

Go, Get Your Harp

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part III

Ezra 2

Introduction

Someone sent an article to me entitled, “Young Wisdom”. Let me read some of it to you.

A three-year-old went with his dad to see a litter of kittens. On returning home, he breathlessly informed his mother that there were two boy kittens and two girl kittens. “How did you know?” his mother asked. “Daddy picked them up and looked underneath,” he replied, “I think it’s printed on the bottom.”

Another three-year-old put his shoes on by himself. His mother noticed that he had put his shoes on the wrong feet. So she said, “Son, your shoes are on the wrong feet.” He looked down for a moment, then up at her with a strange look and said, “Mom, I know these are my feet.”

On the first day of school, a kindergarten teacher informed her new class of several rules. She said, “Class, now if anyone has to go to the bathroom, just hold up two fingers.” A little voice from the back of the room called out, “How will that help?”

In I Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 6, we are told that the history of Israel would serve as an example for us, as Christians, to live a life that honors God. Couple that with II Timothy, chapter 3, verses 16 and 17, which tell us that all scripture is profitable and capable of equipping the believer for every good work.

Hidden Lessons

From a List of Names!

Frankly, when you get to a chapter like Ezra, chapter 2, those statements are put to the test. How will a catalogue of names, too difficult to even pronounce, help you live for Christ?

Well, before we even begin to study from this list of names, and all we have time to do is focus on a few of them, let me give you three lessons we can learn from a list of names!

The Lord knows . . .

1. Lesson number one is – the Lord knows His people by name.

Isaiah, chapter 45, verse 3b, declares,

. . . it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

God has not lost sight of a single person over the years. The walls of Babylon and the power of Persia had not erased His memory. He knew all these Jewish captives by name. He knew how many sons they had had. He knew everything about their family.

While in India, I had an encounter with a Hindu astrologer. He claimed that he could tell me everything about my past and my future. So, I challenged him to begin by telling me my name. When he could not do that, I introduced Him to my God, whose name I knew as Jesus Christ, and who also happened to know what my name was.

How do I know? Because, according to Revelation, chapter 20, verse 12, those who have placed their faith in Christ as Savior have had their names written in the book of life.

The Lord uses . . .

2. Lesson number two is – the Lord uses ordinary people for His glory.

The common people are the rank and file of this returning party. It is the ordinary person who will rebuild the temple and later the city of Jerusalem. These are people who are without any show-stopping ability, but they are people with life-altering availability.

Even today, the church of Jesus Christ is advanced by the tiny pushes of ordinary people, common people, who, by faith in God, do uncommon things for God. As it says in I Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 26 and 27,

. . . not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise . . .

Nearly 50,000 ordinary people set out on a journey of faith that would take them through dangerous territory for four months. It would take them back to their desolate homeland to rebuild their temple and their capital city that had become an overgrown mound of rubbish.

“How are you going to do that?”

“We don’t know how, but we know Who.”

Oh, if we could have that faith, we could dare to, like William Carey once wrote,

Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

The Lord keeps . . .

3. Lesson number three is – the Lord keeps His promises to His people.

The key word in Ezra, chapter 2 is found in verse 1. Let us read the entire verse.

Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city.

The distinctive word is “returned,” these are they who returned. The last verse of this chapter, verse 70, summarizes that return.

Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

God promised they would return after being captured by Babylon. I can guarantee that many a night went by as the Jewish people wondered, “How will God ever bring us back?”

The word “return” was stricken from their vocabulary. This was so to the point that Jeremiah encouraged the exiles with the classic passage, in chapter 29, verses 10 through 11,

For thus says the Lord, “When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”

This passage was written for your encouragement and instruction, as God has a plan for you as well. When you are in the midst of darkness, fear, and wondering, God has not abandoned you. He has promised, in Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 5b,

. . . I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you

And when God says His people will return, they will return!

So, in Ezra, chapter 2, you discover more than a list of names – you discover a declaration of the faithfulness of God!

Honorable Mention In a Quest of Faith!

