. I need a date that everyone is available. I need a venue. I need to book a transport service, maybe? One that can transport us to the venue and back safely. Is this an overnight or a day trip? Food! The classmates will definitely ask for good food so this should be a priority. What kind of program should I do? Do I need a worship leader? What games can be played? Or do I plan a silent prayer all day? Where do I get my funds? Wait… I cannot do all these alone! God! I need you. I’m lost and I don’t know what to do.” |
| 2: Raise need | When is the last time that you saw yourself in this kind of situation? What did you do then? One thing for sure is you and I need God’s help and only God’s grace can pull us through in this kind of situation. |
| 3: Subject | How then should we respond when we need God’s help? |
| 4: Bkgrd | Ezra has the same dilemma when King Artaxerxes finally greenlighted Ezra and his fellow Jews to return to Jerusalem. Imagine, 56 years since the first batch of Israelites left for Jerusalem. 56 years of facing various oppositions from rebuilding the temple. Finally, King Artaxerxes allowed the resumption of the rebuilding. Moreover, he even allowed Ezra and Jews, who are willing, to return to Jerusalem, even appointing Ezra to be the teacher of the law there. |
| 5: Preview  R, Passage | Today’s passage on Ezra 8 will show us how Ezra carried out the task given by King Artaxerxes. Restatement: Let us turn our bibles to Ezra 8 and keep it open (text) and we will see how Ezra and the Israelites responded to the task and how God had seen them through. |
| T | After Ezra had read the letter that King Artaxerxes had given him, with full trust that God’s grace will be upon him, he took courage and gathered the leading Israelites to go to Jerusalem with him (cf. 7:28b). |
| MP I,  SP “A”  Explanation | Ezra trusted that God will provide the people that he needed and he fully depended on him. Sure enough, God provided him fifteen families who were willing to journey with him back to Jerusalem as seen from verses 8:1-14. Of which, two families descended from the line of the priests and one family from the house of David while the other 12 families belongs to the families that return to Jerusalem 56 years ago. These families were headed by capable men. |
| SP “B” | Then in verses 15-20, Ezra gathered the volunteered families in Ahava for a final attendance check as they prepare for the pilgrimage. He found out that they have no Levites among them. Ezra trusted that God would give him the wisdom to choose the right people to carry out the task of finding willing Levites to return home with them. Sure enough, God provided the chosen men with capable and willing Levites and temple priests to journey with them. |
| ILL, SP “C”  (organizing church camp needs people) | When we are organizing a church camp or a retreat, there are two groups of people we need in order to execute it. We need people willing to attend. We also need capable leaders to run the retreat especially spiritual leaders to help us balance labor and prayer. What’s the use of having a retreat with willing participants joining when there are no competent leaders to run it? What’s the use of having competent leaders running with no willing participants joining? Like Ezra, we need to entrust these to God and have faith on His providence. We need to trust and depend on Him that He will provide all our needs. |
| Big T  (review MPI) | When need arises, we need to depend on God for provision. Yet, Ezra did not just stop there. |
| MPII | In verses 21-23, Ezra recognized that the road ahead of them was perilous or dangerous yet He trusted that God’s hands would be upon them. For that, he called all families to fast and petition for their safe journey. Ezra and the Jews trusted that God will hear and answer their petitions. |
| SP “A”  Explanation | They humbled themselves before God and fasted; offering up petitions of safe journey for them and their possessions. It is not easy to go on an arduous journey with an approximate 5000 people. Calling for a fasting and humbling before God sets the tone for the pilgrimage for God to sustain and protect them physically and spiritually all through out. |
| SP “B”  Explanation | Also, Ezra and the Jews declined any military protection from the king. For they have boldly declared that God’s gracious hand is upon all of them. Rather than depending on the soldiers of the king, they depended on God more for their protection for they trusted and feared Him. With this trust and dependence, they surrendered their concerns to God on this journey that they were taking.  Because the Israelites humbled themselves before God, fasted, trusted and feared Him, God answered their prayers. |
