THE WORK THAT GOD BLESSES

Ezra 8:1-36

By

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You might be surprised to learn that the first article that I had published, back in the late 1960’s, was titled, “Why I Do Not Go to Church.” I grew up in the church. I attended church every Sunday as a kid. I have in a drawer at home a pin that I received for perfect Sunday School attendance for seven years, and my record actually went longer than that. But during my college years I got frustrated with the church to the point of dropping out.

My frustrations did not stem from a lack of commitment to Jesus Christ or enticement into the world. To the contrary, I dropped out when my commitment and zeal for the Lord increased, not when it decreased. The college pastor of our church saw my zeal, latched onto me and put me in a group whose task was to brainstorm and come up with creative programs that would attract other college students to attend. I later sardonically referred to this as coming up with “Creative Programs for Carnal Christians.” If we succeeded in luring 50 otherwise disinterested students to our interesting program, the college pastor raved about how successful it was. But if our program wasn’t quite as enticing, the attendance would drop and we would rack our brains for something different.

Meanwhile, at Long Beach State College, our Campus Crusade group regularly saw 125 students come out on Friday nights to study the Bible without any creative programs to entice them to come. No doubt some of the students came for the purpose of meeting attractive specimens of the opposite sex. But most of the students were there primarily because we wanted to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The gap was glaring: at church, a bunch of worldly kids had to be enticed to attend the creative program or they wouldn’t come. At college, the simple reality of knowing Christ and fellowshipping with others who wanted to know Christ drew the students. So I dropped out of the church with its superficiality and wrote my article for a friend who had started a Christian newspaper.
But even though I was frustrated with what I saw as the superficial games at the local church, I couldn’t shake the fact that Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18); and, “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). God gave me a deep desire to help make the church all that He wanted it to be. That’s why I have been a pastor for these past 25 years.

I want this church to be a work that God truly blesses. I refuse to be a program manager of the latest Creative Programs that will attract Carnal Christians. I’m not here to entertain. I want to shepherd a flock that hungers and thirsts after reality with God. I want the living Savior to be at work in our midst in unmistakable ways. I want to remove every hindrance that would block God’s hand of blessing and I want to add every quality that would bring His blessing on His church. As Ezra testified to King Artaxerxes (8:22), “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him…” I want us to be a people that seek God.

Last week we looked at the life that God blesses. This week we are looking at the work that God blesses. This chapter gives the account of the journey of about 5,000 exiles (including women and children) from Babylon to Jerusalem. The phrase, “the hand of our God,” which we saw in 7:6, 9, & 28, occurs three more times: 8:18, 22, & 31. We learn three ingredients in the work that God blesses:

God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by humble faith, scrupulous integrity, and Christ-centered worship.

Honoring God is the major thrust of the chapter. Ezra refused to accept an armed escort from the king because he had told the king how God would protect His people (8:22). So these people put their faith on the line by venturing out into a robber-infested desert with no human protection. Also, Ezra wanted to honor God by a strict accounting of the silver, gold, and other resources that they were transporting to Jerusalem. And, the reason that these people were making this difficult and dangerous journey was to honor God by worshiping at His house.

1. God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by humble faith.

Ezra’s humble faith in the Lord shines through in two ways: in the roster of people who were willing to commit themselves to
this difficult enterprise; and, in making the journey without armed protection. We learn:

A. We honor God by trusting Him to raise up godly, qualified leaders and people for the work.

It is one thing to go and ask the king’s permission to lead a delegation of exiles back to Jerusalem. But it is another thing actually to get volunteers to commit to the difficult task of giving up their comfortable situations in Babylon and to make the move back to an uncertain future in Israel.

The list of names (8:1-14) begins with priestly families (8:2), then those from the royal line of David (8:2b-3a), followed by 12 “lay” families (8:3b-14), which may be representative of all Israel. The number of men listed is 1,496, plus the 18 heads of families, totaling 1,514. Adding in the 258 Levites and temple servants assembled later (8:15-20) brings the total to 1,772. The women and children would bring the group to around 5,000, compared to almost 50,000 on the first return.

One significant fact about the list is that everyone, except for Joab (8:9) is connected to the pioneers who had first returned 80 years before (Derek Kidner, Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 65). This implies that “the original challenge to return, in the days of Cyrus, had had a very mixed response, dividing individual clans down the middle” (ibid.). The phrase “the last ones” (8:13) may indicate that these descendants represented the final members of that clan residing in Babylon. But that fact that clans were split up points both to the comfortable lifestyle in Babylon that contributed to the spiritual indifference of returning; and to the faith and commitment of those who did return.

It was no small task to organize a pilgrimage of 5,000 people, including children, across 900 miles of hostile desert. The group began on the first of the first month (7:9), but they paused for three days at a canal that runs to Ahava (8:15). As Ezra took stock of things, he discovered that there were no Levites present. There were three groups of priests, all descended from Levi: (1) the high priest; (2) ordinary priests; and, (3) the Levites, the lowest order, who cared for the service of the sanctuary (C. L. Feinberg, Zonder-
van Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible [Zondervan], 4:854). The temple servants (8:20, "Nethinim") assisted the Levites in their tasks.

