

Sermon – 07/12/2008 pm

Ezra Aided by the King

Study Text: Ezra 7:11-28

Ezra committed himself to study the law of the Lord and to practice it. He was a man who sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He sought to know, and to do the will of God. He knew it was God's will for his people to worship him in the temple in Jerusalem, and to worship him in the manner he revealed through Moses. To this end Ezra requested King Artaxerxes to send him to Jerusalem. The king granted his request as detailed in this letter written by Artaxerxes and given to Ezra in the year 458BC. The letter is written in Aramaic, the language of the king.

King of Persia Aids Ezra

Why did Artaxerxes, the King of Persia, support Ezra in going to Jerusalem? Here is the self-proclaimed 'king of kings' sending Ezra the Jewish priest and scribe up to Jerusalem to promote worship according to the law of God. Artaxerxes was the most powerful man on earth. Ezra was a mere priest. Why should the king listen to him? Why should the king assist him in worshipping God?

Should the president or prime minister be concerned about the church today? They only show concern when the numbers are large and they need the votes of people in the church. Sadly many in the church feel the same way. They feel ashamed at their minority, and powerless to petition the government with regard to the law of God. Ezra was a priest, a man with no political power. He was from a minority community. He was from a community of exiles but he went to the king with his request.

Ezra's request was not for himself but for the worship of God, the God of heaven. His God was the Most High God, the ruler of heaven and earth. The great king Nebuchadnezzar was made to acknowledge this God through the ministry of Daniel. The Persian kings would have known about Nebuchadnezzar. They would have known about Belshazzar who was mocking God by drinking from sacred cups in a drunken party when they conquered Babylon. The Persians were not monotheists but they feared the God of heaven, the God whose law Ezra knew.

Cyrus, Darius, and now Artaxerxes, wanted the blessing of the God of heaven upon them and their sons (6:10, 7:23). They wanted the God of heaven to be worshipped with sacrifices and offerings, and for Ezra to remember the king in his prayers. The power of God is not determined by the number of those who worship him. God is self-existent and his power absolute.

How did Artaxerxes aid Ezra? His primary concern was for God to be worshipped acceptably – for God to be worshipped according to his own law. This is remarkable for a man who did not worship God himself. This man understood what the Reformers called the 'regulative principle', namely

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices

of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture (Westminster Confession of Faith XX1.1).

Artaxerxes was sending Ezra to Jerusalem to examine the worship going on in the temple and to reform it according to the law of God.

Finance: Temple worship required the sacrifice of animals, and animals cost money. The king and his counsellors gave Ezra silver and gold to take up and offer to the God of Israel who dwells in Jerusalem. He was not half hearted in his desire for true worship. He 'put his money where his mouth is' – a lot of money. Ezra was to take offerings from the people of Babylon also. Ezra was teacher of the word of God. When he taught the people they were moved to give in order to maintain the house of God and the worship that was conducted in it. What response would Ezra receive if he preached to people today? Is there concern to maintain true worship today?

Ezra was instructed by Artaxerxes to buy animals to sacrifice on the altar at the temple in Jerusalem, along with grain and drink offerings as prescribed in the law. If there was any further need of funds Ezra could ask for more from the king's treasury (7:20).

King Artaxerxes made a further decree in this letter to ensure that Ezra got the funds he needed and got them quickly. He ordered the treasurers of the region beyond the river, the Trans Euphrates region, to give Ezra whatever he needed.

Artaxerxes set a limit on what they had to provide, but it was an enormous amount – calculated to be over three tonnes of silver (7:22). Some scholars think there is some mistake. But the law required many animals to be sacrificed. The amount of wine and oil is considered to be sufficient for two years.

Artaxerxes was not really concerned about the cost. He was concerned that worship was offered, whatever the cost. His focus was upon the house of God and not upon his own house or investments. Haggai had earlier reprimanded the Jews, the people of God, for building their own mansion while the house of God was still in ruins. This would not be the last time God's people were shamed by the dedication of the heathen to worship.

Years ago as I was driven through Uganda my host pointed out mosque after mosque being built along the road in this predominantly Christian nation. I saw the same thing in Malaysia. We do not follow the same method of outreach but are we as dedicated to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the growth of the church as these people are to growth of their religion?

Artaxerxes gave further financial aid to the people of God by not requiring the priests and Levites to pay taxes to the government (7:24). He also supplied Ezra with vessels for use in the temple (7:19). Since the original ones taken by Nebuchadnezzar had already been returned (1:7), these were probably some articles specially made and gifted by Artaxerxes.

Law: The second way in which Artaxerxes aided Ezra was to give him authority to implement the law of God among the people. He was sent up to *inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand* (7:14). Whilst this inquiry was to focus on proper worship, it extended to include the keeping of the law of God in general. In fact Ezra's main task became dealing with mixed marriages.

Artaxerxes gave Ezra authority to set up law courts in which the law of God was enforced. In his heavenly wisdom Ezra was to appoint magistrates and judges with power to impose

penalties upon lawbreakers (7:25, 26). The penalties decreed by Artaxerxes are not necessarily in accordance with Jewish law but did include the death penalty. It is interesting that the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out the death penalty.

This religious law operated alongside Persian civil law (7:26). In India the major religions are allowed to implement their own marriage laws. Muslims are permitted to take more than one wife and to divorce their wife by simply saying *talaq* three times. But this divorce law has been challenged in the civil courts on the basis of human rights.

Ezra was to operate in a society with a separation of religious and civic duties, a separation of church and state. This was a change from pre-exilic days. The old days would never return. Jesus did not get involved in political matters. 'Render to Caesar what is Caesars, and to God what is Gods' he said.

The New Testament church stood firm and suffered greatly to maintain religious freedom but did not seek political power. The Reformers continued to teach the separation of church and state. But never has the church been so devoid of authority as it is today. In the New Testament heretics were excluded from the fellowship. In the Reformation backsliders were disciplined. Today there is no discipline whatsoever, with people allowed to remain members of a fellowship despite non-attendance for years.

King of Heaven

Ezra must have been immensely grateful to King Artaxerxes for giving his approval to go up to Jerusalem and for his amazing gifts to further the worship of God. Artaxerxes was the most powerful man on earth but Ezra knew that there was power greater than that of Artaxerxes, the self-proclaiming 'king of kings'. Ezra knew the true King of kings who is in heaven.

Upon receiving the letter Ezra blessed *the Lord God of our fathers* (7:27). He understood that the hand of God had moved the heart of the king to write the letter. Note the way Ezra puts it – *to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem* (7:27).

Ezra would have approached the king with great care, and much prayer. He had to go through many intermediaries to even get to the king (7:28). The response was more favourable than he expected. He was greatly encouraged (7:28). He understood that the hand of God was upon him as he stepped out in faith to serve the Lord. God had opened the door in a marvellous way and blessed him beyond what he could ask or think.

Ezra wasted no time in moving ahead in the will of God. He *gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me* (7:28). Note the personal pronoun which comes for the first time in this letter. This is the beginning of what scholars call the 'Ezra Memoirs'.

While Ezra was most grateful to the king of Persia for his permission and his bountiful gifts, he saw beyond to the King of kings and Lord of lords, to the God of heaven whom he worshipped. He worshipped the God who rules over all the kingdoms of this world, past, present and future. Let us likewise look beyond the rulers and powers of this world that we too often fear – let us look to the Lord our God and acknowledge his hand upon our lives and upon his church. God continues to work for the good of his people and for his own glory in heaven and on earth.

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