

Ezra Chapters 7-8 John Karmelich

1. My title is "Ezra Part 2- Now what?" These final four chapters of Ezra are like one of those times in life where we've got a big project done, time has lapsed and now we're thinking, "What is next on the agenda?" To explain, it'd be best if I spend a few moments explaining these chapters here and then I'll talk about why it's relevant to our lives:
 - a) In Chapter 7 we meet Ezra himself. It's about 57 years from Chapters 1-6. That means he told the Chapters 1-6 story from historic records and information he got from others. The first few verses give his genealogy. He can trace his roots to Aaron, the first top priest of Israel. It doesn't mean Ezra was the high priest, but he was trained to be as a priest. Anyway, the early verses are all about him organizing a large caravan to go the estimated 900-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. Scholars argue that there may have been as many as 6,000 people in this caravan. For those who like time stamps, I read it's about 435 BC. This is about the time the last of the Old Testament prophets (Malachi) was on the scene.
 - b) Then the chapter lists the letter by the emperor of the moment giving Ezra permission not only to go there, but literally to take millions of dollars in supplies for the temple. We get a bunch of trip details in Chapter 8. Mostly about who went with him and discusses what is the purpose of the trip.
2. OK John, this would be interesting if I lived in Israel way back then. Why is this in the bible? Or as you like to say, "Why should we care?" These chapters are essentially explaining who traveled to Israel about 60 years after the first group went back. I should care because? Sometimes we've got moments in our lives where it's time to start the next phase of our lives. I like to think of those first six chapters as being all about building God's church. Chapters 7-10 are about what we're to do once it's built: In other words, how should we act as believers?
 - a) Let me put it this way: We don't get Ezra's resume to be impressed. We get it to show he's properly trained to be a church leader. The significance is not the fact he's from a priestly family but he's spent years studying the bible (to date) and making it part of his life.
 - b) Let me put it this way, to teach the bible or anything for that matter, one has to prepare to teach. I remember studying the bible for a good number of years. Then I saw a verse that hit me like a ton of bricks, "By now you ought to be teachers". (Hebrews 5:12.) If we are going to live the Christian life, it's important to have good teachers. That's my point.
 - c) If all of this is true, why all the details about the emperor's permission? For starters, that's an indication of how trustworthy Ezra was. The emperor trusted him with millions of the taxpayers "stuff" that's dedicated for God. I suspect the motivation of the emperor is he is interesting to honor local deities "to cover his basis". Plus if people are busy praying to the gods of their choices, they're less likely to rebel against Persia as "they did all this for us".
 - d) Anyway the stuff on this caravan was both heavy (we're talking tons of stuff) as well as it was very valuable. One reason to travel as a caravan is protection against thieves. Plus to show that Ezra was trusting God, he turned down the emperor's request for guards!
 - e) These chapters mostly cover preparation for the trip, who made the trip, what is included on the trip (supplies and animals) to make the trip. Only the last few verses deal with the arrival in Jerusalem. So again, the big question is how do we apply all of this to our life? I will take that on for the rest of this summary:
3. I'm convinced all these details are here not so much to teach us about Ezra other than how he was a good leader. Details about his life will give lessons on how to lead in any aspect of life, not just as a church leader. Obviously he was called by God to lead. There's an old saying about how to tell if you're called to professional ministry. It is, "If you can do anything else, do it". One has to not stand doing anything in life in order to be an effective pastor or priest. I'm positive God calls many people to do what it is they do in order to make a difference for Him.

- a) For those of us not called to the "Professional ministry", I'd argue we're all called to make a difference for Jesus. It could even be financially providing or praying. As one of my old pastors would say, "If you're not on the front line firing the bullets, then you have to be on the back line providing the ammunition (prayer)".
 - b) Anyway, these chapters in Ezra teach us a lot about leadership and how Ezra himself was called to make a difference by God and be used in a mighty way to lead the Israelites after a good time period had past since the temple was built. As to how he actually led them it is a big topic in these two chapters.
 - c) So why the big time gap? Why not a short book about the Israelites retuning to build that thing and comments about Ezra himself a generation later dealing with the issues that did come up again sometime later.
 - d) I don't think the number of years is as important as the idea of using our lives to continue to honor God. Of course I believe we're saved by faith alone. The question is what are we doing with that faith? Once we finish a job for God, then what? Those are the things we'll take on in these chapters.