Now, let us take a closer look at some of these names. We could easily reference them by categories, since that is how Ezra chose to list them.

Leaders Ezra 2:2

1. The first category is the names of the leaders.

Heading the list, in verse 2, is the man named Zerubbabel. In chapter 1, verse 8, he is called Sheshbazzar. In chapter 2, he is called Tirshatha. You are left wondering if his mother just could not get it right. She had that book with five hundred baby names and there were just too many good choices.

Okay, not really. Sheshbazzar was a Babylonian or Akkadian name. Tirshatha was a Persian title, meaning governor. His personal name was

Zerubbabel and that is the one his parents chose for him. It meant “descended of Babylon.” That informs us that he was actually a child of the Exile, born in the Babylonian kingdom.

More importantly, he was the grandson of Jeconiah, one of the last kings of Judah before Babylon swept them away. In fact, if we had time, you could turn to Matthew, chapter 1, verses 12 and 13, and discover, tucked inside Jesus Christ’s own genealogy, the name, Zerubbabel. He was the royal descendant of King David, the forefather of our Lord’s humanity. Had there been a throne in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel would have been the rightful heir. But there was no throne in Jerusalem. In fact, Jerusalem was nothing more than a fifty year old pile of rubble.

Zerubbabel, the rightful king, however, will be the fearless, faithful leader whose greatest passion is not his throne, but the temple of God. It will be Zerubbabel who will supervise the reconstruction of the temple.

Think of it, what better man to lead the people out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem than a descendant of King David and a forefather, as it were, of God the Son. The Son to whom God the Father has promised an everlasting kingdom and a place on David’s throne.

Lay people (according to clan/ancestry) Ezra 2:3-20

2. The second category is a list of lay people according to their clan or ancestry in chapter 2, verses 3 through 20.

the sons of Parosh, 2,172; the sons of Shephatiah, 372; the sons of Arah, 775; the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812; the sons of Elam, 1,254; the sons of Zattu, 945; the sons of Zaccai, 760; the sons of Bani, 642; the sons of Bebai, 623; the sons of Azgad, 1,222; the sons of Adonikam, 666; the sons of Bigvai, 2,056; the sons of Adin, 454; the sons of Ater of Hezekiah, 98; the sons of Bezai, 323; the sons of Jorah, 112; the sons of Hashum, 223; the sons of Gibbar, 95;

Lay people (according to hometown) Ezra 2:21-35

3. The third category is a grouping of lay people, listed according to their hometown, in verses 21 to 35.

the men of Bethlehem, 123; the men of Netophah, 56; the men of Anathoth, 128; the sons of Azmaveth, 42; the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743; the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621; the men of Michmas, 122; the men of Bethel and Ai, 223; the sons of Nebo, 52; the sons of Magbish, 156; the sons of the other Elam, 1,254; the sons of Harim, 320; the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 725; the men of Jericho, 345; the sons of Senaah, 3,630.

We are not told anything about them, but they were the carpenters, the shepherders, the farmers, the stone cutters. They were the ordinary people who were inspired by God to attempt the extraordinary challenge of faith.

Priests (according to clan/ancestry) Ezra 2:36-39

4. The next category is a list of priests, in verses 36 through 39, who are listed according to their ancestry as well.

The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; the sons of Immer, 1,052; the sons of Pashhur, 1,247; the sons of Harim, 1,017.

It was critically important that these men trace their lineage back to the right people. Remember, the priesthood was hereditary – they must be descendants of Aaron. If they could not prove their ancestry, they could be imposters and threaten the sacred work of ministering before the Lord.

It may sound harsh to disqualify men who were not related to Aaron, as we will see happened in chapter 2, but, even today, in a slightly analogous way, ministers also must have certain qualifications.

Apart from the qualifications of character, think of the civil act of presiding over weddings. Can you imagine going to a pastor and asking him to marry you and your bride and he says, “Sure, I’ll marry you two. But, listen, I haven’t been able to find my ordination papers. I misplaced them several years ago, so I can’t prove that I am a licensed minister. But I really am. Trust me. There shouldn’t be a problem at all. Okay?”

