

CHAPTER 7

Ezra's precious name saluted us, at first, in the title of the book, but in the history we have not met with it till this chapter introduces him into public action in another reign, that of Artaxerxes. Zerubbabel and Jeshua we will suppose, by this time, to have grown old, if not gone off; nor do we hear any more of Haggai and Zechariah; they have finished their testimony. What shall become of the cause of God and Israel when these useful instruments are laid aside? Trust God, who has the residue of the Spirit, to raise up others in their room. Ezra here, and Nehemiah in the next book, are as serviceable in their days as those were in theirs. Here is,

- I.** An account, in general, of Ezra himself, and of his expedition to Jerusalem for the public good (v. 1-10).
- II.** A copy of the commission which Artaxerxes gave him (v. 11-26).
- III.** His thankfulness to God for it (v. 27, 28). The next chapter will give us a more particular narrative of his associates, his journey, and his arrival at Jerusalem.

~~<570>~~ EZRA 7:1-10

EZRA'S ARRIVAL AT JERUSALEM

Here is,

I. Ezra's pedigree. He was one of the sons of Aaron, a priest. Him God chose to be an instrument of good to Israel, that he might put honour upon the priesthood, the glory of which had been much eclipsed by the captivity. He is said to be *the son of Seraiah*, that Seraiah, as is supposed, whom the king of Babylon put to death when he sacked Jerusalem, ~~<2518>~~ 2 Kings 25:18, 21. If we take the shortest computation, it was seventy-five years since Seraiah died; many reckon it much longer, and, because they suppose Ezra called out in the prime of his time to public service, do therefore think that Seraiah was not his immediate parent, but his grandfather or great-

grandfather, but that he was the first eminent person that occurred in his genealogy upwards, which is carried up here as high as Aaron, yet leaving out many for brevity-sake, which may be supplied from ^{<B00>}1 Chronicles 6:4, etc. He was a younger brother, or his father was Jozadak, the father of Jeshua, so that he was not high priest, but nearly allied to the high priest.

II. His character. Though of the younger house, his personal qualifications made him very eminent.

1. He was a man of great learning, a scribe, a *ready scribe, in the law of Moses*, v. 6. He was very much conversant with the scriptures, especially the writings of Moses, had the words ready and was well acquainted with the sense and meaning of them. It is to be feared that learning ran low among the Jews in Babylon; but Ezra was instrumental to revive it. The Jews say that he collected and collated all the copies of the law he could find out, and published an accurate edition of it, with all the prophetic books, historical and poetical, that were given by divine inspiration, and so made up the canon of the Old Testament, with the addition of the prophecies and histories of his own time. If he was raised up of God, and qualified and inclined to do this, all generations have reason to call him blessed, and to bless God for him. God sent to the Jews *prophets and scribes*, ^{<E23>}Matthew 23:34. Ezra went under the latter denomination. Now that prophecy was about to cease it was time to promote scripture-knowledge, pursuant to the counsel of God by the last of the prophets, ^{<300>}Malachi 4:4. *Remember the law of Moses*. Gospel ministers are called *scribes instructed to the kingdom of heaven* (^{<132>}Matthew 13:52), New-Testament scribes. It was a pity that such a worthy name as this should be worn, as it was in the degenerate ages of the Jewish church, by men who were professed enemies to Christ and his gospel (*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees*), who were learned in the letter of the law, but strangers to the spirit of it.

2. He was a man of great piety and holy zeal (v. 10): *He had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord*, etc.

(1.) That which he chose for his study was *the law of the Lord*. The Chaldeans, among whom he was born and bred, were famed for literature, especially the study of the stars, to which, being a studious man, we may suppose that Ezra was tempted to apply himself. But he got over the temptation; the law of his God was more to him than all the writings of

their magicians and astrologers, which he knew enough of with good reason to despise them.

(2.) He *sought the law of the Lord*, that is, he made it his business to enquire into it, searched the scriptures, and sought the knowledge of God, of his mind and will, in the scriptures, which is to be found there, but not without seeking.

(3.) He made conscience of doing according to it; he set it before him as his rule, formed his sentiments and temper by it, and managed himself in his whole conversation according to it. This use we must make of our knowledge of the scriptures; for happy are we if we do what we know of the will of God.

(4.) He set himself *to teach Israel the statutes and judgments* of that law. What he knew he was willing to communicate for the good of others; for *the ministration of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal*. But observe the method: he first learned and then taught, sought the law of the Lord and so laid up a good treasure, and then instructed others and laid out what he had laid up. He also first did and then taught, practised the commandments himself and then directed others in the practice of them; thus his example confirmed his doctrine.

(5.) He *prepared his heart* to do all this, or he fixed his heart. He took pains in his studies, and thoroughly furnished himself for what he designed, and then put on resolution to proceed and persevere in them, and thus he became a ready scribe. Moses in Egypt, Ezra in Babylon, and both in captivity, were wonderfully fitted for eminent services to the church.