 - e) Which reminds me of another point about bible study. Yes, the bible is full of messages in the issues of who is God, who is Jesus and what do they expect of us? The bible's also full of text on what God expects of us in return. These two chapters deal with that issue. This isn't an "Old Testament" thing of the Israelites return and here are the rules. It's an issue of how are we to be a good witness for Jesus? Even once our building is built and people do know we're around, how are we to act? Specific issues of how we act are mainly brought in the last two chapters. These two are mostly about leadership. After all if God wants us to lead others either today or in the future, we must study how they're to act to learn from them for that purpose.
4. So is that it? Ezra leads a big bunch of people back to Israel on a long journey along with literally tons of stuff, make it safely and everybody praised God? That's the two chapters in one thought. I am positive there are lessons here about leadership, calling to service for God, giving credit for those who are willing to commit their lives to God and in summary learning more of how God is expecting us to act as a witness for Him.
- a) If all of this bores you then ask yourself, am I interested in pleasing God with my life?
 - b) If you think, I already know what God wants me to do, why should I care about all these details on how others should act? Because leadership affects all of us as a witness for Him in our lives. We lead others by how we act and what we do and say. What I'm getting at is lessons in leadership affect all of us no matter what is our role. That's what I hope you get out of reading all of this.
 - c) With all that said, time for the details.
5. Chapter 7, Verse 1: After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,² the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub,³ the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth,⁴ the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki,⁵ the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest –
- a) First thing I want to say is, thank God for cut and paste as I don't have to type out all of these names! You don't have to memorize this. The most likely reason Ezra lists his family history is just to show that he was a legally a priest.
 - b) As most of you know, priests were from the Jewish tribe (1 of the 12) called Levi. Not all of the Levities were priests but all the priests were Levities. The rest of the Levites assisted the priests in their duties. The picture is to be a priest is something one had to born into to be one. The same with being called in the ministry. One does it simply because one can't stand not doing it!
 - c) By the way this isn't a complete genealogy. It's roughly 1,000 years from Aaron To Ezra. I don't think those names covered that long of a period of time.

- d) So why list this? To brag? No. Ezra wanted to serve in Israel as a priest and one needed to show their "credentials" since priests had to be descendants of Aaron. So Ezra listing this to show the reader that yes, he really and legally was a priest.
 - e) It doesn't mean all priests were called to be prophets. He was just called to be one as he is inspired to write this book. Speaking of which a little more Ezra background.
 - i) As I said in Chapter 1, he wrote Ezra, probably Nehemiah and was responsible for organizing 1st and 2nd Chronicles. Jewish tradition is he also started the idea of a local synagogue as the Israelites were in Babylon and had no temple.
 - ii) The first Jewish attempt to decide which Old Testament books belong in the canon of scripture also had Ezra as a member. I assume he voted for his book!
 - f) Speaking of background a little more about the text. The text said he made this trip during the reign of Artaxerxes. Chapters 1-6 discussed the first two emperors: Darius and Cyrus. Between Cyrus and Artaxerxes was another one named Xerxes. It was during the 57 years between Chapters 6 and 7 that Xerxes ruled. If you read the book of Esther, he's the king at that time. Now Xerxes son, Artaxerxes is on the throne and he'll be prominent here.
 - g) Gee John this would all be interesting if we lived in Israel 2,500 years ago. The point here is the chapter is about "starting over, take 2". If Ezra himself is leading this expedition it is important to understand who are leaders are if we're to serve under them for a while.
6. Verse 6: this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. ⁷ Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.
- a) Let me discuss the city of Babylon for a quick second. When the Persians conquered all of the Babylonian empire, they didn't destroy the city. It was used as a headquarters in the Persian Empire. Alexander the Great was going to use it too, before he died. Many of the Jewish refugees from the Babylonian conquest took up life there. Ezra was among the priests living there. As I mentioned earlier, Ezra was a well-known priest who did a lot of good things including starting the concept of the synagogue organizing bible books (part of the "cannon" committee) and it is told he memorized the first five books of the bible.
 - i) In the New Testament one comes across the term "Scribe" every now and then. The term sounds like a glorified secretary! It actually is more like a lawyer. It refers to a person who's a bible expert. I'm explaining all of this to understand what is the implication behind "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses".