It may be that none from these two groups had joined the returning exiles because of both the hardship of returning and also the bottom of the ladder status of their tasks at the temple. But, even though their jobs were not as glamorous as that of the priests, they were essential if the priests were to be freed up to do their work. So Ezra selected nine leaders, along with two men called teachers (8:16) and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at what was apparently a conclave of Levites. He briefed this delegation on what they should say (8:17). "And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought” back “a man of insight” along with some other Levites, totaling 38 men (8:18-19). Also, 220 temple servants were persuaded to accompany the returning exiles. These 258 men and their families had very short notice to make the decision to return, to pack up and join the waiting group, which started out across the desert on the twelfth day of the first month (8:31).

We see Ezra’s humble trust in God in his thankful acknowledgement that these men joined the group because of “the good hand of our God upon us.” He recognized that God had to put it on the hearts of His people to be willing to serve, even in the tasks that were not so flashy. Three observations:

(1) God’s work requires workers as well as leaders. If you have leaders without adequate numbers of workers, the leaders will have too much to do, and thus will be hindered from giving proper leadership. If you have workers but inadequate numbers of leaders, the workers will not have the direction and understanding of the work that is needed. In other words, all the parts of the body of Christ are necessary for the proper functioning of the whole. If you are a believer in Christ, you’re a part of His body, the church, and you have a ministry where He wants you to serve. Workers are just as vital to the Lord’s work as leaders. Which part of your body would you like to do without? Every part of the body of Christ is crucial!

That point was easy. Now for a more controversial point:

(2) Leaders in the Lord’s work should be male. This list numbers the men, omitting the women and children. They are called “the heads of their fathers’ households” (8:1). Derek Kidner observes, “Ezra
knew the structure of his society well enough to direct his appeal to the heads of families (7:28; 8:1), knowing that in most cases if they came they would bring their groups with them” (p. 64, italics his). He also notes that modern church strategy often tends to reverse this, going after the children first, to the neglect of husbands and fathers.

The New Testament is clear that the role of elder is limited to men (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), and that women are not to function as teachers over men (1 Tim. 2:11-15). In the home, husbands are the heads of their families (Eph. 5:22-6:4). This does not mean that elders lord it over the church or husbands bark orders to their families. Rather, we should be examples of the self-sacrificing servant love of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:1-5; Eph. 5:25). Being the leaders means that elders are accountable to the Lord for the direction of His church and husbands will answer to Him for the spiritual direction of our families. We should not capitulate to our culture by adopting egalitarian roles in the church or home.

(3) Leaders must be both godly in character and qualified by gift and training. The men whom Ezra sent are called “leading men” and “teachers” (8:16). One of the men they recruited is called “a man of insight” (8:16). Also, when Ezra entrusts these men with the gold and silver that they are to safely transport to Jerusalem, he reminds them, “You are holy to the Lord” (8:28). Ezra was not threatened, but rather was thankful (8:18) that the Lord raised up godly, qualified men to serve in leadership positions along with him.

Likewise, local churches need godly leaders, qualified for the office of elder both by gift and training. The qualifications for elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) are primarily character qualities, except for “able to teach,” which requires both gift and training. While no man perfectly matches the high standards for elders, we should not put men into that office who glaringly lack any of these qualities. God will bless the work that honors Him by trusting Him to raise up godly, qualified leaders and workers.

B. We honor God by trusting Him to protect our work and our families from the enemy.

Our text does not reveal what must have been quite interesting, namely, the details of how and when Ezra told the returning
exiles that there would not be any armed guards accompanying them on the return trip! It is amazing that there is no indication that people began bailing out when they heard the news. It is equally amazing that there was not a group of dissidents crying out, “This is insane! It’s suicide to venture out into that hostile, robber-infested desert, loaded with gold and silver, with no military protection!” But apparently, none protested.

Ezra reports, “I proclaimed a fast ... that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions” (8:21). He then explains that this was necessary because he had told the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him” (8:22). Because of this, Ezra was ashamed to ask for a military escort. “So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty” (8:23). “The hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes along the way” (8:31). Thus the group safely arrived in Jerusalem.

It’s interesting that later Nehemiah, who was also a man of faith, accepted the king’s protection for his trip (Neh. 2:9). There is no indication that he was sinning or lacking in faith for so doing. This raises a thorny question, which I can only touch on: When is it wrong to use human means in addition to trusting the Lord?

I think that the normal pattern is to trust God while thankfully using the means that He provides. You pray for protection on the highways, but you fasten your seat belt and drive carefully. You pray for healing, but you go to the doctor and take the prescribed medicine. You pray for a job, but you prepare a resume, dress appropriately, and go for job interviews. God normally expects us to use the means He provides, along with faith in Him.