| ILL  (relying on human efforts) | My roommate shared with me this story. There was one overseas speaker that they have invited to speak in a camp that they organized. The speaker was residing in an area or region that was politically unstable. So, the organizers asked him if there’s anything that they can help with his flight to their place whether through prayer or in purchasing the air ticket. The speaker told them that he’ll take care of it and he has a brother who’s in the government who will help him should he has a problem with going to the camp site. As the camp date becomes nearer, the speaker tried to purchase an air ticket but failed. He tried to reach out to his brother to help him fly out, this, too, failed. The speaker forgot that even the smallest thing that he is confident of will fail should he continue to rely on his own efforts rather than bringing it before God. |
| SP “C” | Likewise, when we are preparing for church camp or retreat, spiritual preparation is very important. We do not know what will happen in the process of the preparation or even during the retreat. As long as the work that we do will glorify God, Satan will find a way to disrupt it like making us rely more on human effort rather than God. So like Ezra and the Jews, we need to humble ourselves before God, with trust and fear, offered up our petitions to Him. |
| review MPII | When petitions are surrendered, we need to completely trust that God hears and will answer our petitions. |
| MPIII | During the three days that they stayed in Ahava, Ezra continued to show his trust and dependence on God especially for protection. |
| SP “A” | In verses 24-30, Ezra chose and set apart twelve leading priests, delegating them the task of accounting for the freewill offerings from the king, his officials and Israelites. He reminded them that these offerings were consecrated to the Lord. He also instructed them to guard these carefully. True enough, the chosen priests proved to be good stewards. God protected their hearts and in turn, God protected Ezra and the Jews. Ezra and the Jews trusted God and depended on Him to protect them by giving them a set of good stewards. |
| SP “B” | God heard their petitions and protected them from enemies along the way. In verses 31-32, Ezra and the Jews were able to arrive in Jerusalem in one piece and rested for three days. All the way, they trusted God and depended on his protection that they or their possessions will not be harmed despite the dangers they had encountered along the way. |
| SP “C” | Not only did God protected Ezra and Jews by giving them a set of good stewards and a safe journey, God protected them by keeping the offerings all accounted for especially the ones that came from the king’s treasury. In verses 33-34, they successfully handover the offering to the priest in charge of the temple in Jerusalem. “Everything was accounted for by number and weight…” |
| SP “D” | Ezra and the Jews trusted that God’s hand was on them. They completely depended on His protection to see through in this journey back home. Likewise, we need to trust that God will protect us from any harm. We need to depend on Him too for protection and not rely on our own selves.  Running a church camp or a retreat from start to the end would not only require us to trust and depend on God for provisions, we need to trust that God will protect this ministry all the way through. Sometimes we would start with complete trust and dependence yet falter along the way and start relying on ourselves to cope. |
| ILL  (camp story) | There was a camp that we have organized for college students 15 years ago. We went through the usual preparations, prayer meetings, praying for one another, praying for the place, praying for everything. When we arrived in our camp-site, we thought we had everything covered. But, unexpected things started to happen. Campers getting injured. Campers being harassed by unknown spirits while sleeping. A portion of the beam would suddenly fell and injuring a camper. We, then, were told that there were spirits in the camp-site. All of us, staff and campers, started to fell on our knees, confessing our sins and start praying for the camp-site and each other for God’s protection the entire camp duration. The entire campers and organizers did a prayer walk and asking God for cleansing and protection in every nook and cranny of the camp-site. One lesson we learned from this experience was to put our complete trust and dependence on God for protection of his people and His ministry no matter what the circumstances. |
| Conclusion | In verses 35-36, Ezra and the Jews showed that they responded to God’s grace with complete faith and trust with the sacrifices that they have offered. Acknowledging their sins is acknowledging their need to depend on God. This trust and dependence on God also became their testimony to the local authorities in fulfilling the king’s orders. |
| MI | So, trust and depend on God for provision, answers and protection. Do not rely on yourselves. Learn to seek God’s help, will and refuge. Just like Ezra and the Jews, they responded to God’s grace with complete faith and trust. |
| App | When is the last time that you seek out God for help with faith and dependence? When is the last time that you humbled down and trust that God will hear and answer your prayers? When is the last time that you completely depended on God’s protection for a safe journey? When is the last time that you completely trust and depend on God for everything?  What will be your response then when you are to face another challenge? |

