

April 14, 2024

Ezra 7:11-26

11 This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: 12 “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now 13 I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand, 15 and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. 17 With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. 19 The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury. 21 “And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, 22 up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 23 Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. 24 We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God. 25 “And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. 26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.”

Scriptures for further study:

Matthew 16:18

Matthew 28:18-20

Hebrews 1: 3

John 1:12-13

Galatians 3:26-29

Galatians 4:1-7

Romans 8:12-17

“These decrees issued by Artaxerxes make the account of Ezra’s return to Jerusalem in chapters 7-10 parallel to the first return narrated in chapter 1-6. Both returns are initiated and accomplished by the decrees of foreign kings, and 6:14 tells us that the decrees of the kings accomplish what God had decreed.”

- James Hamilton



The Hand of God Provides for the Rebuilding of His People Ezra 7:11-26

BIG IDEA: Because of God’s faithful provision for the rebuilding of His people, then we may live with His peace and courage as we follow our commission.

OUTLINE

1. Ezra’s Commission and the Decree for God’s People
2. Ezra’s Commission and the Decree for God’s Law
3. Our Commission

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These "Sermon Discussion Questions" are designed for study during the week for believers in a wide variety of ages & stages in their walk with Christ.

1. When you face a struggle or a big challenge, how do you react? Do you try to face it on your own power? Do you tend to want to give up? Why do you think you react that way?
2. What did King Artaxerxes decree in verse 13? Why do you think these Israelites had stayed in exile almost eighty years after the initial return?
3. What did King Artaxerxes decree in verses 21-23? What are the possible different motives for the King's decree about the finances for the work in Jerusalem?
4. We read that Ezra was commissioned to implement the Mosaic Law once again in Israel. What verses teach this in our passage? What has God provided to be our standard by which we view the world and on which we build our lives?
5. What is our Great Commission as the Church? What does Jesus promise in this Commission?
6. What did you learn about God in this passage?

"Notice the alternative description of the Torah as not only 'the law of your God' (v.14) but 'the wisdom of your God [in verse 25]."

- Derek Kidner

"Where is Jesus in this passage...I [Jesus] am the One who caused this pagan king to write this letter!"

- Derek Thomas

Praise to Jesus. Praise Him this week for how He provides for us in the little ways and in the big ways. Praise Jesus for the gift of our spiritual family, the Church. Ask God to reveal to us this week the blessings from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Repentance through Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the times when you have looked inward or tried to find solutions through your own wisdom. Repent of this self-sufficiency. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the faithlessness, lethargy, pride, or other sinful roots in your heart. Repent of what the Spirit revealed. Repent for a lack of gratitude for God's providence in your life and in your world.

Consecration for Jesus. Take time this week to ask the Holy Spirit to show who you are to tell about God's provision. Pray for the Spirit to give you courage this week to seek to disciple someone. Pray for the Spirit to reveal how and what you need to be equipped to be a disciple-maker.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Artaxerxes supports Ezra by commissioning him. The king's decree is in the form of a letter written in Aramaic addressed to Ezra, which could be used to enforce the king's command. The decree echoes that of Cyrus in authorizing any Jews who wish to go to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, reflecting Ezra's priority and perhaps his belief that the law is not being properly kept. Artaxerxes addressed the temple's needs, per Cyrus's original decree in 538 B.C., 80 years earlier. The king and his counselors gave money for the temple and permitted Ezra to gather further resources in the whole province of Babylonia, perhaps from non-Jews and Jews. The provision includes temple worship and leaves Ezra with extensive discretion in his expenditure. Artaxerxes adds these to the temple treasures initially returned by Cyrus, apparently as his gift, and, finally, allows Ezra to take whatever he needs from the king's treasury, i.e., from public funds. The decree explicitly addresses the royal treasury officials in Beyond the River, compelling them to make provisions for Ezra up to specified limits.