III. His expedition to Jerusalem for the good of his country: *He went up from Babylon* (v. 6), and, in four months' time, came to Jerusalem, v. 8. It was strange that such a man as he staid so long in Babylon after his brethren had gone up; but God sent him not thither till he had work for him to do there; and none went but those *whose spirits God raised* to go up. Some think that this Artaxerxes was the same with that Darius whose decree we had (Ezra 6), and that Ezra came the very year after the temple was finished: that was the sixth year, this the seventh (v. 8), so Dr. Lightfoot. My worthy and learned friend, lately deceased, Mr. Talents, in his chronological tables, places it about fifty-seven years after the finishing of the temple; others further on. I have only to observe,

1. How kind the king was to him. He *granted him all his request*, whatever he desired to put him into a capacity to serve his country.
2. How kind his people were to him. When he went many more went with him, because they desired not to stay in Babylon when he had gone thence, and because they would venture to dwell in Jerusalem when he had gone thither.
3. How kind his God was to him. He obtained this favour from his king and country by *the good hand of the Lord that was upon him*, v. 6, 9. Note, Every creature is that to us which God makes it to be, and from him our judgment proceeds. As we must see the events that *shall* occur in the hand of God, so we must see the hand of God in the events that *do* occur, and acknowledge him with thankfulness when we have reason to call it his *good hand*.

<45718> EZRA 7:11-26

THE DECREE OF ARTAXERXES

We have here the commission which the Persian emperor granted to Ezra, giving him authority to act for the good of the Jews; and it is very ample and full, and beyond what could have been expected. The commission runs, we suppose, in the usual form: *Artaxerxes, King of kings*. This however is too high a title for any mortal man to assume; he was indeed king of some kings, but to speak as if he were king of all kings was to usurp *his* prerogative who hath *all power both in heaven and in earth*. He sends greeting to his trusty and well-beloved Ezra, whom he calls a *scribe of the law of the God of heaven* (v. 12), a title which (it seems by this) Ezra valued himself by, and desired no other, no, not when he was advanced to the proconsular dignity. He reckoned it more his honour to be a *scribe of God's law* than to be a peer or prince of the empire. Let us observe the articles of this commission.

I. He gives Ezra leave to go up to Jerusalem, and as many of his countrymen as pleased to go up with him, v. 13. He and they were captives, and therefore they would not quit his dominions without his royal license.

II. He gives him authority to enquire into the affairs of Judah and Jerusalem, v. 14. The rule of his enquiry was to be *the law of his God, which was in his hand*. He must enquire whether the Jews, in their religion, had and did according to that law — whether the temple was built, the priesthood was settled, and the sacrifices were offered conformably to the divine appointment. If, upon enquiry, he found any thing amiss, he must see to get it amended, and, like Titus in Crete, must *set in order the things that were wanting*, ^{<3005>}Titus 1:5. Thus is God's law magnified and made honourable, and thus are the Jews restored to their ancient privilege of governing themselves by that law, and are no longer under *the statutes that were not good*, the statutes of their oppressors, ^{<3025>}Ezekiel 20:25.

III. He entrusts him with the money that was freely given by the king himself and his counsellors, and collected among his subjects, for the service of the house of God, v. 15, 16.

1. Let this be taken notice of,

(1.) To the honour of God, as the one only living and true God;' for even those that worshipped other gods were so convinced of the sovereignty of the God of Israel that they were willing to incur expenses in order to recommend themselves to his favour. See ^{<19512>}Psalms 45:12; 68:26.

(2.) To the praise of this heathen king, that he honoured the God of Israel though his worshippers were a despicable handful of poor men, who were not able to bear the charges of their own religion and were now his vassals, and that, though he was not wrought upon to quit his own superstitions, yet he protected and encouraged the Jews in their religion, and did not only say, *Be you warmed, and be you filled*, but gave them such things as they needed.

(3.) To the reproach of the memory of the wicked kings of Judah. Those that had been trained up in the knowledge and worship of the *God of Israel*, and had his law and his prophets, often plundered and impoverished the temple; but here a heathen prince enriched it. Thus afterwards the gospel was rejected by the Jews, but welcomed by the Gentiles. See ^{<5111>}Romans 11:11, *Through their fall salvation has come to the Gentiles*. ^{<4136>}Acts 13:46.

2. We are here told that Ezra was entrusted,

(1.) To receive this money and to carry it to Jerusalem; for he was a man of known integrity, whom they could confide in, that he would not convert to his own use the least part of that which was given to the public. We find Paul going to Jerusalem upon such an errand, *to bring alms to his nation and offerings*, ^{<4247>}Acts 24:17.

(2.) To lay out this money in the best manner, in sacrifices to be offered upon the altar of God (v. 17), and in whatever else he or his brethren thought fit (v. 18), with this limitation only that it should be *after the will of their God*, which they were better acquainted with than the king was. Let the *will of our God* be always our rule in our expenses, and particularly in what we lay out for his service. God's work must always be done according to his will. Besides money, he had vessels also given him for the service of the temple, v. 19. Cyrus restored what of right belonged to the temple, but these were given over and above: thus it *receiveth its own with usury*. These he must *deliver before the God of Jerusalem*, as intended for his honour, there where he had *put his name*.