**Operation: The Journey Home**

**Ezra 8 (Cyclical Inductive)**

*Purpose: The listeners will respond with faith and dependence when they need God’s providence, answers and protection.*

**Introduction:**

1. Arouse Interest: How do I prepare myself when going to a retreat or a camping trip? How do I prepare and organize a church camp?

1. Need: How do we respond when we need God’s grace?
2. Subject: What should our posture be when we need God’s help?
3. Background: After 70 years in exile under Babylon, Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The rebuilding process started and halted for several times over the course of another 60 years. Another decree had been issued for the next batch of willing Israelites to return to Jerusalem, this time led by Ezra.
4. Preview: Let us turn to Ezra 8 and keep it open (text) as we explore how Ezra carried the task given by King Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 and how God had been with him all through out (transition).
   1. **Depend on God’s provision (8:1-20).**
      1. God provided willing Jews to return to Jerusalem with Ezra (cf. 7:28, 8:1-14).
      2. God provided capable Levites to return to Jerusalem with Ezra (8:15-20).
      3. We need to trust that God will provide for our needs. (ILL: Church camp manpower recruitment)
   2. **Depend on God for answers (8:21-23).**
      1. God answered Ezra and the Jews’ petition when they humbled themselves and fasted (8:21).
      2. God answered Ezra and the Jews’ petition when they trusted and feared God (8:22-23).
      3. We need to trust that God hears and will answer our petitions. (ILL: Importance of spiritual preparation)
   3. **Depend on God’s protection (8:24-34).**
      1. God protected Ezra and the Jews by giving them a set of good stewards (24-28).
      2. God protected Ezra and the Jews by giving them a safe journey (31-32).
      3. God protected Ezra and the Jews by keeping the offerings all accounted for (33-34).
      4. We need to trust that God will protect us all the way. (ILL: Running the camp and ending well)

**Conclusion (8:35-36):**

1. Trust and depend on God because He provides, answers and protects (Main Idea).
2. Application: When is the last time that you seek out God for help with faith and dependence? When is the last time that you humbled down and trust that God will hear and answer your prayers? When is the last time that you completely depended on God’s protection for a safe journey? When is the last time that you completely trust and depend on God for everything? What will be your response then when you are to face another challenge?

**Prologue:** Israel was still in exile under the captivity of Persia this time. There had been an initial decree for Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple that was destroyed by the Babylonians (Chap 1-3). However, oppositions on-site had been disrupting the progress of the rebuilding until it was halted by another decree (Chap 4-5). This was overturned and rebuilding resumed when King Darius was able to find the initial decree (Chap 6). Then, there had been a second return to Jerusalem, this time with Ezra and any willing Israelites including Levites and priests as permitted by King Artaxerxes (Chap. 7).

**Exegetical Idea:** The response of Ezra and the Israelites to God’s grace shown through His provisions, answer to their petition and protection was done with faith and sacrifices.

**Exegetical Outline:**

1. The way God was with Ezra and the Israelites was by providing for their needs (1-20).
   1. God provided Ezra with Jews willing to return to Jerusalem with him (1-14).
   2. God provided Ezra with capable Levites and temple priests to return to Jerusalem with him (15-20).
2. The way God was with Ezra and the Israelites was by answering their petition (21-22).
3. God answered Ezra and the Jews’ petition when they humbled themselves and fasted (21).
4. God answered Ezra and the Jews’ petition when they trusted and feared God (22).
5. The way God was with Ezra and the Israelites was by protecting them (24-34).
6. God protected Ezra and the Israelites by having Ezra set apart leading priests to take charge of the offerings and artifacts (24-28).
   * 1. Ezra delegated the tasks of accounting the offerings and artifacts to the Levites and leading priests (24-27)
     2. Ezra reminded the Levites and leading priests that they and the offerings were consecrated to the Lord (28).
     3. Ezra instructed the Levites and leading priests to guard these offerings carefully (29-30).
7. God protected Ezra and the Israelites by keeping them safe from enemies and bandits (31-32).
8. God protected Ezra and the Israelites by keeping the offerings and artifacts sent by the king accounted for (33-34).
9. The response of Ezra and the Israelites to God’s provision, answer petition and protection was with faith and sacrifices (35-36).
10. Ezra and the Israelites responded with faith and trust in God’s grace (18a, 22b, 31c).
11. Ezra and the Israelites responded with sacrifices to God (35-36).

