

Ezra 8

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References: **Ezra 8**, Ezra 7:6; Ezra 7:9; Ezra 7:10; Ezra 7:14; Ezra 7:25; Ezra 7:27-28; Ezra 8:1-14; Ezra 8:15; Ezra 8:16; Ezra 8:17; Ezra 8:18-20; Ezra 8:21-23; Ezra 8:31; Ezra 8:32; Deuteronomy 26:5

Very good. Well, let's turn to the book of Ezra, and chapter 8, I believe, is where we begin tonight. Ezra chapter 8.

Introduction and Ezra 7 Review

Now, Eric, I'm not sure—I think we finished seven last time, more or less, didn't we?

Pretty well.

Maybe a comment.

Go ahead.

Okay, a comment or two just on the last couple of verses, 27 and 28, where we read chapter 7, verses 27 and 28:

[Ezra 7:27-28 NKJV]

²⁷ Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me.

And so this is really an introduction to chapter 8. However, I was wondering what prompted Ezra to want to make that very difficult decision to go up to Jerusalem in the first place? What was the motive for this?

Forty-nine years had elapsed between the completion of the temple. Now Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest—Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest—they had passed off the scene. We don't read of them anymore. Another generation had come up, and this generation had matured. Forty-nine years had elapsed. I wonder, had some report come out

of Israel or Judah to the exiles still in Babylon, had come to Ezra, the priest, the scribe, and had news of a decline? Things were not quite right in Jerusalem.

Now notice what the king had said to him, his commission, Ezra's commission, in chapter 7 and verse 14. It says that:

[Ezra 7:14 NKJV]

And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand;

—to inquire about the law of the land. Now, had there been some message that had come out from Jerusalem that Ezra had received that said that there was a weakness there, that there was a need for teaching? And this, I believe, is strengthened by the fact that in verse 10 of that same chapter, it says:

[Ezra 7:10 NKJV]

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

So he could have done that quite well, successfully, in Babylon. However, he chose to make this bold venture to go all the way back to Jerusalem. Now, as I mentioned, they couldn't just travel according to their own desires and wishes. They were under the authority of the kings of Persia. They were under the authority of the Gentiles, that God had given authority—taken it from the kings of Israel and given it to the Gentiles—so that he could not by himself organize an expedition to go back and to see what was going on there himself. So he had to make a request to the king himself. Now this request, verse 6 of chapter 7, we read that:

[Ezra 7:6 NKJV]

... this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

Now notice this: "The king granted him all his request." So he had come into the presence of the king and his counselors and the princes to make this request, and it was given to him. Because we read there in verse 27, which we read earlier, but I reiterate:

[Ezra 7:27-28 NKJV]

²⁷ Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me.

So he probably went to the king, it would seem, and said that things in Jerusalem are probably not in very good shape according to the law of God. "I've heard a report." The king then writes in his decree for him to go back to inquire. And this was a commission that was given to him. This was his request, that he might have the authority of the king to inquire concerning the law of God. And he already prepared his heart to learn, to seek out, to study the law of God, and to be able to do it, and to be able to teach it. So it was a long, I think, preparation on the part of Ezra, and perhaps explains why he went back. It wasn't the king that initiated this by any means. The king also, probably, had heard reports that there wasn't a very good government going on there, and so he issues another decree to put in Ezra's hand, who seemed to have the king's confidence, to be able to appoint magistrates and judges who can judge all those people on that side of the land. So he not only went to inquire concerning the temple of God and the ministry and the law of Moses, but he was also sent to put right some administrative problems that the king probably had heard about or been told about or something. So that commission, part of the commission, we read in verse 25:

[Ezra 7:25 NKJV]

And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them.

And so it probably explains later on why he insisted on taking Levites up to Jerusalem. Among those we'll read later on how he had camped by the river, but there weren't any Levites. And so he appeals to some to get some that are ready to go, some Levites, because what was happening in Jerusalem, it would seem that the report seemed to put the blame on

the fact that the leaders of the temple, the priests and Levites, were not doing their job properly. And so he insists on having some priests or some Levites to come up with him to Jerusalem.

These are some of the things I was pondering, the background about why would Ezra go in the first place. I didn't say the Lord raised him up—the Lord prompted him to come. Certainly the Lord is behind all these things. And ostensibly, it was also—he went up, perhaps he had heard that the temple itself was being neglected, not only the law of Moses, but subsequently the temple. And so the king makes some gifts to beautify the temple itself.

