

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF EZRA

### PART THREE – THE TEMPLE IS BUILT SO IT IS TIME FOR TEACHING – CHAPTERS 7-10

Almost 60 years passed from the time at which nearly 50,000 people had responded to God's call to them to return to Judah and after much opposition and discouragement the people finally completed the rebuilding of the temple. The Levites who could teach would have shared with their brothers and sisters what they knew of God's word but there were some important gaps, especially in their application of truth to life at home. To meet this need, the Lord now sent a man who had been preparing himself for a long time.

Ezra was from the family of Aaron, the first high priest. His great-grandfather was Hilkiah who had been the very faithful high priest when Josiah, an eight year old, became king in a very difficult time in the history of Judah. He had been responsible for rediscovering the word of God when the temple was cleaned up and then leading its teaching to the whole nation.(II Chron. 34) In the family tradition he was steeped in the Old Testament but more than that he had a hunger to know God's message. He had a reputation as someone whose prayers God answered because he listened to God in the word and in his own heart.(I Jn.5:14,15) 'The hand of the Lord was with him' because he wholeheartedly wanted God's will in his life.(Acts 11:21) He led a group mainly of Levites in a new batch of Jews returning from Babylon in 457BC. What would they have to offer? The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem would have been a hazardous one for a small group of unarmed men but they were still in the safe hands of God because they were walking in the will of God. Ezra was more than just another well trained Levite. He had an awesome determination to do three things which belong together. He wanted to study the law of God, practise it and teach it to all of his people.(7:1-10)

As with the earlier group of returning Jews, Ezra had a commission from the king of Persia, now Artaxerxes. We need a commission from the King of Heaven for every new venture in our lives. Last time the commission was to rebuild the temple. This time it is to have that temple fully functioning as it was meant to be. Ezra and his team were to study the word of God, pray and teach the people, and to offer abundant sacrifices in the temple. Teaching people must start with our own Bible study and prayer. Building people in Christ must begin with His abundant sacrifice of Himself at the cross. The king himself guaranteed all the resources needed for the sacrifices as Cyrus had guaranteed the resources for building the temple. He wanted the work done with zeal, real enthusiasm, not out of reluctant duty. The resources were not to come from the Levites themselves.(7:11-24)

Ezra was to use all the wisdom God gave him but he was also to share the task of teaching the truth and how to apply it in daily life with all who really knew God's word. They also had authority to spell out the consequence of defying God's message as we have a responsibility to warn of the result of saying 'no' to God. Ezra was excited about the privilege and resources God had given him which were an expression of the Lord's lovingkindness.(7:25-28)

Chapter eight begins with another list of names unknown to us, yet a further reminder of the importance of every individual, however humanly obscure, to Him. There were over a thousand enthusiastic volunteers but no Levites who with their knowledge of the scriptures were the potential teachers. The 'good hand of God' provided an exceptionally gifted teacher and his little team. Finally they were ready to leave but there was one final obstacle, fear. They had a long journey, loaded with the king's generous provision of gold, silver and bronze, and they were unarmed. They

were a great target for an ambush. They had two choices, to look to the king on earth or to the King in Heaven. They prayed and God listened so that they arrived safely in Jerusalem. They handed over the king's instructions and the king's provision for the task. There was no commission for the middle men!(8:1-36)

The arrival of Bible teachers brought an immediate response. The leaders in Judah acknowledged their major problem and its cause. The previously returned Jews were slipping into the beliefs and ways of the neighbours, the world around them. The reason was clear. It lay in family life as it always does. Intermarriage with unbelievers meant a confusing message for the children. Which god were they to follow, the God of Israel or the gods of ignorance and materialism? The first offenders were the leaders who should have provided a fine example. Ezra knew at once why he had been sent but for the moment he was overwhelmed by the size of the task. He literally tore his hair out! (9:1-4)

The way ahead was clear. People needed to be taught God's plan for marriage and the family but the first step was to get on their knees before God in repentance. Ezra led the people in a prayer of confession but it was to acknowledge 'our' sin not 'your' sin. As a teacher he recognised his responsibility as much as any member of his congregation. In the same way Paul would remind Timothy that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.'(I Tim.1:15) Ezra looked back over the cause of Judah's exile in rebellion but he reminded them of the grace God had shown them in returning them to Jerusalem and to the task of rebuilding the temple. If they were to continue to experience God's grace they would need to listen to God and trust Him in family life first. He sought God's forgiveness and promised obedience in the future. Forgiveness would be available because of the sacrifices they were now offering, as we come back to the cross of Christ. Obedience through faith would begin to happen as the people listened to the word of God which was now being taught by Ezra and his friends.(9:5-15)

In the final chapter the tears of Ezra become the tears of the whole congregation. There is a national, God-given repentance in which the people recognise their sin and commit to putting family life right before God. Ezra urged the whole nation to come together and commit to God's way for the family, led by a believing couple, united in their faith in God. When they met together they trembled partly because it was pouring with rain but mostly because of their sense of shame. They agreed to separate from unbelieving wives. The leaders were to be an example to the rest but sadly some held out. For those who responded the book concludes with another list of names. This time it is a catalogue of those who had put marriage to the woman they wanted before their union with the Lord but finally faced the damage they were causing. Paul emphasises the same principle when he urges the Corinthians not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,(II Cor.6:14) recognising how marrying unbelievers drags us into worshipping their gods, and choosing their values.(10:1-44)

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What two needs among the returned Jews did Ezra's ministry fill? What was it about Ezra which made him so valuable to his people? How can we respond to the same needs in the same ways today?(chap.7)
2. With what resources was Ezra equipped for his ministry? How are we equipped for our work in the modern world? How did Ezra overcome his nervousness as he was getting started?(chap.8)

3. When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem what major issue among God's people became apparent? How did he respond? How would God have us respond to the same kind of crisis in our world? What was so striking about his prayer for the Jewish people?(chap.9)
4. How did Ezra urge his people to deal with their problem? How did Paul instruct us to deal with similar problems in his time?(I Cor.7:12-16) How are we to understand the striking difference between Ezra's approach and Paul's?(chap.10)