

# **By The Waters Of Ahava**

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In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus of Persia allowed a small portion of the Jews who had been in captivity to return to their own land. Led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, they were commissioned to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1-2). By 516 BC they had finished the Temple, but after a brief period of religious zeal, the nation soon fell into a state of apostasy. The Temple services and sacrifices were neglected and immorality became prevalent.

In 458 BC Ezra, a priest, scholar and teacher of the law (Ezra 7:6, 12, 25), led another group of Jews to Jerusalem from their captivity. After a four-month journey, they arrived in Palestine, and Ezra began instituting reforms to reestablish the laws of God. He taught the commandments, statutes and ordinances, and reinstated the holy days and the sacrifices and offerings. Among other reforms instituted by Ezra, he dissolved the mixed marriages that had proliferated since the Jews' original return (Ezra 9-10).

Making such profound and difficult changes is not easy to do. It would take a courageous man, strong in faith and totally dedicated to God to accomplish such a task. Before attempting to do this, God needed to know that His servant possessed the mettle to fulfill His will. Thus, long before Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, his faith and dedication to God were tested.

## **Ezra's Dilemma**

The story begins many months before. While still in Persia, Ezra had heard of events in Judah, and it displeased him that his people had fallen so quickly into their old habits of disobedience to God. Determined to correct the problem, he went before Artaxerxes, the Persian Emperor, and requested permission to return to Judah with some of the Temple treasures to institute religious reforms. The king granted him all that he asked, generously supplying him and his party with provisions and a letter of introduction that

gave him wide powers and plentiful resources in the lands through which he would pass (Ezra 7:12-26). God had given him great favor with the Persian government.

Before leaving, though, Ezra had boasted to the king, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him" (Ezra 8:22). Though what he said was true and properly proclaimed his faith, he later regretted that he had been so proud. For when they began their travels, the company of Jews became quite aware of the dangers of the open road.

Nine days into their trek to Jerusalem, they arrived at a ford of "the river that flows to Ahava" (verse 15). Realizing they were about to enter perilous country that was notorious for "the enemy on the road" (verse 22), Ezra called a halt. "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions" (verse 21).

They had every reason to be afraid. In addition to brigands and highwaymen, they had to fear the people of the lands they would cross. As has been true throughout most of history, the Jews were not well regarded across the Middle East. The surrounding nations did not want to see the Jews organized and powerful under their God as in the days of David and Solomon. Ahead of the company loomed the prospect of crossing seven hundred miles of enemy territory without an armed escort.

So, Ezra faced a dilemma. If he sent men back to Artaxerxes requesting military protection, what kind of example would he present to the king, his counsellors, the people of the land and the Jews that remained behind? Would he be representing God properly? If he showed any lack of faith or courage, would he be jeopardizing any future Jewish returns to Judah (only thirteen years later Nehemiah made a similar trip)? Would it bring on a reversal of royal favor or public opinion, leading to persecution of the Jews in Persia?

He had to weigh other factors as well. Ezra was responsible for the lives of everyone in the caravan. Ezra 8:1-13 lists 1,496 males in the company. Assuming a wife and two children for each man, the number of people

returning with Ezra was approximately 6,000. Though they had the manpower to protect the caravan, the men had no training as guards, and most of them had their own families to protect.

Ezra also had to safeguard the Temple treasures entrusted to him by Artaxerxes. These included 100 talents of gold, 650 talents of silver, 100 talents of silver articles, 20 gold basins and two bronze vessels (verses 26-27). These valuables would be very tempting to bandits.

Lastly, he also had to consider the morale and confidence of the people travelling with him. The company was composed of priests, Levites and Jews—people with varying degrees of loyalty to Ezra's commission. If he wavered, they might decide to return to Persia or even choose a new leader, thus possibly changing—or at least hindering—Ezra's planned reforms when they arrived in Jerusalem. Considering all these factors, Ezra's decision would not be easy to make.

### **Prayer and Fasting**

After analyzing the various choices before him, Ezra made the right decision, putting his full trust in God. He called for a three-day fast to beseech God for protection and direction on their journey. The whole company, he knew, needed to place themselves into God's hands by humbling themselves before Him through fasting and prayer.

With such an attitude, their entreaties were bound to be heard. Ezra simply records, "And He answered our prayer" (verse 23). When the three days were past, they crossed the river of Ahava and continued to Jerusalem (verse 31).

But the trial was not really over for Ezra or the people. Seven hundred miles—four months of travel—separated them from their goal, Jerusalem. They had to place their trust in God every day, with every step of their journey, to ensure that they made it safely to their destination. So they did: "And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road. So we came to Jerusalem" (verses 31-32).

### ***Semper Paratus* (Always Prepared)**

Ezra did not make this decision without a great deal of preparation. He did not just "fall" into it; he had a strong background in knowing God's will. "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). After years of study and living God's way of life, this model teacher had the opportunity to lead by example. With this decision, he proved to the king of Persia and the Jews with him that his faith in God was not empty words but strong conviction and decisive action.

As Ezra stood "in the gap" (Ezekiel 22:30), so are we to stand for the truth and for our God with unwavering faith. Whether we realize it or not, we are witnesses to everyone with whom we come into contact: our mates, families, neighbors, coworkers and acquaintances. We are role models and teachers to our children and possibly to others as well. This is a great responsibility that we should not take lightly.

Like Ezra, we must be preparing ourselves for this job and for the position we may have in God's Kingdom. Our Christian lives are like on-the-job training; we are learning how to handle problems and trials as they surface. We must be humbling ourselves daily in prayer and occasionally in fasting, placing total faith in God for protection, guidance and providence for ourselves and our families.

We must be studying God's law and His Word as Ezra did, so we will be prepared to take the right steps when trials come upon us. We can study examples like Ezra's to understand how to face and overcome the difficult times coming upon this nation and upon God's people. Knowing that God has faithfully guided and protected His people in the past will strengthen our faith to endure whatever blocks our progress. God will do the same for us if we give Him the opportunity.

The times are only going to get tougher as we near Christ's second coming. We can use the example of Ezra's faith to encourage and strengthen us as we face our own trials "by the waters of Ahava."