Yea, right! You would tell that guy, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

You cannot afford for this thing not to be legal, right? In fact, you cannot afford to go through it twice – you do not have the energy or the money. The first time has to stick.

I was sitting around a table with some former pastors, recently, sharing stories of strange things that had happened in the ministry. One of the pastors told about a wedding he had performed where at least five people had fainted. Something was wrong with the heater, in this small church, and people were just toppling. Even the trumpet player stood to play and just keeled over. Unfortunately, the bride succumbed and fainted. She and her groom spent the entire ceremony at the kneeling bench with a damp cloth.

When the wedding ceremony was finally over, the couple left in their car, headed for their honeymoon spot, when both of them realized they did not remember a thing about their wedding. They could not even remember saying their vows. They became so concerned that they headed back to the home of a relative who had videotaped the ceremony. They popped in the tape and listened to themselves repeat their vows.

There are some things about which you want to be absolutely sure!

Levites (according to clan/ancestry) Ezra 2:40

5. Not only the priests, but the fifth category is the Levites, who served in the temple, and had to have the right lineage as well. Their family connection is given in verse 40.

The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74.

Singers (according to clan/ancestry) Ezra 2:41

6. Then, in verse 41, you have the sixth category of singers. There was a one hundred twenty-eight voice choir that had descended from the great musician Asaph.

The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128.

Asaph was a great musician who, by the way, had a humble beginning. His first appointment was to sound the bronze cymbals during the ceremony when the Ark of God was brought to the new tabernacle, as it tells us in I Chronicles, chapter 15, verses 16 to 19. Then, in chapter 16, verses 4 and 5, David appointed Asaph to serve by giving constant praise and thanks to the Lord God of Israel. Later, in that same chapter, verses 7 through 37, you discover him leading Israel in a special song of praise.

Finally, you find Asaph's name appearing in an inspired collection of hymns, in Psalms 50 and 73 through 83, as the author and composer. You also discover he had established a guild; that is,

professional musicians whose task and joy it was to create and perform music to the glory of God.

Gatekeepers (according to clan/ancestry)

Ezra 2:42

7. Notice next, in verse 42, the seventh category is the gatekeepers.

The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, in all 139.

Gatekeepers were the original "bouncers". They rejected or admitted visitors to the temple. They were also responsible for supervising the offerings and guarding the storehouses. In David's zenith, there were four thousand of them. They had to be men of character who could not be bought or bribed.

Servants (according to clan/ancestry) Ezra 43-58

8. Then, in verses 43 through 58, the eighth category is the servants, listed according to their clan.

The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmi, the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim, the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, the sons of Nezhiah, the sons of Hatipha. The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami. All the temple servants, and the sons of Solomon's servants, were 392.

Think of them in this way – these names represented skill and tradition that had been handed down for more than fifty years. Can you imagine

trying to find a record player repairman thirty years from now?

Hidden in this list is the principle that God not only preserved His people, He preserved the purposes He had for His people! So when the time came, these people knew what to do.

Foreigners (non-Jewish participants) Ezra 2:59-63

9. Finally, in verses 59 to 63, we are given the category of names of foreigners who were unable to identify their Jewish ancestry, as well as priests unable to trace their lineage back to Aaron.

Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households, and their descendants, whether they were of Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 652.

And of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name. These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood. And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.

They were excluded from the priesthood, but they were not excluded from the promise.

In fact, a precious verse appears in Ezra, chapter 6, verse 21, that tells us that while they could not be priests, while they could not prove their Jewish paternity, they could enjoy the Passover. They could be a part of the company of believers who had placed their faith in the blood of the Lamb, which, years earlier, had been placed upon the door posts to rescue them from the death angel.

So today, no matter what race or lineage you are from and no matter what your past, if you have placed your faith in the slain Lamb of God as your personal Savior from sin, you also can sing the song of the redeemed.

Helpful Insights For Interested Harpists!