 - ii) As I said in the introduction, there comes a time when all students need to step out and then teach others in one form or another. Of course one never stops learning. I would still argue that God leads us when we're ready to take on a bigger role. It is what we see here in these verses.
 - iii) Apparently Ezra was known enough that the king knew who he was and trusted him to lead a caravan full of people and supplies to Israel.
 - b) These verses give the overview of who's going on the trip. I'm sure many of these people also had "day jobs", but Ezra lists their functions for serving God. Stop and think what'll matter for all of eternity, how we used our lives to make a difference for Jesus. I suspect it is why those functions are mentioned. What about children who die young? I'm positive God will judge all people fairly. I'm also saying if we got opportunities to use our lives to make a difference for Jesus, "take them".
 - c) Let me discuss this from the emperor's perspective. Even if he knew who Ezra was and it appears he believed Ezra to be an honest man. So why give him what we'll discover to be a huge sum of money (in the millions) in gold and silver to go back to Israel and build the temple again? What's in it for the Emperor to do this? Yes God's behind it, but why is he ordaining all of this as opposed to just saying, "I'm in charge, deal with it".

- d) The "politics" is the emperor wanted his people to focus on worshipping their gods so the pressure to rebel against the king would be less. If you studied the Roman Empire, you'd discover that the army would often contribute to building temples to local deities. That is to discourage the people to rebel against Rome. That's why you read in the Gospels as the Roman soldiers as good guys who helped build synagogues. Anyway, the king needed someone trustworthy to take lots of valuables from Babylon to Jerusalem to make the temple better. Therefore it was the duty of Ezra who the emperor deemed trustworthy.
 - i) OK John, so how does this apply? We may not be able to change the politics of the world around us, but if we're honorable people, we never know who is watching, and how we can be used by God when we use our lives for His glory.
 - ii) What if we've messed up our lives to date? Welcome to the club! All we can do is learn from our mistakes, pray for His wisdom, trust in His word and then do what is logical based on the situation in front of us as I like to preach.
 - e) Anyway, with all that understood, Ezra organized this trip and took along people who'd be useful for God's service. Thus we get mentions of priests, singers and gatekeepers! All of that leads to the next few verses that deal with the arrival.
7. Verse 8: Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king.⁹ He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him.¹⁰ For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.
- a) It took Ezra four months to make what scholars estimate to be a 900-mile journey if there were no short cuts taken! Given the fact that all these men brought their families along, I can understand that for this "wagon train" it would take that long to make this trip! We'll get more details about the trip in a matter of verses. I keep picturing kids asking, "Are we there yet?" What we have here is gratitude that God got the caravan there safely. As we'll read later, the caravan carried millions in gold and silver, and made it safely. Personally, I'm a big believer in gratitude. We can't be happy in life without being grateful. Even on our worst days, we can always find something to be grateful for.
 - b) So why bring up the fact that Ezra was a devout bible student and observer of the law? Is it to brag? I think it's simply the fact that God called Ezra to take on this task because he's trusting in God and "putting his money where his mouth is" so to speak by trusting in the word of God to guide his life. That alone is a model for our lives.
 - c) Do I believe we're saved by doing good works? Of course not. However if we believe the concept that Jesus died for our sins and the bible is God's word, lets be honest, putting our money where our mouth is (again, so to speak) is the evidence of our faith! Being a priest is always about being a good witness for Jesus all of the time. Yes we mess up. Still when we do we ask for forgiveness and again, use our lives for His glory. OK, enough lecturing for these verses, let's move on!
8. Verse 11: This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest and teacher, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel:
- a) If there's one thing I've learned about Ezra is he loves to include official documents as part of his books. Yes it's God's inspired, but God uses people with different personalities as to communicate what he wants us to learn.
 - b) Maybe Ezra was overwhelmed by the fact the emperor would single him out for this task. Whatever the reason, the letter itself from a pagan king to Ezra, became part of the bible.
9. Verse 12: Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven: Greetings.
- a) Here is the letter opening, addressed to Ezra himself. Remember that as Ezra was leading the caravan, he'd have to show "papers" to people. This letter was his proof that what he's doing was officially ordained by God and the emperor himself!

- b) I'm not sure if the emperor believed that the Jewish God was "the" God. It may have just been a way of making this look more "official" to the people of Jerusalem when he arrived.