So 50 years almost—50 years had gone by and the cycle had come full circle, and there was a great need for revival. So he was prepared for that. In chapter 9 where we read—and I just anticipate chapter 9—where he finds that the condition of the people, the situation there is far worse than he anticipated, that the very leaders, the priests, the Levites, and the leaders were intermarrying with pagans. The condition was far worse than he had anticipated.

I guess we can then—that is an introduction now to chapter 8, where it says in chapter 7, the last verse, he was encouraged, it says, "as the hand of the Lord God was upon me," which is a phrase that he often uses, and he said, "I gather leading men of Israel to go up with me." So he was the one who was the leader of encouraging others to come with him. The king's decree was voluntary. The only one that was commissioned to go was Ezra, and Ezra thought that he would need a lot of help, and so he gathered leading men. And then in chapter 8, we read who these men were that decided to go up with Ezra, and whose hearts the Lord stirred to make that difficult, expensive, and dangerous journey across the desert to Jerusalem. So we could probably go then into chapter 8, Mr. Summers.

Ezra the Teaching Priest

Just one comment in general on Ezra. He was a priest, and we read about a lot of the priests, but Ezra was a **teaching** priest. And over and over in the book of Ezra, we read about Ezra being a teacher. Many of the priests were priests, but we don't read that they were all active teachers, but Ezra was a teacher. In the New Testament, the responsibility of the Christian priests was to be teachers. The Jewish priests in the days of the Lord Jesus, in the days of the apostles, were not always teachers. They were complainers. They resisted the work of God, but we don't read of them being enthusiastically apt at teaching. Gamaliel was a teacher. Others were, but Ezra, in some respects, is almost unique in Scripture. He was primarily a teacher. And I just believe that that's a responsibility we all have. We praise the Lord for Bible teachers. Amen. And we all have got to be more—what's the word I want?—more able, more enthusiastic, more diligent teachers. Praise the Lord for those whom the Lord gives.

And remember, Ezra's name means help. And he was not only helped of the Lord, but Ezra was a great help to the work of God in many respects because of his teaching abilities and of his teaching practice. So just that thought.

Well, now, chapter 8. And chapter 8 is a chapter of names of people who got involved in the work of God. The first 14 verses introduce the first section. And so I'm going to ask somebody else to read, if you will, those first verses, because my voice doesn't always handle things like that very well. So verse 1 through 14, yes.

Okay.

[Ezra 8:1-14 NKJV]

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: 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, of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah; and registered with him were one hundred and fifty males; ⁴ of the sons of Pahath-Moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred males; ⁵ of the sons of Shechaniah, Ben-Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males; ⁶ of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males; ⁷ of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males; ⁸ of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him eighty males; ⁹ of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males; ¹⁰ of the sons of Shelomith, Ben-Josiphiah, and with him one hundred and sixty males; ¹¹ of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males; ¹² of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred and ten males; ¹³ of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names are these--Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah--and with them sixty males; ¹⁴ also of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud, and with them seventy males.

Amen.

Not one Englishman among them!

No, Daniel was there.

Daniel. No.

So it's interesting. It's thrilling, again, that the Lord records those who are active in His service. And to me, it's very encouraging. Even if you've got an awkward name, the Lord knows, and He'll put it down. And it's interesting also that many of these men who went had, following them, a certain number of males—100 here and 200 there and 50 and so on. What do I say? Ezra was not the only leader here. He chose men who indeed were able to bring with them other men. The work of God, especially in the church, is not really one man's work. The Apostle Paul had many men travel with him, and probably each of those men had others traveling with them. Paul didn't say, "I can do it all. You guys stay home; I'll do it all." He was wise enough to work with others and with them in a discipleship manner. They traveled with him, they lived with him, they served with him. And Ezra is somewhat like that. He's got some key men who are working with him. The last verse of chapter 7 says—he says, "I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me." And I think Ezra chose a lot of these chief men to go up with him. And here we have, I think, the record of some of these chief men.

I'm impressed with some of the names. It's hard to know precisely who is referred to when you see a name. I mentioned a minute ago Daniel, verse 2: "Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush." Well, we know a lot about Phinehas—I'm going to call him Phinehas number one. He was the grandson of Aaron. He was a good man. Now, this is another Phinehas, but not the same Phinehas because Aaron's grandson died a whole lot earlier than this. So here's a man with the same name. Similarly, Daniel was there. Which Daniel was that? Well, this Daniel was of the sons of Ithamar, and Daniel in the book of Daniel wasn't of the sons of Ithamar—he was of the royal seed, and Ithamar was of the priestly family. So two different Daniels. So when you read, just be a little bit careful if you see the same name; it doesn't necessarily mean always that it's the same person.

