

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

Vol. 2 No. 56

October 14, 2007

He Set His Heart To Study...To Do & To Teach Ezra 7:10

Ezra was a remarkable man. He was directly descended from Aaron the first high priest of Israel. He was a learned man and he was a captive, born in captivity. He was a scribe who was skilled in the Law of God, and by God's grace, like Daniel before him he found favor with the king of Persia.

The book of Ezra is written to encourage the re-gathered exiles of their redemptive part in history that God was working out on their behalf. The first six chapters of Ezra deal with the first return of the exiles under Zerubbabel. The number of exiles who returned was 49,897. It was the Persian king, Cyrus who permitted the exiles to return to the land to rebuild their temple. Cyrus' decree to permit the people of God to return to Israel was a fulfillment of Scripture found in Jeremiah 25. It was this Scripture that prompted Daniel to recognize that the 70 years of captivity were drawing to a close (Dan. 9:1, 2).

Chapters 7 through 10 are about Ezra's leadership as he leads a second group of exiles back to the land about 80 or so years after the first group under Zerubbabel. Under Zerubbabel the mission was to build the temple and under Ezra the mission was to rebuild the spiritual condition of the people. Between these accounts the story of Esther exists.

There is naturally a strong priestly emphasis within the book seeing that Ezra was himself a priest. The Jewish Talmud ascribes the authorship of Ezra to Ezra himself since the book does not make this assertion itself. According to 2 Maccabees 2:13 – 15, Ezra had access to the library of written documents that Nehemiah had collected. This is probably where he got his material in order to write the first six chapters of Ezra. The book of Ezra continues the story immediately from where 2 Chronicles ends, and demonstrates how God fulfills His promise to re-gather His people (see also Jer. 29:10 – 14).

The days of glory and splendor for the nation are long gone. Solomon's temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, and the temple that had been built in its place was a poor comparison. Nevertheless, the worship of God continued. Their spiritual heritage remained and God's promises remained.

Not many exiles chose to make their way back to the land after Cyrus gave his permission. Out of a possible 2 to 3 million people in exile only about 50,000 elected to return. This is surely a picture of their contentment in a foreign land, and perhaps an indication spiritually of how unconcerned they were about returning. Their heritage seems to have vanished in the Euphrates River, except for a few of them.

The comforts of life in Babylon held a firm grip on the nation just as they complained in Moses' day that perhaps Egypt after all was a better place. At least there you had food and water. The nearly one thousand mile journey (of hardship – see Ezra 8:21 – 23), did not appeal to the vast majority of exiles. So they stayed in Babylon.

Zerubbabel was a direct descended of King David and so he proudly leads his people back. In the same way, this priest of God, Ezra leads his people back. In between the 2 returns under Zerubbabel and Ezra, work on the temple began and then faltered. The prophets, Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people

to finish the temple which they then did after a period of inactivity. It was Zerubbabel who restored the altar and religious feasts and who saw the foundation laid for the temple. The work on the temple ceased because of opposition but recovered under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. This opposition occurred during the reigns of Darius and Ahasuerus. The dedication of the temple took place in Ezra 6:16 – 18. It was King Artaxerxes who gave Ezra permission to also make a return in 457 BC. Ezra made the journey back with less than 2,000 individuals. Ezra 8:15 – 23 is concerned with spiritual preparation for their return and future service in the temple and in the land.

Ezra's return is marred by the intermarriage that had occurred between the Jews and the Canaanites, and other nations. The reason this produced such a time of sorrow in Ezra 9 is because it was because of these sins that they first had been taken into captivity.

In Ezra 9 we see the deep and profound spiritual depths of this man, Ezra. He is appalled at the sins of his people. He makes deep contrite confession and repentance before God and includes himself (9:3 – 15). Ezra 9 is one the great prayer chapters in the Scriptures (see also Neh. 9 and Dan. 9 for similar confessions of sin).

This confession is the outcome of deep study and knowledge of God. In Ezra 7, we note that Ezra was a scribe. This undoubtedly meant that he could write and transcribe official documents. He could take dictation. He could provide administrative skills of the highest order. These were secondary to Ezra. What set him apart from his peers was his commitment to the Law of Moses. He was skilled in God's law. This implies that he knew the Law, but more particularly, that he could apply the Law.

It is the ability to apply that is beneficial to God's people and not mere knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Ezra was skilled at this work. The work of application is hard heart work. It would have involved memorization, learning and application. Three times we are told that the hand of God was upon him (7:6, 9, 28). This deep relationship with Yahweh set Ezra apart. Any person who will set themselves the goal of knowing God deeply cannot come away from that experience without being deeply impacted. One of the outcomes of this is the impact on others. This is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6 – 16).

Not only was God with Ezra, but Ezra determined to be a student. No doubt his understanding of God and his desire to study were interwoven with each other. He set his heart to study. He made the determination to study. This is no easy task because it requires diligent regularity. When John Newton began to experience God's working in his heart, he began to study, learning Latin and Greek and then theology. Amazing grace came from a heart immersed in that grace of God.

Not only did Ezra commit himself to study, but more importantly he set his heart upon doing the Law of God. As he studied God's law, he desired to do it. This is the heart of a person committed to God. It is one thing to learn the Word of God but it is another thing to do it. We are to be not only hearers of the Word, but doers also (James 1:22). In fact the doing is required.

The impact of studying the Law of God and doing the Law caused Ezra to teach the Law. The burning passion for God which has grown through exposure to the Law, the desire to do it now drives Ezra to communicate it to others. The burden of the teacher is to tell others of his labors. This is Ezra. He does not teach anything except the Law of God. The Law is his delight day and night (Ps. 119:13 – 16, 18, 24, 33 – 37, 64, 68, 70 – 72, 97, 103, 105, 129, 160, 174). Is God's word our delight? Ezra's life manifested this relationship with God which was grounded in the Scriptures and was applied in daily life. Have you set your heart to study God's Word? If you have, watch the goodness of God manifest itself in your life, and in the life of others.