 - c) What this introduction does prove is "his highness" knew who Ezra was. He had enough respect for him to trust him with the task at hand. OK, time for the body of the letter.
10. Verse 13: Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. ¹⁴ You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. ¹⁵ Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, ¹⁶ together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. ¹⁷ With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem.
- a) This letter implies pressure. Here's the leader of the largest empire the world telling those Israelites, "Hey guys, I know you're comfortable in Babylon, but I'd really like all of you to be part of this caravan heading to Israel. Apparently the king had 7 top advisors. They're advising the Israelites to "get moving". I don't know about you, but I'd consider that a big motivation to pack my bags and realize God's behind that request.
 - i) OK John, we don't get decrees from our leaders to do God's work. How are we to know when something is God's will? First, the obvious. We pray about it and we make sure it's not in violation of God's word. If it's a project to bring the gospel to more people or help others grow in Him, I'd say that alone is motivation enough! I also like the prayer of "bless it or block it" and watch how God works in our lives. Meanwhile, back to Ezra.
 - b) The emperor is trusting Ezra with literally tons of silver and gold. Therefore Ezra also had to trust those under him with these great valuables too. The emperor even specified these gifts are for temple use: That probably means adding to the temple as well as using all of that stuff to buy the sacrificial animals for the temple as well as grain used for other types of offerings. Realize the emperor got a bit of an education on how God's temple worked. I don't know if his advisors told him or Ezra himself, but the emperor had enough facts that he could command Ezra with specifics of what's to be sacrificed as specified mainly in the book of Leviticus but also states elsewhere in the first five books of the bible.
 - i) Assume we get all of this. The emperor is backing the Jewish desire to continue to use the temple for worshipping God and the government is financing it. Also we get the idea the government encourages this to help them not rebel against them.
 - ii) Does this mean we should endorse government financial support of the church? I am mixed on this. In Europe the government pays to keep it going yet attendance in church in England and much of Europe is at an all time low. Personally I do not think it's a good idea. As an American believing in freedom of religion I'd rather it not happen that way. Still it's hard to turn down a free gift like this especially with no strings attached! That's politics. Let's move on to something else.
 - iii) The other question is how do we relate to all of this? I don't think the issue for us is the temple itself as much as it is being a good witness for God and doing His will. I would argue His will is simply to use our lives to glorify Him. I've always liked the idea of figuring out what we enjoy, what our gifts are and finding ways to use them for His glory. Of course we each have to do our share of stuff that isn't really spiritual gifts like taking out the trash, but that goes without saying.
 - c) The main underlying point is God's making it obvious to the Israelites that it's His will for them to "start over". Yes they messed up, and yes they were kicked out of the land. Still it is obvious God wants His people united in the worship of Him, so God's encouraging the travel back to Israel so people can glorify Him with their lives in that land.

11. Verse 18: You and your brother Jews may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God.¹⁹ Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God.²⁰ And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you may have occasion to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury.
- a) One has to understand that gold and silver is a form of hard currency. It can be used for the benefit of the temple worship as well as any other form of trade. Notice the emperor said the "rest of it" (whatever that means) can be used for whatever Ezra says. You have to admit, that would be a temptation for any of us! My guess is Ezra spent a lifetime as a proof that what he cares about is serving God and I don't see him as wanting to hoard any of the stuff for himself. I'm sure he picked trustworthy men under him who now will be accountable to each other. Which reminds me I'm a big believer in accountability to other people in our Christian life. Let's be honest, we're a lot less likely to sin if we must account to others for our actions.
12. Verse 21: Now I, King Artaxerxes, order all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates to provide with diligence whatever Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of you--²² up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cors of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of olive oil, and salt without limit.²³ Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and of his sons?²⁴ You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.
- a) Keep in mind we're still reading the transcript of a letter (or memo) written to Ezra that he took with him to Israel. The reason for this is so when the caravan traveled there and got to Israel and people asked who gave you permission to do all of this, Ezra can pull out the letter and say, "Oh, you mean this?"
 - b) I've beaten to death the point that the king had motives that were far more than building a temple to God. It had political motivations that benefit him personally. (The short version is people busy focused on serving their gods are less likely to rebel against their leaders as the government made the worship possible.)