But sometimes using human means will lead us away from trust in the Lord, or it would be a poor witness to unbelievers. Often, this is an individual matter before the Lord. For example, George Muller believed that it would not demonstrate faith in the Lord and thus not honor Him to advertise the financial needs of his orphanages. I’m sure that he was obeying God in the way he operated, making his needs known only to God in prayer. Yet others have revealed the needs of their ministries to God’s people, while trusting God and asking Him to provide. We just need to be
sure that we're seeking to honor God and that we are consciously trusting Him.

Our text shows that as God’s people seeking to do God’s work, we need to recognize that there are enemies and ambushes along the way (8:31), and thus we desperately need “God’s hand over us” to protect us. The enemy is seeking to destroy us and our little ones (8:21) by tearing apart families and by bringing down church leaders. I know of many men, formerly in the ministry, who have brought dishonor to God and His church through divorce or moral failure. Satan is especially targeting leaders. Knowing that there are enemies and ambushes along the way, we must humble ourselves and seek God’s protection through prayer, and in special times of need, through fasting. God will bless His work through us when we seek to honor Him by humble faith.

2. God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by scrupulous integrity.

Some scholars have questioned the amount of gold and silver mentioned here, which amounts to many tons and represents millions of dollars in today’s currency. But if the king thought that Ezra’s God really existed, he would have wanted to give a gift fitting for a king. When you add in the gifts from the king’s counselors, princes, and the Jews who did not return (8:25), it added up to a sizeable amount. Ezra was concerned to give a report back to the king that the entire amount was delivered to Jerusalem without any of it being skimmed off through greed and corruption.

Thus he parceled the items out by weight and let them know that they were accountable to deliver that amount to God’s house in Jerusalem. When they got there, everything was numbered and weighed, recording the numbers (8:34). Perhaps some of the leaders grumbled, “Doesn’t he trust us? Why does he have to weigh everything on both ends and write it all down? After all, God is watching all that we do.”

But as Paul put it with regard to his careful handling of the gift for the poor in Jerusalem, “We have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Cor. 8:21). If we do not follow proper accounting procedures, it exposes workers to temptation and to accusations. I knew of a
church near us in California where the members made out their checks to “Jim Smith Ministries” and Pastor Jim (not his real name) was the only person who handled the funds. He made all deposits and he dispersed all checks. That is simply an open invitation for corruption and scandal!

We need to be scrupulous in matters of financial integrity, even on small matters. We have each staff member pay for personal long distance calls on church phones and for personal copies on the church copy machine. None of the pastoral staff have access to our giving records. Those who do are charged with maintaining confidentiality. Other accounting procedures insure that the work here is honorable, not only in the Lord’s sight, but also in the sight of men. When Jesus said, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10, the “very little thing” in the context is money. He went on to promise that if we are faithful in money matters, then the Lord would entrust true riches to us (16:11), which in the context are the souls of people.

The matter of integrity extends beyond financial integrity to the whole of a man’s character. Ezra was a man of moral integrity. That is one reason that God’s hand of blessing was upon him.

Thus God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by humble faith and by scrupulous integrity. Finally,

3. God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by Christ-centered worship.

The whole aim of this arduous undertaking of moving 5,000 people across 900 miles of desert was to worship God by offering sacrifices at His temple in Jerusalem (8:35). Our chapter repeats the phrase, “the house of [our] God” six times in reference to the temple (8:17, 25, 29, 30, 33, 36). Worshipping God at His house was so important to these exiles that they were willing to suffer hardship, danger, and great inconvenience to move back to Israel.

As soon as they got back to Jerusalem, rested, and accounted for the items for the temple, they offered sacrifices to the Lord. “The sin-offerings availed as an atonement for the sins of all Israel, and the burnt-offerings typified the surrender of the entire nation to the service of the Lord” (C. F. Keil, Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament [Eerdmans], Ezra, p. 113).
The entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered Himself on the cross as the atonement for our sins. Thus our worship must always focus on Jesus Christ and Him crucified. As Paul put it, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). If we exalt Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross, God will honor His work in this church.

**Conclusion**

God’s people in Ezra’s day were far from perfect. In the next chapter, we will see how Ezra was appalled to learn that both the people and the priests had corrupted themselves by intermarrying with the peoples of the land. Nehemiah had to deal with further problems just a few years later (Nehemiah 13).

There will never be a perfect church on this earth before Christ returns. We all are prone to the influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Corruption forms on us as easily as rust on a nail left out in the rain.

But just because the church cannot be perfect does not mean that it cannot be good. We can be a holy people before the Lord. We can seek Him. We can experience His blessing on His work here if we will seek to honor Him by humble faith, scrupulous integrity, and Christ-centered worship. I encourage you to join me in laboring to make this church a work that God truly blesses!

**Discussion Questions**

1. Every Christian should have a ministry. Agree/disagree? Give biblical support.

2. Men should be the leaders in the church and at home. Agree/disagree? Give biblical support.

3. How can we know when it is proper or when it is wrong to use human means in addition to trusting God?

4. In light of Luke 16:10-13, why is financial integrity a big deal?

5. What does it mean to glory (boast) in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14)? How can we do this as individuals and as a church?