I was interested in verse 10, in the name of this man Josiphiah. It sounds like Joseph and it sounds like Josiah. And very often the Hebrew names were combinations of one name and another. Was he named after Joseph? Or was he named after Josiah? And I'm not sure that it really matters terribly much, but it is interesting that some of these names are very similar. So, again, the Lord has chosen each of these, and He has outlined them. And they played an important role. Ezra could not have done it alone, any more than we'll see later on that Nehemiah could have built the wall alone. But Ezra had others going with him.

I'm not sure of this number. I think there may have been 1,500 who went. I think Eric suggested that it may have been closer to 2,000.

Thank you.

It was a big number of people who went.

Did you say 2,000?

It was over—if you count them all up, it's over 1,500 men. And then, of course, there would be their wives and children. Some of them said between 5,000 and 7,000.

Oh, okay.

If you have the same number of—if their families went.

Yeah, yeah, which I would imagine, because it would be a long-term expedition.

It would. That's right.

Yeah. And I think they mentioned—don't they mention little ones? I think that's mentioned probably in the response to the prayer, or the prayer of Ezra in chapter 9 or 10.

In chapter 8, verse 21.

Okay.

He mentions "our little ones."

That's right.

So there would be families that had gone up.

Yeah, yeah. Amen.

So, that's the group that went. Among other things, it suggests that Ezra was an effective administrator, and he probably kept pretty accurate records. Sometimes we wonder what the value of records are, and I have trouble with that. But he knew who they were. He kept records. I suppose if I were going to be going for a 900-mile walk with 7,000 people, I probably would want to keep pretty accurate records too. "Whatever happened to Waldo?" Ezra says, "Well, I don't know. I think he came. Did he come with us?" No, Ezra wouldn't say that. Ezra said he came with us, and he was part of this group, and he was under the hand of this man. And I think he had it pretty well organized. Sometimes I think our administration is lacking; other times we can depend on administration and forget the working of God. There's got to be a very fine balance between appropriate administration and freedom for the Lord to do His work without having to be accountable to us.

So those are just a few thoughts on those verses. We get into some more of the implications of it later, but that's the introduction. I think one of the things about the Bible is full of names. Just absolutes. So the first time I truly read the Bible, I was amazed at the amount of names in the Bible. True names—not only personal names, but geographical names, names

of kings, and so on. Every name that is in there is a record that could be checked; it could be disproven. In other words, if you start naming details like names and places, they could be checked up whether they are true or false. A lot of the other religious writings of the world, they don't have this kind of detail.

The other thing that impressed me about the names, especially when I got to the book of First Chronicles, where we read name after name—the first six chapters are full of names—is that God is interested in the **individual**, so much so that He has recorded forever the names of all these people. If He's that much interested in these ancient people from so far back, then why would He not be interested in me? Amen. And we read about the Lamb's Book of Life, where each one who has committed their lives to the Lord Jesus is written down in this book—the most important book of all as far as genealogy is concerned. It's a genealogy of the Lord Jesus Himself, the Lamb's Book of Life. So instead of being upset about all these names, I'm thrilled by those. Amen. Now, when I'm doing my Bible reading, I sometimes skip over some of these sections, but with a silent, "Thank You, Lord, for each one of those that You've recorded, that You have had a special interest in during their lifetime, and You've recorded it for us in this book we have today in our hands."

Ahava and Three Days of Preparation

So off they go. Verse 15 says:

[Ezra 8:15 NKJV]

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.

We're going to go. What are we going to do? And Ezra basically says, "We are going to go, but we're going to get organized before we go." And so instead of striking out immediately, heading for Jerusalem, they go to this little town Ahava that's by the river. He says, verse 15 again, "I gathered them together to the river that runs to Ahava." So he didn't go precisely to Ahava, but he went to the neighborhood of Ahava, and he gathered them to the river that was there. So I thought, well, we don't know much about this place Ahava. I wanted to know what the word meant. So I looked it up and it says, I shall subsist. What's subsist mean? Well, it means continue. It means I'll carry on, not necessarily at a very high level, but I will carry on even at a low level. And I think Ezra recognized the seriousness of the situation that they were in—these thousands of people, the 1,500 or 2,000 men of God and all they're associated

with. And he basically said, "We're not the most glorious group in the world, but we're going to subsist. We'll carry on. People will think we're just feeble and faint, but we're going to keep going. We're not going to collapse. We're going to keep going. We will subsist. We'll be sustained." And so I think there is associated with that word a delightful humility and confidence in God.