 - c) I have to admit that if I was Ezra or even a member of this caravan, I'd be impressed. Not only did the king give "tons of stuff" that the Israelites can use to worship God, but all of the people on this trip will now get to live tax free! Grant it those in professional ministry don't make as much as other professions, but like Persia the United States and many other countries do let those in the professional ministry go tax free in exchange for the service of leading others to draw close to God. Again, it's a tradition for governments to encourage this if for no other reason than to have people focus on God and not rebelling against the government.
 - d) This would all be interesting if I was in the professional ministry or if I lived in Israel way back then. How does any of this matter to me? Yes we get the idea professional ministry work gets a tax break, but how does any of this "stuff" affect my life? For starters it shows that God will work "how God will work" to encourage us to grow closer to Him. For us it probably won't be a government edict, but if we're dedicating our lives to be used by Him I promise He finds ways to use us for His glory. It mainly shows that God is willing to do whatever it takes to draw people closer to Him. Even work through major empires. They (the Persians) gave up a huge amount of tax collection to do this, and yes I'm positive it is God ordained.
 - e) It may help to think about the introduction to this lesson. My key point is the building of the temple is now done, and the next step is to encourage people to use it as to draw them closer to God. It's sort of amazing that God can even use official government edicts so we will be encouraged to draw closer to Him.

13. Verse 25: And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates--all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.²⁶ Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.
- a) These two verses are the end of the king's "memo". It ends with a personal note saying in effect, "Hey Ezra, you're a good guy. You're smart and know God's laws well. When you get to Israel use that knowledge to help people draw close to God by teaching His laws."
 - b) That in effect is the job of any bible teacher. We teach bible lessons to show people how it is that God wants us to live. We teach people how to draw closer to Him. We explain the idea of sin and how much it hurts our lives. We grow ourselves in His word and closer to Him as we teach others. Stop and think what will matter for all of eternity: How we used our lives to make a difference for Him. Yes of course the Gospel Message is central. What I am emphasizing here is once we accept that message, what do we do next? For teachers like myself, our greatest joy is seeing people "get it" and then helping them grow closer to God in their lives.
 - c) Notice that the king (or emperor as I go back and forth over that) also gave Ezra power to appoint leaders in Israel. The term "Trans-Euphrates" simply refers the Persian territory of their empire west of the Euphrates River. It's a fancy way of telling Ezra, "I'm the king and since I'm in charge, I'm appointing you to be the head guy not only to bring all the stuff to Israel but to also to say you're in charge of all this stuff you're taking to Israel."
 - d) With all that said, let's talk about Verse 26 for a moment. This is the "incentive clause" for serving the Persian King. It's one thing to say "You should go to church this Sunday". It's another to say it's a death sentence if you don't go! Would that verse scare me if it applied to me? Of course! Let's discuss the idea of "forced worship" while I'm here:
 - i) While it's tempting for church funds to force people to go to church let alone to try to win souls for Jesus, but all in all it's not a good idea. One of the concepts we got to grasp about God is He never "forces Himself on us". He gives us freewill and it means in effect he doesn't put a gun to our head to worship Him. That's because it is not true worship when we're forced to do it.
 - ii) OK John, if all that's true, why is this king forcing "religion down their throats"? I would say there are a number of incentives for him. For starters Ezra's taking what would be millions of dollars worth of stuff to Israel. If thieves are considering this a great robbery opportunity, let's just say "You have no idea who you are messing with" so to speak. Next it's a message to the Israelites living there telling them in effect, "Your king is spending a fortune on this project. What I expect in return is for you to honor God in exchange for all of this! Did that mean every Israelite did go to synagogue for a while? I wouldn't want to test that theory. What we'll soon discover in the next lesson is "They went but the sin issue was still there!"
 - iii) Since I'm in the neighborhood, let me discuss the death penalty for a moment. It is the only one of God's laws that's stated in all five books of Moses. Yes, I know the whole process system in the United States is insane but if one knows one will die if they commit certain crimes, it's a great motivation. If God says this is the right way to punish people for certain crimes, who am I to say He's wrong?
14. Verse 27: Praise be to the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way²⁸ and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.
- a) By Verse 27, Ezra is done "cutting and pasting" the king's letter in his book. Next we get to read Ezra's reaction to all of this. His first thought, "Praise God" as He gets the credit.

