

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Ezra 8:24-30

Lesson Title: Gifts for the Temple

Introduction

Ezra has been called by some “a mini Moses.” While we understand there are no big or little servants in God’s kingdom, the ministries of Ezra and Moses although worlds apart in size and scope bear some striking similarities. Both men were students of God’s law. Both men led groups of people to the Promised Land. Both men enjoyed divine protection while they traveled. Both utilized God appointed leaders in their journey. And both carried valuable gifts given to them from the leaders of the land they left.

Our lesson text in Ezra 8:24-30 takes place in Jerusalem at a time when the temple had been rebuilt. It is now time for Ezra’s group to return and bring with them the gifts and materials necessary for proper temple worship. These gifts and materials were heavy and very costly. Getting these items across 900 miles was an enormous responsibility and one that Ezra took seriously. The way Ezra handled this daunting task is a lesson to Christians and churches that should be carefully studied and implemented in our spiritual journey.

Ezra 7:11-26 contains a letter from King Artaxerxes to Ezra that included several important factors in the Jews return to their homeland. First, it permitted “*all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem*” (Ezra 7:13). Second, the king gave Ezra permission to teach the law of God and to enforce it (Ezra 7:14, 25-26). Third, the king charged Ezra with the responsibility for carrying both financial and material gifts for the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:15-19). Like his predecessor, King Cyrus, King Artaxerxes contributed generously to the worship of God.

All of this seems too good to be true. Why would a Persian king care about Jews obeying God’s commandment and about giving money and materials for their temple worship? While no one knows for sure why Artaxerxes gave such generous financial contributions, it is safe to say that he desired God’s blessings personally and nationally rather than His wrath (Ezra 7:23). It is also evident that he had high regard and respect for Ezra (Ezra 7:25). But beyond any human explanation we arrive at it is evident that the hand of God is present in every detail of Ezra’s story.

God is looking after His chosen people and can use whoever and whatever He desires to see that they have what they need (Philippians 4:19).

Ezra was pleased with the king's generosity and commission. He expressed his pleasure by giving praise and glory to the Lord for all that was taking place (Ezra 7:27-28). He did not take credit for the king's generosity, nor did he praise the king. Ezra gave credit where credit was due, unto the Lord.

Individuals Chosen (Ezra 8:24)

Verse 24

“Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them”

If you read this verse by itself it seems to indicate that Ezra appointed “twelve” men “of the chief of priests” to be responsible for the treasure. He appointed “Sherebiah” and “Hashabiah” and “ten” others which would add up to “twelve.” However, according to Ezra 8:18-19, “Sherebiah” and “Hashabiah” were “*sons of Levi*” which would make them “Levites,” not “priests.” Also, Ezra 8:30 clearly identifies both “priests and the Levites” as part of this journey. Considering all these verses together, it seems the best interpretation of Ezra 8:24 is that Ezra chose “twelve priests” and “twelve Levites” among whom “Sherebiah” and “Hashabiah” were two. That would make a total of twenty-four leaders appointed.

The name “Sherebiah” means “Jehovah hath made me to tremble.” The name “Sherebiah” reminds us that being a leader requires that you fear and tremble in God's presence. There is an unfortunate loss of the sacred responsibility among church leaders today that needs to be restored. Whatever position one may hold or responsibility one may have been given ought to cause us to tremble and fear before the Lord. The name “Hashabiah” means “Jehovah is associated with or hath devised.” This name also serves as a reminder to all of us involved in the Lord's work that we are doing what we do in connection with the great work of God. The carrying of gifts to Jerusalem and the responsibility that went with it was in association with God's plan. May the Lord revive that truth in all of our hearts as we daily seek to do God's will.

Ezra's appointment of these two individual leaders along with “their brethren” shows us his great wisdom. Ezra did not trust one person with everything but rather distributed the responsibility equally among trustworthy men. Responsibility and

accountability must be spread throughout the body of Christ if we are to be good stewards of all God has given us.

Inventory Taken (Ezra 8:25-28)

Verse 25

“And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered”

While coins were common at this particular period in history the wording here seems to indicate that the “silver” and the “gold” were bars instead of coined money. “Weighed unto them” means Ezra carried out some form of inventory to list the exact amount of the money and “the vessels” and the “offering” that was to be taken to Jerusalem. This insured that all items would arrive intact, since another weighing would occur once they arrived in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:33-34).

The “offering of the house of our God” was the special money given by King Artaxerxes and “his counselors, and his lords, and all Israel” who were “present.” Many different people had contributed to this great cause which further required accountability and integrity. We should be reminded that we are not only handling treasures that belong to God, but we are also handling treasures that have been given to the work of God from both those who know the Lord and those who don’t.

Do Ezra’s actions in taking this inventory and keeping records indicate a lack of trust in the men he selected? Does he think he will be robbed on the journey even though he has previously stated “*The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him*” (Ezra 8:22). No. His actions are a result of his integrity. He is protecting himself from accusations of taking anything for personal gain or any of those he has appointed from the same possible accusation. Ezra’s actions remind us of the admonitions of the Apostle Paul to the young preacher Timothy, “*A bishop must be blameless...*” (1 Timothy 3:2). The word “*blameless*” means “nothing for the world to use to discredit God’s man.”