He says, "We abode there in tents three days." I presume they abode in tents for the next three, four months as they traveled too, but here they arrive and their first days of tenting were by the river that goes to Ahava. The interesting thing is that they were there for three days. Three days is an interesting time in the Bible. Do you remember other things that happened in three days? And if you think about it long enough, if you look it up in your concordance, you'll find three days is a very commonly referred to time span—three days. Can you think of any? I'm not good at this, but can you think of anything that happened in three days?

And I'll give you one: the Lord said, "Moses, you gather the people together, and I'm going to speak to them from Mount Sinai." And Moses got them together and said, "In three days, the Lord is going to speak to you from this mountain. Now you've got three days to get ready." And he listed the things that they had to do. So that's three days. Any other items, any other places where you remember three days? Those of you in Zoom land can speak up. Any other places where we read of three days?

Well, didn't Moses tell Pharaoh that the children of Israel had to go journey three days into the wilderness to meet the Lord?

That's right, yeah. Give me some other three days.

Well, Jonah—three days, three nights in the belly of the whale.

Three speaks of resurrection, a new beginning. So would that pertain to the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection? Three days, three nights in the belly of the whale, so the Lord would be three days and three nights.

So as I put it all together, I say three days is very frequently the time of **preparation**. You've got three days to get ready for... And sometimes I think this is what I would like to happen: I'd like it to happen right now. And the Lord says, "Hang on, Harold. I'm going to give you three days to get ready. This is very important, and I want you to take time to get ready for it." There are many other references to three days that we have not quoted for you. Three days is very often the time of preparation.

I'll just give you one other, and that is when they get to Jerusalem, what happens? In chapter 8 and verse 32:

[Ezra 8:32 NKJV]

So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days.

They had three days to get ready to go, and they had three days after they got there to get ready for what they had to go there for. Over and over you'll read it: three days. Take time. When you're going into big issues in life, don't be afraid to take three days and say, "Now, Lord, I'm going to give You three days, and You help me, You guide me, You direct me." You don't always have to make your decision right now. So that's just...

Another three days—important three days—was when they were about to cross the Jordan out of the wilderness where they'd been wandering for 40 years. Joshua told the people to prepare provisions: "You're going to cross over—within three days, you're going to cross over the Jordan to go in to possess the land." And after three days, they sanctified themselves, and they went dryshod across the dry Jordan River and into the promised land. The ark was in the middle of the stream, and they crossed over. And so it's a picture of them leaving the one world and going into another. So the picture, again, of resurrection. Amen. So death, burial, and resurrection.

All right. So what did he learn in those three days? Well, he found that there was nobody there from the sons of Levi. I suppose if he hadn't waited three days, they would have started marching, probably got halfway from Babylon to Jerusalem, and then said, "Where are the Levites?" But they had three days to begin to evaluate everything that had happened, and they said, "We've got a problem. We don't have any Levites here." So what's he do about that? Verse 16:

[Ezra 8:16 NKJV]

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

So what do you do? He said, "We've got a problem. We don't have any Levites." So he called for these men. Interesting. He called for Elnathan, and he called for Elnathan, and he called for Elnathan, and he called for Nathan, and he called for the others. So can you imagine being in the meeting and somebody said, "Well, I was speaking to Elnathan about this," and somebody said, "Which Elnathan are you talking about?" It's like the problem that we have at 16th periodically: "Josh—who is Josh?" "Linda—which was Linda?" And we keep going. Lots

of people with similar names. Is that good or bad? Frankly, it's good, but it gets to be a little confusing. I told you that many years ago there were four Harolds at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel. That was a little confusing and sometimes embarrassing, but we survived, and they survived. So you get lots of repetition of names, and that's maybe a good thing. Nathan was an outstanding man of God, and all these were named after him. Good deal. All right.

So having spoken to these men, verse 17, he said:

[Ezra 8:17 NKJV]

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.

So who were these men, the Elnathans and their brethren? Well, they were probably some of the chief men, some wise men, and he says, "We've got to get some Levites here. You go to Iddo, and you say to Iddo, we need some good Levites." And so instead of tapping the Levites on the shoulder himself, he sent his men to Iddo and said to Iddo, "You've got to get us some good Levites and some good Nethinim to work with us." Again, the work of God should be carried on with a group of brethren together. In an assembly, there are a few elders and there are many others. We don't give them official names, but the fact is, the assembly couldn't function without good men doing much work for the glory of God. Unsung—it's not glory jobs, it's just hard work jobs. And they needed—they had good priests, they had good leaders. What they needed in this assembly that was going up, what they needed was good Levites and good Nethinim. Who were the Nethinim? Thank you.