**Verses Questions**

Context What did the author record just prior to this passage?

A letter from the King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra decreeing that any Israelites may return to Jerusalem with him. It is a letter approving of Ezra’s role as a teacher of the law in Jerusalem and Judah. This letter also served as a warning to those who will oppose or create trouble or disobey the law of God.

Purpose Why is this passage in the Bible?

This passage shows how God’s gracious hands are upon Ezra and the Israelites by making His presence known through provisions, answered petition and protection.

Background What historical context helps us understand this passage?

Israel was still in exile under the captivity of Persia this time. There had been an initial decree for Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple that was destroyed by the Babylonians (Chap 1-3). However, oppositions on-site had been disrupting the progress of the rebuilding until it was halted by another decree (Chap 4-5). This was overturned and rebuilding resumed when King Darius was able to find the initial decree (Chap 6). Then, there had been a second return to Jerusalem, this time with Ezra and any willing Israelites including Levites and priests as permitted by King Artaxerxes (Chap. 7).

1. What is the genre of this passage? What kind of story is this?

This passage is in narrative form telling the pilgrimage story of the Israelites back to Jerusalem under the leading of Ezra.

1. Who is the main character of this passage?

Ezra is the main character of this passage as he was the one who appeared through out the story. He is also the one who very dominant all through out in terms of dialogues and instructions. Through the use of first person, Ezra is not only the narrator but also the actor in the entire passage.

1. What is the significance of the Israelites willingly to join Ezra return to Jerusalem?

As a contrast to Ezra 2, this chapter provided the remaining list of families in Babylon who were all willing to return to Jerusalem with Ezra, “leaving none of their members behind.” The list also opened with a highlight on the background of some of the family groups such as two groups descended from a line of priests and one group from the house of David. Having the heads from these families joining Ezra speaks a lot about Ezra’s influence and status in this community. [[1]](#footnote-0)

1. What is the importance of “gracious hand of our God was on us”?

This showed how much faith Ezra has for God as this phrase he often uttered to acknowledged how God is a good provider and finding favor in the Almighty God.[[2]](#footnote-1)

1. Why did Ezra gather the people in Ahava?

Ezra had chosen this place as it is probably one of the streams or canal that is not far from the city of Babylon and it is most likely for purification requirements as the Jews prepared for their pilgrimage back to Jerusalem.[[3]](#footnote-2)

1. Why the three days motif?

As seen in both verse 15 and verse 32, having a three-day motif represents a “brief period of time” which is a common feature in a traditional narrative[[4]](#footnote-3). For practicality, this time period is sufficient to finding shelter for people close to five thousands[[5]](#footnote-4). Three days in Ahava would also give ample time for Ezra to do an accounting of people, delegate administrative tasks to able leaders (accounting for the offerings and articles) as well as leading the community to humble before God and pray for protection before they start their pilgrimage (vv.15-30). Three days in Jerusalem would give ample time for the Jews to rest and settle in before they come before God.

1. After seven chapters, why is there a shift from third person to first person then shift back to third person in this narrative?

The use of first person would emphasize on Ezra’s personal involvement in the preparation for the pilgrimage. This includes gathering of Jews who volunteered, proclaiming a fast and delegating of tasks to the leading priests. Here, Ezra was already playing the role of the teacher of the Law especially in instructing the priests of handling the offerings and articles. The first person in this passage also suggests that a report made to the Persian authorities, justifying the “refusal of armed escort and emphasizes the safe delivery of the entire consignment.[[6]](#footnote-5)” The shift to third person in verse 35-36 suggests relaying the king’s orders to the local officials “taken from Ezra’s memorandum.[[7]](#footnote-6)”

1. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. "Ezra 8 Pulpit Commentary." The Pulpit Commentary, Electronic Database. 2010. Accessed March 29, 2017. http://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/ezra/8.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1988), 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)