Verse 26-27

“I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents; Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.”

These measures represent an enormous amount of “silver” and “gold.” When you consider the fact that a “talent” weighed approximately seventy-five pounds, this means the “silver” bars weighed around twenty-five tons. The “hundred talents of silver vessels” and the “hundred talents of gold” weighed a little over three tons. The “twenty basons of gold” and “two vessels of fine cooper, precious as gold” would be around nineteen to twenty pounds. That’s quite a load for twenty-four priests and Levites to carry. Most likely these items were transported in wagons (Numbers 7:2-3).

All of these items would be valued in the millions of dollars today. But it is not just the dollar value that makes all of this so important and special. These “vessels” and “offerings” were given for the work of God. And God’s work is important and valuable no matter the dollar amount that is attached to it. The church building that is just a rented out store front is just as valuable in the sight of God as the multi-million dollar sanctuary. The bi-vocational pastor who works two jobs to support his family and ministry is just as valuable to the Lord as the pastor with a three figure financial package.

Instructions Given (Ezra 8:28-30)

Verse 28

“And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers.”

“And I said unto them” are words spoken by Ezra to those appointed in verse 24 to be in charge of the treasure. “Ye are holy unto the LORD...” means those chosen to be responsible for the money, the vessels, and the offering had been “set apart.” These men belonged to the Lord. It is only proper and right that the priests and Levites should carry and be responsible for the sacred things belonging to the temple. The temple and all its functions was their life. It was their purpose and reason for existence. None but those who are “holy” should be entrusted with this great treasure. In reading Ezra’s instructions we are reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians when he said, “*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels...*” (2 Corinthians 4:7). As believers we too have an enormous treasure of salvation and the Holy Spirit living within us. To possess something so “holy” and sacred is to require us to be “set apart” unto the Lord. The only way to keep the treasure clean is to keep ourselves clean (Isaiah 52:11).

“The vessels are holy also...” also means that which these men carried had been “set apart” unto the Lord. Everything they carried had a special and sacred purpose

in the temple and must be treated as such. These words should convict us concerning how casually we approach the Lord's work and the Lord's service. So much of what we do today is done without that sense of holiness and sacredness. The "silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers" is a reminder that the things they are responsible for are things given to "the LORD God of your fathers." It is not our church or our ministry. The money in the church treasury does not belong to the finance committee or the church treasurer. The piano and the organ do not belong to the one who donated them or to those individuals assigned to play them. The pastor is God's shepherd to lead, feed, and guide the flock but he does not own the church. These may seem like trivial matters but churches and ministries have failed because of misconceptions concerning who we are and what we are doing. As God's servants we must be "holy." As God's servants we must remember that "the vessels are holy."

Verse 29

"Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD."

This verse stresses the importance of guarding the treasure. "Watch ye, and keep them" literally means, "watch in order that ye might keep." Ezra is saying, "Guard this stuff with your life until you weigh it in at Jerusalem." The day of accountability would come when they arrived "at Jerusalem" and gave account "before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel." This is a reference to the leaders of the nation of Israel. The "chambers of the house of the LORD" were rooms around the edges of parts of the temple area used both for administration and storage and for the priests' personal convenience.

Commenting on this verse, author Alexander Maclaren writes, "*Though it cannot be that we shall meet the trial and the weighing of that day without many a flaw and much loss, yet we may hope that by His precious help and His pitying acceptance we may lay ourselves down in peace at last, saying, "I have kept the faith," and may be awakened by the word "Well done, good and faithful servant."*" That was the desire of Ezra's heart for these priests and Levites and it should be our desire as well.

Verse 30

"So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God."

“So took the priests and the Levites” means they accepted Ezra’s instruction and his solemn charge concerning their duties and responsibilities. They accept the “weight” as they left with a clear understanding that they were accountable to “weigh in” the exact amount at the end of the journey. The priests and Levites are to be commended for accepting this responsibility because they had no clue as to what dangers might await them on the long journey home. No matter what may come they are ready to bring the gifts for the temple to Jerusalem.

Conclusion

According to Ezra 8:31-36 Ezra and his group arrived safely in Jerusalem. The implication in Ezra 8:34 is that the books balanced when the silver, gold, vessels, and offering was counted and weighed. The men chosen had faithfully fulfilled their task and proven themselves trustworthy in the mission given to them.

As believers in Christ we cannot read this story without being reminded of our enormous responsibility and accountability. The treasures we carry may not be vessels of silver and gold or even financial offerings. They may be worth far more. Some of the treasures we carry are priceless. Our testimony of saving grace is so valuable to our own assurance and to a lost world. Enoch was given a testimony at the beginning of his spiritual journey and he walked with God all the way to heaven (Hebrews 11:5). Our families are precious treasures. Our Christian fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ is so valuable today. Let’s accept our duty to protect these and all the treasures God has given us. And when that final day of reckoning comes, the day of “weighing in” may everything balance in the presence of God (Romans 14:12).

Amen.