The Nethinim and the Work of the House of God

Well, the Nethinim were, we believe, the descendants of the Gibeonites who had made a contract with Joshua, and they were hewers of wood, drawers of water. They were servants of the Lord, Canaanites, but they were servants of the Lord, and they carried on a good work for the Lord. And their descendants carried on a continual work for the Lord—the Nethinim. So they needed Levites, who were children of the tribe of Levi, to help in the work of God, and they needed Nethinim, who were the descendants of the Gibeonites, and they were there to help the Levites and to help the priests and work in the service of the Lord. So good for them. They said, "We need these people to help us." And so that's what he did. He sends off—he tells them, verse 17, "I told them what they should say to Iddo and to his brethren, the Nethinim." Verse 18:

[Ezra 8:18-20 NKJV]

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

So he doesn't give us all the names here, but when they came, they were all officially registered. And they came therefore officially registered from Babylon to Jerusalem in order to facilitate the work of the tabernacle, the temple. I guess if the Nethinim had their names written down, when they got there, they might have said, "Well, I'm not sure I'm going to go to work today." And somebody called up the register and said, "Is this your name?" "Yeah." "This is your assignment. The reason you left Babylon was to come here to do this work." And the Nethinim therefore had responsibility, and the priests had responsibility. And it wasn't just a casual responsibility; they were given official names. Again, I'm just impressed. Thank you. This fellow Ezra was a good teacher, he was a good priest, he was a good man of God, but he was a good administrator, and he had things organized. So more power to him. Well, that gets us down to the end of verse 20. So Eric and others may have some comments.

Yes. They have a staging ground there by the river. They camp by the river. It says in chapter 7, verse 9, that Ezra left Babylon on the first day of the first month. He began the journey from Babylon.

[Ezra 7:9 NKJV]

On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

It says the completion date was the first day of the fifth month when he came to Jerusalem. But, of course, this story takes place, or this account in chapter 8 where he gathers by the river, takes place early on as he has just left Babylon. Now, how long it took him to get to Babylon and, or from, you know, to get to the camping spot, I'll call it the staging spot—probably the word went out, "We're going to leave on the first of the first month. Meet us at the river Ahava, at the staging ground that they had prepared." So they would then make

their journey from various places in Babylon, those that he had spoken of, these heads, come from diverse places. It would take them some time to organize themselves and to collect their provisions that they would need, and then to arrive at the staging ground. So probably some months of preparation before that, and then he leaves on the first day of the first month. They get there—probably took him a day or two. It isn't very far. Apparently, this isn't too far from Babylon itself, where Ezra starts out from. So they're camped there by the river, and for three days. Now, they leave that spot—we read in verse 31 of our chapter 8:

[Ezra 8:31 NKJV]

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 on the 12th day of that month. So after leaving Babylon, and then camping at the river, staging, to get all the different people that were coming with their families and their possessions and whatever they needed, it was 12 days in total before they actually set out—12 days total. Now, there were three days at camp there, so possibly it would be about a week that they actually—over a week that they would actually stay at that campground there, or more. Now, interestingly, that within that short period of time, they were able to recruit all these Levites. Amen. And Nethinim. So, apparently, this place Casiphia was very close by. It had to be fairly close by, Casiphia. Yeah. And also, there was an Iddo who was the chief man at this place Casiphia. So where did he find all these Nethinim and Levites? Well, it might be assumed that this was a training spot there, that there was a school for the prophets. They would also have schools for, like, theological colleges for the Levites, we might say, training them. And so it's possible that Ezra himself had been involved with some of this training in Babylon, and keeping those traditions alive, because he knew who to talk to. He said, "Now, I want you to go and talk to Iddo in Casiphia and tell him that we want some men whose hearts are prepared to come with us—Levites and Nethinim."