Here are two helpful closing insights for those who are interested in joining the guild of Asaph; in joining the ranks of those committed to singing praise to God.

It takes the commitment of . . .

1. The first insight – it takes the commitment of faith to create music in the soul.

One of the marks of the redeemed, in this church age, is the mark of singing, of music. The church is told, in Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 19, and also in Colossians, chapter 3, verse 16, to sing songs with our lips and make melody with our hearts to the Lord.

I especially loved the mention of the gatekeepers and the singers because of their obvious faith. Sure, it was the same faith as all the other groups, but when I read of these groups, one thing just jumped off the page. These were the gatekeepers . . . and there were no gates to keep. These were the singers . . . and there was nothing to sing about. If God did not fulfill His word, they would have nothing to sing about in their future.

One author put it this way,

Faith is resting in the fact that God has a purpose in leaving me on planet earth, even when I feel useless to Him and a burden to others.

It seemed useless to be a singer or a gatekeeper in those days. Man, get a life! Nobody understood them or why they kept their family tradition alive.

But God had a plan, and their faith in Him, eventually, made that plan a reality.

It takes the quality of . . .

2. The second insight – it takes the quality of obedience to compose music in the heart.

You can almost hear the melody and feel the excitement among these who have been obedient to return. They have listened to Jeremiah and Haggai and Zechariah. They are headed to the land of God's promise.

And, make no mistake, their captivity in Babylon had not been a time for singing. There were no fresh creations of song. How do I know? Turn to Psalm 137 and see for yourself.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.

In other words, "In Babylon, we didn't sing, we sobbed with grief. We had disobeyed our Lord. We had ignored His word. We hung up our harps. There was no singing, no music."

But now that the Jews were heading home, they had a song to sing once again. It was time to gather the sons of Asaph. It was time to go get their harps and tune them up for the songs of Zion.

By the way, just read the last few chapters of Revelation and you discover the singing of songs to the Lamb. You read of the four hallelujahs that will be chanted and sung. You read about the final collapse of Babylon, that name which came to represent all that opposed the covenant of God with His people. And, you find, in that victorious creation of God's new kingdom of heaven and earth, that there is incredible singing; there is unbelievable music!

When we sing together, we are merely tuning up for the concert of our lives. If you are a member of the redeemed, you had better start learning how to sing now. How? By the same two things that allowed them to begin their songs again: a decision of faith and an act of obedience. Faith and obedience, even when He asks you to attempt something or experience something that requires the greatest resolves of trust.

You had better do like the Israelites, who were leaving Babylon, and go back down to the willow tree by the riverside, find your harp, and tune it up.

Music is the result of faith and obedience. It struck me that now, in Babylon, even the potential of music was severely dampened. Why? Because the sons of Asaph had left. The musicians were gone. The singers had obeyed God's call and returned home.

A little over two hundred years ago, a woman was riding in a stagecoach. Sitting across from her was an older gentleman. At some point in the ride,

she began to hum a favorite hymn of hers. Suddenly, she noticed that this man had begun to quietly weep. She stopped and asked him if there was something she had done. Why was he so sad?

He said, "Ma'am, my name is Robert Robinson. That hymn you were humming was written by me, and the words have haunted me. For, you see, because of my disobedience to the Lord, I haven't been able to sing that hymn for a long time."

The Lord used their conversation, on that chance journey, to bring Robert Robinson back into fellowship with the Father and make him able to sing again.

The name of the hymn is, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

*Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of thy redeeming love.*

*O to grace how a great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee;
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for thy courts above.*

Those are such transparent words. We are prone to wander, are we not?! We struggle with things like faith and obedience, do we not?

Because we do sin, wander away, and lose our song at times, may I remind you of that coming day when disobedience will no longer be possible, when we will sing in the choir of the redeemed in that new heaven and earth. Confirmed in holiness, we will sing like never before. God intends for you and me to be making music for a very long time.

So, do not wait until then. Go, get your harp, and tune it to a decision of faith, some act of obedience . . . and begin to sing songs of loudest praise.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/7/1999 by Stephen Davey.

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