- b) Notice Ezra's first reaction is not, "Hey I worked hard all my life to get where I am. I'm not surprised the king picked me to do all of this". There's no, "I deserve it". It's praise to God for all He's done. Remember it's been about 60 years since Chapters 1-6. Yet we got who's the most powerful man in the world at that moment not only focusing on the Israelites, he is also giving them millions out of the treasury and ordering the Israelites to turn to their God by the "order of the king". Ezra saw the big picture here and his first reaction was to praise God for what He was doing.
 - c) Notice in Verse 28, this letter encouraged Ezra. Obviously the death sentence and being in charge of all that gold and stuff would make anyone happy. Still, Ezra realized God is behind all of this and he takes a few moments here to praise God when something great is occurring in life. Now there's a strong reminder for us at any time something good occurs in our lives. In order for one to appreciate life, one has to be grateful for things no matter how big or small. I've made a gratitude list part of my daily prayers and it's helped me in many ways to appreciate life a whole lot better.
 - d) Speaking of gratitude, we made it to Chapter 8, which is a little easier to deal with!
15. Chapter 8, Verse 1: These are the family heads and those registered with them who came up with me from Babylon during the reign of King Artaxerxes:
- a) If there's one thing I've learned about Ezra, is he loves to list names of people. If you have ever read the first ten chapters of 1st Chronicles (more or less) it's pretty much just a list of names. So why list all the names of the "head guys" who made the trip? My guess is God loves people who make an effort to make a difference for Him. If you study Paul's letters, he loved to mention those who were with him, those who delivered the letters and people he knew in those cities. The idea is to show that it's not the size of our ministry that is the key, but our efforts to be willing to use our lives to make a difference for God. Enough of all of that time to list lots of names:
16. Verse 2: of the descendants of Phinehas, Gershom; of the descendants of Ithamar, Daniel; of the descendants of David, Hattush ³ of the descendants of Shecaniah; of the descendants of Parosh, Zechariah, and with him were registered 150 men; ⁴ of the descendants of Pahath-Moab, Eliehoenai son of Zerachiah, and with him 200 men; ⁵ of the descendants of Zattu, Shecaniah son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 men; ⁶ of the descendants of Adin, Ebed son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men; ⁷ of the descendants of Elam, Jeshaiiah son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men; ⁸ of the descendants of Shephatiah, Zebadiah son of Michael, and with him 80 men; ⁹ of the descendants of Joab, Obadiah son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men; ¹⁰ of the descendants of Bani, Shelomith son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 men; ¹¹ of the descendants of Bebai, Zechariah son of Bebai, and with him 28 men; ¹² of the descendants of Azgad, Johanan son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 men; ¹³ of the descendants of Adonikam, the last ones, whose names were Eliphelet, Jeuel and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men; ¹⁴ of the descendants of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with them 70 men.
- a) Unless you're one of those rare people who have a gift to memorize long lists of names, I won't be quizzing you on all these names and I doubt God will either. If we ever do meet any of them in heaven, we can ask what the journey was like to travel with Ezra. Beyond that, I think the issue again, is simple to say, here are a lot of brave people willing to help and start a new life in Israel making a difference for God.
 - b) By the way, some of the names do sound familiar. We see the name Daniel listed. No it is not the same as "the" Daniel. This Daniel is a descendant of King David somehow. We do read in this list of some priests listed. The name Ithamar is listed here. He was one of the two sons of Aaron the first high priest. My simple point is other priests made this trip and not just Ezra.
 - c) Some scholars make a big deal about the fact that 12 families are listed as 12 is often used as a symbolic number in the bible. It could be. I think Ezra simply wanted to give credit for all these families who decided to start over again with a new life in Jerusalem.

17. Verse 15: I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there. ¹⁶ So I summoned Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, who were leaders, and Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of learning, ¹⁷ and I sent them to Iddo, the leader in Casiphia. I told them what to say to Iddo and his kinsmen, the temple servants in Casiphia, so that they might bring attendants to us for the house of our God. ¹⁸ Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 men; ¹⁹ and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 men. ²⁰ They also brought 220 of the temple servants--a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name.