Now, the lack of Levites was certainly a very serious problem. I was checking the number of Levites that had actually come up with Zerubbabel, and there were very few. There were only 74. Of the priests, there were thousands. But of the Levites, there were only a few. I wonder if he knew that. He'd probably seen the register and knew that they needed more Levites to assist the priests. Why the Levites were so reticent to come, I'm not sure. Maybe it was very comfortable there in Babylon... In Israel, the Levite had to depend upon the freewill offerings of the people where they brought their firstfruits, which would be the support for

the Levites. And maybe they just weren't very well supported and didn't feel that they would be supported. So they're probably comfortable in Babylon. But here we find some men—perhaps their hearts were already... Go to Iddo. It seems like Ezra knew that he could get some followers if he talked to Iddo. And sometimes, you know, hearts are prepared to go, but all they're doing is waiting for a call. You know, a lot of people are like that. They may not have the ability to go out on their own, but they prepared their heart in secret. And perhaps many of these men were like that. All they needed was the call from Ezra: "There's a need." And they said, "Finally, that's what will fulfill my desire, and I'll go." So their hearts were perhaps ready and waiting for some service, and all they needed was a word from someone like Ezra to step out in faith and make that journey, very dangerous journey, to Jerusalem.

The Nethinim—yes, the Nethinim. I find that fascinating. Their work was hewers of wood and drawers of water. I can't think of two harder occupations. We know how heavy water is. When the pumps weren't working at Haslam Lake hallway, we hired an African, and he was only about five foot two or three, short little guy, but he would go down to the river and he would pack these big five-gallon, 20-liter pails of water. And they're five gallons—that's about 60 pounds of water—and carry it up the hill from the Coldwater River and fill a big barrel that we had. And I remember on the windowsill, every one that he—thank you—every bucket that he brought, he used to put a little pebble on the window so he'd keep track of how many he had brought up. And we paid him for that, you see. Well, it was hard work. It was, to me, it was hard work just climbing up that hill in the heat. But he would go all afternoon; he'd be packing this water up. Down he'd go again, get another pail, up he'd come on his shoulder. And he'd fill up this big barrel—probably, I don't know how many gallons, 50-gallon or 100-gallon tank that we had there. So it was hard work. And chopping wood is hard work. I've done a lot of it in my life, working in the woods and so on. One of my first jobs was, after I left school, was actually—thanks, man—that was my official title: I worked for the provincial government, working for the Ministry of Forests as an axeman. There was a surveyor. We were surveying logging roads and fire service roads. And there were three crew, three-man crew: there was the cook who doubled as the rodman, and there was the engineer who was the surveyor, and I was the axeman. And what my job was, not only to cut line through the bush, but also to chop and saw wood for the wood stove. So I did a lot of that stuff. At home, from the time I was young, I used to chop wood for our kitchen stove. It was a wood stove, so I know how hard work getting wood is. And how much wood would that altar take? Do you know how much wood it takes to burn a carcass of a sheep? Never mind an ox! A tremendous amount of wood is required. How much water would be needed for all the washing of the innards of the sacrifices and the washing of the blood from the blood that was poured at the base of the altar? And they had a gutter that they would then pour water

down, that it would run down into the Kidron Valley. Much, much water. And yet those Nethinim, when Joshua said to them, "Why did we deceive you? We're going to make you slaves of the house of God," and they said, "Do unto us as you see fit. We are glad to be your slaves." And they were faithful through the years, I believe. The Nethinim served the Lord, and how many of them? 220 of them decided. Now, in Babylon, they didn't have to draw water in. They didn't have to chop wood. They volunteered to go up for that hard labor because it was the Lord's house; they didn't mind.

So I'm intrigued when it comes to these Nethinim—former Canaanites who gladly became slaves of the temple. And they are named with Solomon's servants. They became residents—we read later on in Nehemiah that they lived right in Jerusalem, right next to the temple. So they'd be men available for the use of the Levites and priests, because they assisted the Levites, the Levites would assist the priests, the Nethinim would assist the Levites in their work, doing that heavy, heavy work. So there were a lot of Nethinim that had come up with Zerubbabel, too. As I say, I'm fascinated by these men who would labor in such humble circumstances. But they acquired a rather noble name among Solomon's servants, and much value in the service of the Lord.