FOR FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

1. Review how Ezra is introduced and described in Ezra 7:1-10. (He is descendant of Aaron and as “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses.”)
2. Who gave Ezra his commission and authority? Why is this important to note? (The non-Israelite King Artaxerxes sent Ezra to Jerusalem with the authority to implement the Law of Moses. This is another amazing example of how God is guiding the story in the book of Ezra and how He uses non-believers for His purposes, even if those non-believers are unaware.)
3. What did King Artaxerxes allow in verse 13? (He allows any Israelite who wants to return to Jerusalem to go with Ezra. Point out to your children that this means that some Israelites did not feel led to return to Israel about eighty years ago when the actions of the book of Ezra began. But now they are given another opportunity.)
4. What did King Artaxerxes decree in verses 21-23? (He decrees that whatever is needed by Ezra should be paid and given to him from the royal treasuries.)
5. In verses 14, 23, and 25, what authority is to guide Ezra in his work? (It is God’s authority that is the ultimate standard for Ezra. Verse 14 says “according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand.” Verse 23 says, “Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven.” Verse 25 says, “according to the wisdom of God that is in your hand.”)
6. What is our standard for how we are to view the world and how we are to live the Christian life? (God’s Word)
7. In Matthew 28:18-20, we read of the Great Commission that Jesus gave His Church. Discuss the different components of this Commission. (Verse 18 reminds us that this Commission is given due to Christ having all authority. The main part is to make disciples of all nations, and we do that through baptism and teaching how to live out Christ’s teachings. And then Jesus promises to be with us.)

Scriptures for further study:

Matthew 16:18

Matthew 28:18-20

Hebrews 1:3

FOR STUDENTS

- 1 Read Ezra 7:11-26 and look back to chapter 1. What similar themes do you find, and how are they developed even more richly in this scene decades later? What does the king send Ezra to do, and what can you discern about the king's motives (ch.7)?
2. In light of Ezra 7, how can we view secular authorities and their potential roles in God's plan?
3. How does Ezra model humility in his actions, and how can we follow his example?
4. In what ways does the king's decree reflect God's sovereignty?
5. How does the theme of restoration and renewal in Ezra 7 apply to the church today?

FOR SEEKERS AND NEW BELIEVERS

1. Verse 11 informs us that Ezra was “learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the Lord” (i.e., he was quite knowledgeable about the Bible).

QUESTION: On a scale of 1-5 (with Ezra being a 5), how would you measure your current level of biblical knowledge? Know and believe that you, too, can develop depth in your learning. That being the case, what would be a good next step for you towards moving in that direction?

2. Verse 14 refers to the “Law of your God,” and verse 25 refers to “the wisdom of your God.”

Ezra equates the two. In other words, to know God’s word is to have God’s wisdom.

QUESTION: How does seeing this connection affect WHY we read the Bible? How does seeing this connection affect HOW we read the Bible, for example, when approaching a book like Proverbs?

3. The incredible favor extended by King Artaxerxes to Ezra in the form of protection and abundant material riches could only be explained as coming ultimately from the “hand” of God that was upon Ezra and his people.

QUESTION: Take a moment to reflect on all the many blessings you are experiencing (or have experienced) in your life. Do you recognize that these come ultimately from the hand of God? Would you now take some time to thank God for his favor upon your life?

4. Artaxerxes is referred to as “king of kings” (verse 12), but the Bible declares that God is “the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15).

QUESTION: What are some of the implications of this for our lives, in terms of how we look at earthly authorities, in terms of where we place our allegiance, in terms of where we look for our hope?

The Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People



The Ancient of Days, William Blake, 1794.

About the artwork:

The Ancient of Days, found in prophecies of Daniel, is the subject of William Blake's engraving in which he shows us the Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People, the sermon series title for Ezra.

The Ancient of Days is the cover art for Blake's Poem *Europe: a Prophecy* (1794). The Ancient of Days is a name for God the Father, whom the prophet Daniel spoke of in Daniel 7, where he saw Jesus, the Son of Man, "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." This artistic rendering by Blake serves to encourage God's people to know that He is still active and on the move with His plan of redemption despite their surroundings and circumstances.

William Blake (1757-1827) was committed to bringing prophecies and visions of the God of the Bible to life; the poet, printmaker, and painter was unrecognized and died impoverished. Despite their circumstances, William and his devoted wife Catherine, whom he taught to read and write, enjoyed a happy marriage and life together.

As a child, he came home one day and told his parents he saw "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." His middle-class mom and dad greatly loved him and all their seven children but didn't appreciate their son's story. Only the pleas of his mom saved him from the "beating" his dad said he deserved! Blake's visions continued throughout his fifty years. Among his many visions, Blake saw Christ with his Apostles and a great procession of monks and priests and heard their chant." He saw "God's face pressed against his window, seeing angels among the haystacks, and being visited by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel." Blake believed the Bible was the most significant work of poetry ever written. It was the basis for the art. His love for the Bible and his visions were the stuff of a vast collection of visual and literary art through which Blake attempted to describe "the body of God.

Barker, (2004) (Barker, William Blake 1757-1827, 2004)

Today, William Blake is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language and one of the most original visual artists of his day.