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**Day 279 - October 6**

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## **Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)**

### ***Ezra and the Second Return***

**Readings: *Ezra 7:1-8:36***

#### ***Reflections:***

- If Malachi did prophesy during the previous 40 to 60 years, then his preaching helped continue to lay a foundation for this remnant to understand the will of God, particularly during this season of struggle to re-establish and expression of the nation of Israel and its temple worship. The story of Ezra unfolds during the time of Artaxerxes, who ascended to the throne in 465 BCE. Like the end of his father's reign, Artaxerxes faces political challenges with rebellions needing to be quelled in Egypt and Greece. No doubt these troubled areas were the consequences of the harsh treatment of his father, a good lesson for any leader to learn. Although Artaxerxes could have been threatened by Israel's desire to strengthen their little nation, he apparently viewed them in positive terms and wanted to help them re-establish their worship. Similar to past pagan rulers, Artaxerxes, a polytheist, may see his support of this temple as a way to help strengthen his position by having yet another god on his side.
- In 458 BCE, Artaxerxes blesses Ezra, a great teacher to return with 1500 other Jews to their native homeland to continue the rebuild process. They are sent with significant financial support and resources. The gold and silver were an important part of properly decorating and furnishing the temple as well as purchasing animals for sacrifice. Again from a pagan ruler's point of view, this is what would be expected of almost any religion. We see God working with this pagan ruler to continue the unfolding storyline in this divine drama.
- How does Ezra feel about this kind of support? "Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading me to go up with me." As we see God working through our lives, even if it is in unexpected ways, God would have us take courage, take steps of faith and move forward with his calling on our lives. We see the importance here of partnering with God. God doesn't do it all and we don't do it all. It is a partnership.
- Artaxerxes also supports the re-establishment of the leadership of Ezra as well as the reinstatement of Torah observance and national law. This leads to a full re-establishment of the temple leadership and organization, down to the temple servants who supported the Levites. This organizational leadership although important, was still not as critical as their

heart position before God. Ezra expresses his heart for God in his account of their prayer for safety in the return journey. "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, and all our possessions." As they travelled they would be potential targets for bandits, especially with all the gold and silver they were carrying for the temple.

- God provides the protection they need as they travel: "The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way. So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days."
- In the text, we see God's hand on Ezra and his heart for God: "...the gracious hand of God was on him. 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." We see four aspects in this brief passages to spiritual leadership: 1) God's gracious enablement; 2) Ezra's personal study and discipline for growth and understanding; 3) Ezra's commitment to teach and lead as he invests in others; and 4) Ezra's ownership of his role in serving the larger community. All of these elements are essential to God working through a leader.
- We see in the detailed records that this effort was well organized. Excellence in organization is a part of strong leadership and being effective in completing big goals.
- The return to Israel is marked with properly honoring God through offering sacrifices as well as honoring the local leadership by providing the appropriate communication to the Trans-Euphrates governors. This in turn led to further support from the local leaders. In all things, we see that Ezra and his group followed due process. When tackling big goals, we must remember that all aspects to leadership and community are important: 1) start with the right leader and leaders; 2) make God's mission your mission; 3) keep everyone's heart humble before God; 4) remain in submission to authority structures; 5) do the hard work that is needed and trust God will do his part; 6) pay attention to detail and keep everything well organized; 7) take the time you need to both work and rest to ensure you are maintaining a sustainable pace. Great lessons to learn. Here we see some of the value of studying the story of "what doesn't work". We not only learn what doesn't work to change the human heart, we also learn some valuable life and leadership lessons that can help us as we follow Christ and live out the story of "what does work to change the human heart."