So maybe just a couple of other notes on the Nethinim. Who were they? Well, they were people who were the Canaanites who lived in Gibeon. And there were two outstanding things about Gibeon: one is that it was right on the edge of the forest that was to the west of them. They were on the top of the side of the mountain, and the winds came in, and to the west of them there was a forest. And before Joshua got there, their job was forestry—they looked after the forest. But Gibeon was a substantial reservoir, and I believe it's still there today, and it provided water for a great region around, and it was a reservoir as a storage space so that if there was a time of little rain, they would still have water. So they needed a reservoir to store the water from the rains so that when the rain stopped, they'd still have water. So what was the job of the Nethinim when Joshua went to them? Well, they were hewers of wood and drawers of water. And so the Lord said to them through Joshua, "All right, we're not going to get rid of you. We made a covenant with you. Your job in that covenant is to keep on doing what you were doing." And so you can imagine these men saying, "I don't know if I want this job of drawing water, hewers of wood and drawing water." And somebody said to them, "Well, what option do you have? Before you trusted the Lord Jesus Christ, you were hewing wood and drawing water. Now that you're born again and you're new people in Christ Jesus, what's your job? To do what you used to do for the glory of God rather than for yourself." And I think that they may very well have said, "This was what we were, and this is what God chose us to do, and this is the mercy of God to us. We get to draw water, we get to hew wood for the glory of God, where in the past we did it just for ourselves."

Is it good to look back? And the answer is yes. And so the Lord says to the children of Israel, "When you go up to Jerusalem, you've got to ask yourself this question: Who am I, and what was I here?" And you shall say—and the verses are in Deuteronomy, but they go like this: "Thou shalt say, A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and God saved me."

[Deuteronomy 26:5 NKJV]

And you shall answer and say before the LORD your God: "My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down to Egypt and dwelt there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous.

You look back. What were your forebears? I look back in my life, and I don't know very much about my forebears. And some of my forebears told me, "That's a really good thing. Don't try to find out!" But my forebears weren't always outstanding people. And so I say, "Well, I don't know about me." And then the Spirit of God says, "Harold, who were your forebears? They were Syrians ready to perish, and instead of that, the Spirit of God saved them." Nethinim, what were you? "We got saved. We're still doing the work we have to do, but we're saved instead." And so I say, "Harold, you've got to get out of bed in the morning." And I say, "I don't want to get out of bed in the morning. You've got to do this." I say, "I don't want to do this." And then I say, "Harold, remember, a Syrian ready to perish was your father. You could be like your forebears. You could be getting out of bed in the morning to do all manner of bad things." But the Lord says, "Get out of bed in the morning and do something good."

All right, so more about the Levites. Why didn't the Levites all volunteer? They heard that Ezra was going. They heard that Zerubbabel was going. Eric said they didn't all volunteer in great numbers then, and certainly didn't volunteer when Ezra said he's going. Why did they not volunteer? Why is it that when Iddo went to them, they said, "Yes, we'll go"? And I wonder, again, if they're not something like me. I look back in my life, and I've said, "Harold, why did you end up doing what you did?" And very rarely did I volunteer. I didn't volunteer for a number of reasons, one of which is I think I was lazy. Another one was that I figured if I volunteered, I wouldn't do a very good job, and somebody else would be far more qualified. And so I didn't volunteer. But then I realized that there were occasions when I was not volunteered, but I was requested to do something in the work of God. What am I going to do now? I don't know. And I said, "Harold, if you've been requested to do it, you had better do it." I've told you before that on one occasion, a man of God that was highly respected by our family actually said to me on one occasion—he said, "Harold, I've got some counsel for you. When you're asked to do it, do it." I said, "Well, that's very interesting counsel." One of the

advantages of that, of course, is this: if you're asked to do it and you do it wrong, what is your excuse? You can say, "Well, it's not my fault. He asked me to do it. Good, it's his fault. He's smarter than me. He should know—he made a big mistake when he asked me!" And so I just think that a lot of us as Christians are reluctant to volunteer—sometimes for bad reasons, sometimes for what are pretty good reasons. And so periodically, it's good when somebody says, "Will you do this?" And you say in your heart, "I'm not qualified, but I will do it." And you say yes. The Lord qualifies you and gets you to do it. And what amazes me here is, first of all, they didn't respond, and then secondly, they did respond in a matter of days. They had to leave on the 12th day, as Eric told us. They probably weren't commissioned to go until the 4th, 5th, or 6th day, and they turned around and went because they were invited by Iddo, and by the men of God who approached Iddo, and by Ezra, who approached the men of God, who approached Iddo, who approached them. So I guess I take encouragement from that, and I say, "Harold, if the Lord wants you to be a Levite and do something, then say, yes, I'll do it."

All right. So anyway, that's mine—that's my thoughts there. Probably that's sufficient.