- a) If you read the text carefully Ezra technically began his journey on the 1st of the month (a night of no moon) and arrived 4 months later. Technically the caravan didn't actually get moving for about 12 days later to get more people. While everybody was gathered, Ezra noticed there were no Levites who were not priests. To say it again, only the descendants of Aaron were considered priests. Those priests were of the tribe of Levi. The rest of that tribe were supposed to assist the priests in their duties. I'm sure the average Levite was at this point comfortable in Babylon and may have not been crazy about going back to Israel and starting over. Therefore Ezra had to go say, "Hey, the King gave an order and besides no more taxes if you go" (as an incentive). I don't know what did the trick, but Verses 18-19 do state that some Levites did make the journey.
 - b) Verse 20 also mentions "Temple Servants". It appears there were slave descendants who also worked there and they were willing to continue their family history there. Maybe an appeal of "no more taxes" was an incentive, but who knows.
 - c) Bottom line is the caravan was now ready for travel.
 - d) Time for a quick, "why should I care" lecture: If we're going to take on a project for God, I would think we need people capable of doing whatever job it is that needs to be done. It's a necessary step to "take inventory" before starting the job and then say, "Wait a minute, I think we're still going to need this or that before we start." That's it
18. Verse 21: There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. ²² I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." ²³ So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.
- a) First a technical note here: Man made canals existed back the. A canal is a "water bridge" to connect two bodies of water. Anyway that's where Ezra and the gang camped.
 - b) These verses deal with the issue of fasting. I'll get to the question of "should we" in a few moments. First let me explain why this was done here. To begin with the journey would be a dangerous one. Bandits in the open road are always a danger, let along to someone with millions of dollars of gold and silver in hand. Verse 22 says Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for protection for the trip. Why? Because Ezra wanted to show the king that the God of the Israelites is "The" God who would protect them. So if that's true, why pray for protection? Because every step of our lives should have our focus on God. It's to remind us who's really in charge of this trip and requesting His will be done. The lesson for those of us who lead is, "Hey, let's look to God to protect us and guide us" as that's the only way we'll get there safely. OK then point made. Let's discuss fasting!
 - c) The purpose of fasting is a way to get our focus on God. It's saying in effect, "Right now, I consider God more important than food. So I'm going to not eat for a time period in order to get my focus on Him. The fact that I'm hungry for say a day, is a reminder that we trust in Him for guidance and protection."

- i) Remember when Jesus was in the desert, he fasted for 40 days. It is said that after a few days one loses one's appetite. The trick is the 40th day is when hunger does return and one has to eat to survive. Personally I've never fasted more than one day and when I do it, I never tell anyone. There are also fasts when one gives up a certain type of food or no deserts. The important idea is a lack of food is designed to get our focus on God, nothing more or less. It's not meant as any sort of method for an effective diet. I'll leave that issue to the professionals. I'll just say that diet is a (not the) biblical method to get our focus on Him. If one is considering a fast that lasts more than a day, I know there are Christian books on that topic.
 - ii) Just discussing this issue is getting me hungry! Let's finish the lesson first!
- 19. Verse 24: Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, together with Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brothers,²⁵ and I weighed out to them the offering of silver and gold and the articles that the king, his advisers, his officials and all Israel present there had donated for the house of our God.²⁶ I weighed out to them 650 talents of silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold,²⁷ 20 bowls of gold valued at 1,000 darics, and two fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold.
 - a) If memory is correct the amount of gold brought weighed three and a half tons and silver weighed about twenty tons. Even if my figures are off, it's still a mind-boggling figure not to transport, but to trust one person with that much responsibility.
 - b) So what was all this "stuff" for? I'm sure some of it was to decorate the temple, but I'd also guess some of it was to buy supplies for the priest to do their job, let alone survive. Some of the items are obvious, such as silver bowls that were used to offer sacrifices to God.
 - c) Coming back to the theme of leadership, notice Ezra was putting his trust in all these men with the stuff the king gave.
 - d) Speaking of what's all this stuff for, I present the next few verses.
- 20. Verse 28: I said to them, "You as well as these articles are consecrated to the LORD. The silver and gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers."²⁹ Guard them carefully until you weigh them out in the chambers of the house of the LORD in Jerusalem before the leading priests and the Levites and the family heads of Israel."³⁰ Then the priests and Levites received the silver and gold and sacred articles that had been weighed out to be taken to the house of our God in Jerusalem.
 - a) Keep in mind that the caravan hasn't moved yet. The Israelites are still at the canal. Yet it is here that Ezra says to the priests, "You're in charge of this stuff now, I'm trusting you to keep it safe through the journey as well as to use it for its proper purpose when we make it to Jerusalem.