IV. He draws him a bill, or warrant rather, upon the *treasurers on that side the river*, requiring them to furnish him with what he had occasion for out of the king's revenues, and to place it to the king's account, v. 20, 22. This was considerably done; for Ezra, having yet to enquire into the state of things, knew not what he should have occasion for and was modest in his demand. It was also kindly done, and evinced a great affection to the temple and a great confidence in Ezra. It is the interest of princes and great men to use their wealth and power for the support and encouragement of religion. What else are great revenues good for but that they enable men to do much good of this kind if they have but hearts to do it?

V. He charges him to let nothing be wanting that was requisite to be done in or about the temple for the honour of the God of Israel. Observe, in this charge (v. 23),

1. How honourably he speaks of God. He had called him before *the God of Jerusalem*; but here, lest it should be thought that he looked upon him as a local deity, he calls him twice, with great veneration, the *God of heaven*.

2. How strictly he eyes the word and law of God, which, it is likely, he had read and admired: "Whatsoever is *commanded by your God*" (whose institutions, though he wrote himself *King of kings*, he would not presume

in the least iota or tittle to alter or add to) “let it be done, let it be diligently done, with care and speed.” And,

3. How solicitously he deprecates the wrath of God: *Why should there be wrath against the realm?* The neglect and contempt of religion bring the judgments of God upon kings and kingdoms; and the likeliest expedient to turn away his wrath, when it is ready to break out against a people, is to support and encourage religion. Would we secure our peace and prosperity? Let us take care that the cause of God be not starved.

VI. He exempts all the ministers of the temple from paying taxes to the government. From the greatest of the priests to the least of the Nethinim, *it shall not be lawful* for the king's officers *to impose that toll, tribute, or custom upon them*, which the rest of the king's subjects paid, v. 24. This put a great honour upon them as free denizens of the empire, and would gain them respect as favourites of the crown; and it gave them liberty to attend their ministry with more cheerfulness and freedom. We suppose it was only what they needed for themselves and their families, and the maintenance of their ministry, that was hereby allowed to come to them custom-free. If any of them should take occasion from this privilege to meddle in trade and merchandise, they justly lost the benefit of it.

VII. He empowers Ezra to nominate and appoint judges and magistrates for all the Jews on that side the river, v. 25, 26. It was a great favour to the Jews to have such nobles of themselves, and especially to have them of Ezra's nomination.

1. All that *knew the laws of Ezra's God* (that is, all that professed the Jewish religion) were to be under the jurisdiction of these judges, which intimates that they were exempted from the jurisdiction of the heathen magistrates.

2. These judges were allowed and encouraged to make proselytes: Let them *teach the laws of God to those that do not know them*. Though he would not turn Jew himself, he cared not how many of his subjects did.

3. They were authorized to enforce the judgments they gave, and the orders they made, conformable to *the law of God* (which was hereby made *the law of the king*), with severe penalties — imprisonment, banishment, fine, or death, according as their law directed. They were not allowed to make new laws, but must see the laws of God duly executed; and they

were entrusted with the sword in order that they might be *a terror to evil doers*. What could Jehoshaphat, or Hezekiah, or David himself, as king, have done more for the honour of God and the furtherance of religion?

⌘ EZRA 7:27-28

EZRA'S THANKFULNESS TO GOD

Ezra cannot proceed in his story without inserting his thankful acknowledgement of the goodness of God to him and his people in this matter. As soon as he has concluded the king's commission, instead of subjoining, *God save the king* (though that would have been proper enough), he adds, *Blessed be the Lord*; for we must *in every thing give thanks*, and, whatever occurrences please us, we must own God's hand in them, and praise his name. Two things Ezra blessed God for: —

1. For his commission. We suppose he kissed the king's hand for it, but that was not all: *Blessed be God* (says he) *that put such a thing as this into the king's heart*. God can put things into men's hearts which would not arise there of themselves, and into their heads too, both by his providence and by his grace, in things *pertaining both to life and godliness*. If any good appear to be in our own hearts, or in the hearts of others, we must own it was God that put it there, and bless him for it; for it is he that *worketh in us both to will and to do* that which is good. When princes and magistrates act for the suppression of vice, and the encouragement of religion, we must thank God that *put it into their hearts* to do so, as much as if they had granted us some particular favour. When God's house was built Ezra rejoiced in what was done to beautify it. We read not of any orders given to paint or gild it, or to garnish it with precious stones, but to be sure that the ordinances of God were administered there constantly, and carefully, and exactly according to the institution; and that was indeed the beautifying of the temple.

2. For the encouragement he had to act in pursuance of his commission (v. 28): *He has extended mercy to me*. The king, in the honour he did him, we may suppose, had an eye to his merit, and preferred him because he looked upon him to be a very sensible ingenious man; but he himself ascribes his preferment purely to God's mercy. It was this that recommended him to the favour of his prince. Ezra himself was a man of courage, yet he attributed

his encouragement not to his own heart, but to God's hand: "I was strengthened to undertake the services, *as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me* to direct and support me." If God gives us his hand, we are bold and cheerful; if he withdraws it, we are weak as water. Whatever service we are enabled to do for God and our generation, God must have all the glory of it. Strength for it is derived from him, and therefore the praise of it must be given to him.