Fasting, Prayer, and Trust in God

Maybe we can do verse 21 to 23. I'll just read them and make some comments, maybe more when our time is—when we've got more time next week. It says:

[Ezra 8:21-23 NKJV]

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. 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." ²³ So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

And we're going to read later that they made it all the way to Jerusalem, the 900 miles. They made it all the way to Jerusalem without being attacked. So what did he say to the king? He said, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him." And they sought Him. They held a specific prayer meeting in order to deal with the issue because they had said to the king, "If we seek the Lord, the Lord will protect us." He didn't say, "The Lord will protect us, we don't need to seek Him." He said, "We will seek Him. He will protect us." And so they

proclaimed the fast and they had the prayer meeting. I keep repeating these days the need for prayer.

Okay.

There's always a need for prayer. I just don't know that we always recognize a need for prayer. But 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel right now has a great need for the blessing of God through prayer. Keep praying. Keep attending prayer meetings. Keep praying. Keep praying. Keep praying. And they said, "We're going to fast. We're going to pray. God is going to have to protect us. We're going to take all this money that we'll be reading about in the next section. We're going to take all that. We are easy prey for the bandits on the road. How are we going to be protected? The Lord will protect us." And they fasted and prayed. It wasn't just a few of them bending their knee; it was the whole assembly saying, "We've got a big problem." And they all were involved in the fast. Thank you.

Conclusion and Closing Encouragement

All right, so that's brought us down now to the end of 23. I think our time is pretty much up. I have a few things I'd like to say on this section, but I think we can wait until next week, can we?

Yeah, we can, sure.

Okay. The thrilling thing through all this is these people were simple people like you and me, but they attempted for God, and they were blessed by God. They were diligent in doing something. Don't just sit there—do something. What do you do? Well, that doesn't always matter what you do, but it does matter if you do. Do something.

I've told you before that once I tried to make an analysis of what it is that was blessed of God that we accomplished here at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel. And I tried to make a list of everything we ever tried, and some of the things were successful, and some of the things went down as being not very successful, with this exception: that almost everything we ever tried resulted in somebody getting saved. So you say, "Well, if it's really good, maybe there'll be two people get saved. And if it's not really good, maybe there'll be only one person get saved." And periodically, you'll find somebody else says, "You didn't see it then, but I got saved." I told you the story of Lorna Biggs' family with a preacher, Willie Wilson, who came to 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel way back in the 1950s. And he was a full-time preacher. Thank you. He used to—his preaching was get on a train in Winnipeg and stop at every town and get off the train, go and preach, get back on the train, go to the next town, get off the train, preach, get back on the train, keep going. That was his ministry. And somebody said to him—

I guess they were on the table—they said, "So did you see success?" And he said, "Well, sometimes. Sometimes I didn't." He said, "Was there any time you didn't?" So he told the story of being in a particular town and preaching, and nobody got saved. And Lorna's mother said, "Do you have a good memory? Can you remember that there were two little girls sitting in the front row when you were preaching in that town?" And he said, "Well, yeah, I can remember that." She said, "I want you to know I was one of those two girls." Okay, there's no such thing as wasting time preaching the gospel. The Lord will do His work. Hallelujah.

All right, so that's our time for today. Again, let someone close in prayer, and the Lord will bless us. Thank you for being with us. By the grace of God, we're going to serve Him this week too.

My loving Heavenly Father who art in heaven, have You heard my name? We're so blessed to be studying this particular portion of Scripture where God's people were coming back from Babylon, going back to Jerusalem. Lord, it wouldn't be easy. Some had already sort of been to that place, but others were encouraged to go back. And we thank You for the Nethinim and for all the people that would want to go back and to establish the sense of order that was needed in Jerusalem. Thank You again for teaching us that, yes, it's important that where we are, that there's a sense of order that is established as we—as we serve God in the things that we do. Amen. But most of all, Lord, we realize that there is a large portion of people out there in the world that know not God, and they're going to perish in hell if we don't do anything about it. Help each one of us to have enough strength, but also wisdom to know how to reach these people, because they need to hear the gospel. And may we be willing. Thank You for the ministry here that teaches us we have to be part of the church, of that body, if we're going to be collectively reaching people for Christ. Now, bless as we go into this week. Thank You that we had this Lord's Day where we could remember what Christ has done. This do in remembrance of Me. And how blessed we were for this worship and fellowship. Now, I thank You for the time we spent together here now. And as we separate and as we go home and prepare for rest, that You would guide and direct each one of us so that we would be faithful servants of Yours this morning. Now, I commit each one to You. Thank You for everyone that was here and for the fact that we could discuss these things and encourage others to be followers too. I pray this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us and is coming again. We look forward to that. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.