 - b) Obviously one of the tasks of leadership is delegation. Yes Ezra was a godly man but he's now trusting "all this stuff" with others he may or may not know that well. Grant it they'll all be together for months but still give Ezra credit for taking the leadership by saying this is now your responsibility, be careful as you're working with God's stuff right now!
- 21. Verse 31: On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way.³² So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days.
 - a) After 30 verses here in Chapter 8, not to mention all of Chapter 7, we get a whopping two verses on the trip itself. Must have been fairly uneventful to summarize it that briefly. All it says is they didn't leave the "canal camp" for 12 days, God protected them from enemies and bandits and they made it to Jerusalem.
 - b) So why mention the three days rest? I'd guess after traveling all that distance and having to transport all that heavy stuff, the group just wanted three days to "kick back in tents" to ease up from what must have been a hurried pace. Yes there's still the matter of turning in all the stuff to the locals, but Ezra is saying as hard as we worked to get here, it's time as a leader to say, "OK everyone, let's ease up here, praise God for making it and take a break!"

22. Verse 33: On the fourth day, in the house of our God, we weighed out the silver and gold and the sacred articles into the hands of Meremoth son of Uriah, the priest. Eleazar son of Phinehas was with him, and so were the Levites Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui.³⁴ Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time.
- The last order of business of this trip was to turn over the stuff to the locals. Verse 34 says that everything was accounted for and weighed. This is the old, "Trust but Verify" model of accountability. As I stated earlier in the lesson, a great system for any church or even a bible group is to set up some sort of accountability. Yes we all make mistakes. Still we're less likely to do the wrong thing if we know we're accountable to people!
 - Bottom line is the emperor wanted all this stuff sent to Jerusalem to be used in association with the worship of God and it all was.
 - OK John, nice story. I know you gave good lessons on leadership and accountability. Let us say that we're already involved in projects to make a difference for God. How does any of this apply to us? Obviously we don't make sacrifices on an altar as Jesus paid the price for our sins. So what's the take away? It has to do with using our life to make a difference for Jesus and being accountable to people as we do so. Our projects may or may not be an effort that we deem a success. What matters is we use our lives for His glory.
 - As I said in the beginning, not everything we do for God goes as planned. Still what He is asking for us is to use our lives for His glory. The results are His business. All He asks is an effort on our part to make that difference. If you get that, you get this lesson.
 - Meanwhile, I got two verses left to go:
23. Verse 35: Then the exiles who had returned from captivity sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs and, as a sin offering, twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD.³⁶ They also delivered the king's orders to the royal satraps and to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, who then gave assistance to the people and to the house of God.
- The last order of business was to "get down to business". They started making offerings on the sacrificial altar. I'm guessing the number of animals had some significance to them as they made them. Notice the offerings were "burnt offerings". That simply indicates the complete dedication of their lives to God. I'll let Ezra tell me one day why they picked the specific number of animals they did. Maybe it's what they had on them. Notice the lambs (77) were a sin offering. I don't know what sins were committed on the trip, but I suspect it's simply a matter of "covering their bases" to show their dedication to God.
 - Obviously Christians don't offer live animals today as Jesus is our sacrifice. However we do give financially and with our time to make a difference for Jesus. I'm just saying when we read of this dedication of their lives to God it should make us jealous a little. No I am saying we have to prove our worth to God by how much we work. I am saying if we do believe Jesus is God and are grateful for what He's done for us, we will, "put our money where our mouth is" so to speak and use part of our lives to make a difference for Him. It is what will matter for all of eternity.
 - Let's end on a technical note: When you see "royal satraps and to the governors of Trans-Euphrates", just think of it as the government officials in the area. After all they'd wonder why all the gold and silver arrived and the letter from the king was proof that all of this has been ordered. Since it's "official" the local government leaders approved this project.
 - OK, so now what? Why are there two more chapters of Ezra after this? The short version is Ezra deals with the issue of separating ourselves for God's use, which is a natural issue to follow up on how we use our lives for God. Until then, it's time to wrap it up in prayer:
24. Heavenly Father, the most valuable thing You give us is our time. Help us to use some of it to make a difference for You and Your kingdom. Make it obvious to us how it is You'd specifically like us to use our lives for Your glory. May Your Spirit guide us as we dedicate some of our time and our resources for Your glory. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen!