

God and His People

Ezra 2:1-70

You must be wondering, “What is he going to do with this chapter?” Seventy verses of lists of names and numbers of people, the people who returned to Israel after 70 years of exile. Not very interesting. Not very exciting. But these are the inspired words of God, and according to 1 Timothy 3:1-17, they are therefore “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” So as boring as these verses might seem on the surface, I will preach today with the conviction that these very words will be useful in your lives—for training in righteousness, for thoroughly equipping you for every good work.

In a broad sense, these verses describe God and his people, and the great blessing of God that seems to be underemphasized by these words is that blessing referred to in the very last verse, v.70

Everyone lived in their own towns, all the people of God. And what a blessing that was for a people who had been enslaved and exiled for exactly 70 years. Life was restored. Everyday life. The normal routines of everyday life. But let’s look first at the identification of God’s people, and then the references to the priests and Levites, before we come back to this description of everyday life.

Who were,

I. THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

And how were they identified? I don’t intend to read all those verses at this point, but I’ll start with,

v.1

Obviously, these were the people who had been taken into Babylon. That is an historical truth. And now they are described as the people who are coming back from captivity. They were carried away by Nebuchadnezzar 70 years earlier, and now they are returning. “Each to his own city.” So who were they? It is certainly obvious from this long list that,

A. The people of God are identified by their family relationship.

Let me read just some of those lists.

v.2-10

That list of families continues down through verse 20. Each family identified specifically. With the exact number of representatives. Why such detail?

A very important biblical principle is shown here. It is very simple to understand. God works in families. Today, we have such an individualistic mentality. We often think of ourselves isolated from the families in which we live. And even spiritual things we think of individually. Whereas the Bible thinks most often in terms of families. Husbands and wives are joined together, inseparably. Parents and children are joined together. And God’s promises, his covenant promises, extend to the whole family. Even those generations not yet born. The clearest NT example of that is,

Acts 2:37 “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” 38 Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your

children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

That’s the promise of the covenant, the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. The promise of redemption. And this same principle was obvious in the OT as well.

Gen.17:7 “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

There are certainly exceptions today, but the great majority of God’s people still become God’s people through their experiences at home. Most Christians became Christians through the influence of parents, or even grandparents. And so we pass along that promise to our children, to descendants not even yet born. The covenant promise. We identify our children as covenant children. And we include them in the visible church. We teach them about God’s love for them.

The idea is very important. God’s people are identified by their family relationship. And that earthly family does serve to represent a larger family that we belong to, a larger family with a greater list of family members. Our eternal family. And so the record of God’s people given to us here in Ezra is an appropriate symbol of that record which identifies us as the true people of God, those who will inherit eternal life. It is that great list which the Bible calls the “lamb’s book of life.”

Well, back in Ezra 2, the list of people continues past verse 20, and it becomes a list of cities in verses 21-35.

v.21-28

B. God’s people are identified by their city.

There is a geographical order followed, starting in the south with Bethlehem, moving to the north, then to the northwest, the far north, the southwest, and finally to the northwest.

But there is a greater significance than mere geographical location. The people were now, again, citizens of their own town. Notice what they had been delivered from. Verse 1 says that they were “people of the province.” In captivity, they were carried away from their own cities and made into a province in another foreign land. They had to receive laws and directions from the king of Persia and were accountable to him. But now, as it says at the end of verse 1, “each [went] to his own city.” Or town.

So it is of us today, if you carry out this illustration, that we are in exile, we are citizens of a province, under the authority of earthly rulers and worldly governments. But we, too, shall return. We, too, shall be restored. To the city of our home. And that city is the heavenly city, that same New Jerusalem whose inhabitants are those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Phil. 3:20 “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

The application comes immediately,

Phil. 4:1 “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

All of that is pictured for us in this great OT deliverance out of exile ordered by King Cyrus, with the encouragement to stand firm in the expectation that we shall return to our true home. And in Colossians, Paul makes that application even clearer.

Col.3:1 “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things

which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

The following words get even more practical.

Col.3:5 “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, 7 in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. 8 But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, 10 and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.”

People of God, as citizens of a heavenly kingdom, as members of a heavenly family, as you look forward to returning “each to his own city,” learn to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Let’s move on then, and look at the next group of people listed here in Ezra 2, and that is,

II. THE PRIESTS AND LEVITES.

v.36-40

Now, just a quick reminder. All priests had to be Levites. They had to be in the line of Levi. But not all Levites were priests. Some were secondary workers in the temple, identified here as the singers and the gatekeepers. Remember that the work and worship of the temple required the priests and Levites to work as

mediators. The people could only approach God through them. And,

A. The importance of the priesthood is shown by their large numbers.

Again, totaling up the numbers in verse 36-39, you get over 4200 priests. Out of a total of 42,000. With just four families of priests listed, over 10% of the whole returning group of God’s people is identified.

You can’t underestimate the importance of the priesthood in the OT and in the religion of the people of God before Christ, the nation of Israel. The role of the priest was crucial, for only through him could the people approach God. Yet, always, when studying the OT priests, always think of Christ as the fulfillment of everything that they did. Think of Christ, who is the perfect high priest, whose sacrifice once for all has done away with sin for every one of God’s people. And think of Christ as a sympathetic and compassion high priest, who also learned obedience through what he suffered on our behalf.

Let me draw your attention to the NT fulfillment of that great priesthood, with an emphasis upon just how important that is for us.

Heb.4:14 “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. dence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

The importance of the OT priests, their great importance, shown by the numbers of priests who have gone back to Israel, has one purpose and one alone. To point you to Christ and to describe and define his work. Because of that important work, there were strict standards placed upon the priests. And in fact, some were excluded.

v.61-63

These few families of priests couldn't prove their identity, they could produce no clear title to the priestly honor of the line of Levi. Others could not even prove themselves Israelites,

v.59-60

According to verse 61, there were some priests who had an ancestor who was not an Israelite. Yet the priests had to be clean, that is, clean in their physical descent. Clean from any intrusion of non-Israelite blood. They had to be of exclusive Jewish descent. Without proof of that, they were considered unclean. Outside the priesthood. So we see that,

B. The need of purity of the priests is shown by those who were excluded.

According to verse 63, the governor wisely determines that the Urim and the Thummim. The need for purity was important, and the final determination was given by the Lord himself, through the revelation of the Urim and Thummim.

The priests would eat the food and sacrifices that were used in worship. The priests would "partake of the most holy things." And there must be purity among those who offer sacrifices to God in worship. Purity is required of all those who have fellowship with God.

Ps. 24:3 "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place."

Let me keep in mind the applications for us, we whom the NT calls a kingdom of priests. We can learn a lot about worship from these OT types and shadows of priestly regulations, for they show us the need for proper reverence and order in worship. Priests who were the least bit impure, or suspected of being impure, were excluded. So important was the corporate worship of God's people.

But what about the other temple workers, the others members of the tribe of Levi, the singers and gatekeepers especially? Well, they aren't so numerous. They are pretty scarce.

v.40-42

341 in all. That's it. Not a very good showing, especially when compared to the priests. And what is the implication of that? Well, the assistants in the divine worship of God were lacking in diligence and faithfulness, therefore we might assume that worship itself was lacking. I believe that,

C. The careless approach to worship is shown by the few numbers of Levites.

Careless approach to worship. Few singers, who were the priestly select who offered the songs of the choirs on behalf of the people before God in worship.

And the gatekeepers, those who opened the doors and watched over the treasury. They were lacking. They were absent!

It was quite a contrast to 2 Chron. 29, when the good king Hezekiah restored to the temple the worship of God.

2 Chron. 29:25 And he stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king's seer and of Nathan

the prophet, for the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets. 26 The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. 27 Then Hezekiah commanded that the burnt offering be offered on the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord began also, and the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David king of Israel. 28 The whole assembly worshiped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded. All this continued until the burnt offering was finished. 29 When the offering was finished, the king and all who were present with him bowed themselves and worshiped. 30 And Hezekiah the king and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped.”

In that case, the affairs of corporate worship were handled very carefully and faithfully. They discharged their obligations well. To the glory and honor of God. But this was lacking after the 70 years of exile, and from a human perspective, I can say that that is very understandable. There was no temple in Babylon! And 70 years is a long time.

But nonetheless, it is blameworthy to speak about carelessness of worship. And to say that, the application is also for us. In general terms, how careless we are in our day, when it comes to matters of public worship. How careless we are in ordering our worship according to God’s commands and God’s regulations. How careless we are in our minds and hearts, actually preferring exciting and living entertainment that stirs our own passions over the reverence of biblical worship that ascribes glory to God as it’s overriding purpose.

We ought to come to worship to offer a sacrifice of reverent delight in the God who has created us and redeemed us. A

worship designed to be pleasing to him. But we can get careless, don’t we? Some people get careless even about attending worship. Others get careless in their preparation, coming to worship with thoughts of the world filling their minds and hearts, and distracting them from the fullness of worship. Or coming late, needlessly unprepared as they enter the sanctuary to worship God. A proper time for realizing that the Lord is in his holy temple and we, his people, need to be silent before him.

People of God,

Hab. 2:20 “[T]he Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”

The clearest expression of that necessary serious and reverence necessary for the worship of our great and mighty God is perhaps found in,

Psalms 29:1 “Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength. 2 Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.... And in His temple everyone says, “Glory!””

So when it comes to worship, please don’t be careless! Not in your mind or in your actions. Be prepared to give to the Lord glory, the glory due his name. Be prepared to sing. And to offer your praises.

Sadly, when the people of Israel returned from exile, they were not immediately prepared. They were careless, much like the church of our day can be. But that fault notwithstanding, they did return. And experienced God’s blessings in doing so. They returned to normal, everyday life.

v.70

And so in these last verses of this chapter, we see,

III. EVERYDAY LIFE AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE.

What is everyday life? The normal routine of living with God. Of walking with God. Day in and day out. Doing the things that God wants you to do.

Sometimes I wonder what "normal" really is. Normal for us means keeping up with the busy activities and schooling of three high school students. Normal means getting ready for the changes that are sure to come with college. Normal means that nothing extra happens in my ordinary weekly schedule of labor for the church. Normal is an elusive goal for all of us.

But in reality, normal, before God, is the experience of simply walking with God day by day. And so the people of Israel in the OT would return to normal. They would return to their own country and to freedom of worship there. And they would do so with great blessing, for as a part of normal, everyday life, we see that,

A. God is faithful to richly provide for his people.

Notice their riches and abundance of provisions.

v.64-67

That's a lot! So great is God's faithfulness.

Most of us could claim that same abundance as well. An abundance of provisions are given to us by the gracious hand of God. And that is, in many way, the normal experiences of God's people.

Ps. 37:25 "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. 26 He is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing."

Notice how God's people respond. The normal response.

v.68-69

Surely,

B. God is pleased when his people give to him freely.

Again, I wish to say that this was their normal experience.

This was normal, everyday life. Freely giving to the work of God, each according to his own ability. The principle which became established was that of tithing, a practice which continues to be required in the NT, a principle of giving that is proportional to the increase of your blessings. The first portion returned to God, as a testimony of his faithfulness. And given cheerfully. Freely, not under compulsion or manipulation. But freely.

Indeed, the church of today ought to survive on the free and cheerful tithes of her people, and not upon a long list of special offerings and fund raising events. The church ought to stay away from all such commercialization, and be supported by the free giving of her people, just as the people of God in the OT when it came to rebuilding the temple.

God is pleased, honored, glorified, when his people give to him freely. And with that, let me end by pointing out the blessing of,

v.70

Here's where I began this afternoon. The people lived in their own towns. They were home again. Home at last. And there is a great sense of delight in that, for these words show us that,

C. God gives his people the satisfaction of contentment.

The satisfaction of contentment. What a great and high blessing that is. And so elusive to others who live in this world around us.

The Bible simple says they lived in their towns, their cities. The implication is that they lived in peace. They lived with the security of knowing they were God's people, and that he was their God. And that he lived with them.

Few people today achieve the simple satisfaction of contentment, because we are always striving for more. Aren't we? More something! More anything! Just more. But godly values mean contentment. Godliness must include contentment. In the words of the Apostle Paul,

1Tim. 6:7 "... for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content."

Content with ordinary, everyday life in the presence of God. But what, then, is the application for us? What is the application of these 70 verses of Old Testament history from Ezra 2? Perhaps, to put it as simply as possible, I will use the words of Paul again.

1Tim. 6:11 "But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

That's normal. That's ordinary life, the life of faith. The pursuit of righteousness. The practice of godliness. With two main things to remember from this text. That you and I, like the Israelites, are now in exile as you live on this earth. And that you, represented by the people of God of the Old Covenant, shall be returned to your own town, your own city, which is the city of God.

Col.3:1 "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For

you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."