

Taking the Long View

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[0 : 00] And we're going to turn to our Bible reading for this morning, which you'll find in the Old Testament in the book of Ezra at chapter 8. Edward is resuming his series, which he was doing until recently on Sunday evenings.

If you have a church Bible, that's page 394. And we're going to read together the whole of this long chapter 8 with all sorts of difficult names.

So please forgive me if I don't get them quite right. And many of them are Persian names. So perhaps our Iranian friends will put me right as to the pronunciation after the service.

Ezra chapter 8 at verse 1. These are the heads of their father's houses. And this is the genealogy of those who went up with me, that is with Ezra, from Babylonia in the reign of Artaxerxes, the king. Of the sons of Phineas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush. Of the sons of Shekaniah, who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered 150 men.

[1 : 14] Of the sons of Pathav Moab, Eloheni, the son of Zerahiah, and with him 200 men. Of the sons of Zatu, Shekaniah, the son of Jehaziel, and with him 300 men.

Of the sons of Adin, Eved, the son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men. Of the sons of Elan, Jeshiah, the son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men. Of the sons of Shepatiah, Zebediah, the son of Michael, and with him 80 men.

Of the sons of Joab, Obadiah, the son of Jethiel, and with him 218 men. Of the sons of Bani, Shalemith, the son of Josipha, and with him 160 men.

Of the sons of Babi, Zechariah, the son of Babi, and with him 28 men. Of the sons of Asgad, Johanan, the son of Hakatan, and with him 110 men.

Of the sons of Adonikam, those who came later, their names being Eliphelet, Jerul, and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men. Of the sons of Bigvi, Utai, and Zakur, and with them 70 men.

[2 : 23] I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi.

Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshulam, leading men. And for Jeriab and Elnathan, who were men of insight.

And I sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Kasipiah. Telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers, and the temple servants at the place Kasipiah. Namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God.

And by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of discretion. Of the sons of Mali, the son of Levi, son of Israel. Namely, Sherebiah, with his sons and kinsmen, 18.

Also, Hashabiah, and with him, Jeshiah of the sons of Mereri, and with his kinsmen and their sons, 20. Besides, 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites.

[3 : 37] These were all mentioned by name. Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Hava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.

For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against enemy on our way, since we had told the king, the hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all those who forsake him.

So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty. Then I set apart 12 of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and 10 of their kinsmen with them.

And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered.

I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver and silver vessels worth 200 talents and 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darrocks, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold.

[4 : 59] And I said to them, You are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the Lord, the God of your fathers.

Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of the fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord. So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and of the gold and the vessels to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God. Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month to go to Jerusalem.

The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way. We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days.

On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Merrimoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jehozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Benui.

[6 : 13] The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded. At that time, those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, they offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel.

Twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering, twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord.

They also delivered to the king's commissions, to the king's satraps, and to the governors of a province beyond the river. And they aided the people and the house of God.

Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Well, friends, let's turn in our Bibles to Ezra chapter 8, once again, page 394, if you have our hardback edition.

Ezra chapter 8. Now, I don't know whether you've ever listened to the Radio 4 program, which is called Taking the Long View.

[7 : 31] The BBC runs a series of this program every once in a while, and it's presented by a man called Jonathan Friedland, a journalist. And what Jonathan Friedland does is to take some contemporary issue of controversy or crisis, something like the crisis over immigration in Europe today, and he sets it over against a similar crisis that happened a century or perhaps even two centuries ago.

So to take this example of immigration, he might describe a similar crisis of immigration that happened in the 20th or even in the 19th century. So it's an exercise in comparing and contrasting. And it's remarkable and rather comforting to see just how similar some past crisis is to its modern counterpart. It helps you to see that the world has been there before and somehow has survived the crisis.

And it encourages you to think that if the world survived that crisis of yesteryear, it might just survive the contemporary crisis. In other words, it gives some historical perspective on what is going on under our noses.

Seeing the present in the light of the past helps you to deal more effectively with the present. Now, the Bible is rather like that. Certainly, the book of Ezra works like this.

[8 : 52] Let me put it this way. The history recorded in the Bible works at two levels. First of all, there is what you might call the great story, which starts with the old creation in the book of Genesis and ends with the new creation in the book of Revelation.

That's the story of God's mighty deeds in the whole cosmos, but centering on his dealings with mankind and his glorious purpose achieved through the intervention of the Lord Jesus to salvage a people for himself from the wreckage of human sin, a people who will finally be transformed and made fit to share his heavenly home.

Now, that's the great story, and you and I are living in the last days of it. That is the period between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus. But there's a second and very important level in Bible history, and that is that within this great story, there are repeated patterns of events, and the Bible reader is intended to see those repeated patterns and to learn from them.

And one of the most obvious of these patterns is the ebb and flow of the fortunes of the people of God. There are times of advance and progress and godliness, and then there are times of setback

when the people rebel and become disobedient.

You see that ebb and flow repeatedly in the Old Testament and strongly in a book like the Acts of the Apostles as well. So with this thought in mind, what pattern can we trace in the book of Ezra which might help us in our own day?

[10 : 31] How might we take the long view? How might the history recorded in the book of Ezra shed light on the problems and the opportunities that we face in the 21st century?

Well, the big idea that links the book of Ezra to us is the need to rebuild the people of God after a time of difficulty and setback.

Let's just remind ourselves for a moment of what was happening in Ezra's day. Ezra was living in the 5th century BC and his great trek from Babylonia to Jerusalem which is recorded here in chapter 8 took place in the year 458 BC.

But the fortunes of Israel were in a sorry state and had been for quite a long time. The great tragedy, the great disgrace for Israel was the exile.

Well over a century earlier in the 590s and the 580s BC the Babylonians had conquered Judah and Jerusalem and they deported large numbers of the Jews to Babylonia.

[11 : 37] They sacked Jerusalem, they burned the temple, they knocked down the city. in 587 BC. And for the Jews this was an episode of unbelievable horror.

How could God allow this to happen to them? Was he not the God with whom they were in covenant? Hadn't he promised to be their protector? Wasn't the great temple of Solomon an inviolable symbol of his presence among them?

Well the sad truth behind the exile and you know this was that God was punishing his people for their disobedience. For centuries they'd been turning away from him, turning to idols.

They'd been turning to foreign kings to protect them in times of trouble rather than turning to the Lord. They'd been neglecting the law of Moses and sometimes treating it with contempt.

and the patience of a very patient God eventually ran out and he caused the Babylonians to be the instrument of his punishment upon his own people.

[12 : 42] But although the blessings of the covenant had been forfeited for a while the covenant itself had not been torn up. It was and it remains an everlasting covenant.

And so it was after several decades of the Jews languishing in Babylonia that the Lord then stirred the spirit of Cyrus who had come to the throne of the Persian Empire.

He stirred Cyrus up to make a proclamation that the Jews should now return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and effectively to reconstitute the people of Israel in their own land.

Now this was in 539 BC and this is how the book of Ezra opens. Chapter 1 verse 1 the Lord takes the initiative he stirs up the spirit of the pagan king Cyrus and Cyrus commands the Jews to return. The covenant had never been rescinded. God was still working out his purpose in the great story. And so the Jews began to come back.

[13 : 47] Not in great numbers at first just a few thousands but they headed back and after various setbacks and difficulties they had the temple rebuilt by the year 515 BC which was 24 years after Cyrus' proclamation.

And the story of those 24 years and how the temple was rebuilt is told in the first six chapters of the book of Ezra. But while the temple was now rebuilt and the sacrifices commanded in the law of Moses were now being regularly offered again the people were languishing for lack of teaching. And this is where Ezra himself comes into the story nearly 60 years later in the year 458 BC. That was the year when he journeyed from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

And if you look back for a moment to chapter 7 verse 10 you'll see that little pen portrait 710 the pen portrait of Ezra which gives us such a clear view of who he was and what he was equipped to do. Ezra 710 had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. He had set his heart to study to obey and to teach.

[15 : 06] Now friends if you are a Bible teacher or a future Bible teacher write that verse out on a piece of paper stick it up on your kitchen wall and learn it by heart because it will tell you the purpose of your life from now on.

So in chapter 8 Ezra gathered his companions hundreds of them as you can see he gathered them on the banks of the river Ahava in Babylonia and they set off across 900 miles of desert country and reached Jerusalem safe and sound about four months later.

Now let's take the long view and see what light this story might shed on our own situation. The people of Israel in 458 BC they were up and running but they were somewhat depleted and discouraged.

They needed reviving and in particular they needed to be retaught the law of the Lord. Now they had their Bibles but they were largely ignorant of them and Ezra knew that the thing which was necessary to bring life and health back into the people of God was the teaching of the words of Moses because the people were spiritually starving.

Man shall not live by bread alone. How then shall man live? By every word that proceeds from the mouth of God as Deuteronomy had said and Jesus said years later and Ezra knew this and that's why he had set his heart to study the law of God so that he could then obey it and teach it.

[16:44] Now isn't our situation very similar today in the United Kingdom and not least in Scotland where the people of God the churches are up and running it's not all gloom and discouragement by no means there are bright lights shining in quite a few places but in many places the churches have grown thin and gaunt.

You can tell a great deal about a local church by reading the church notice boards and looking at the weekly leaflets if you pop into the church building and as you look at these signs of what's going on the key question is how much is the word of the Lord being fed to the congregation each week? Sometimes a church's weekly activities consist of mums and toddlers food bank badminton club choir practice seniors lunch club and hymn singing at the care home on Sunday afternoon.

Now those are all good things for Christian people to be involved in but if there's no Bible the church is dying man cannot live by bread alone only by the words that come from the mouth of God it's the Bible that creates the church and it's the Bible that sustains the church and this is what Ezra understood so well so as we bend our ears to Ezra chapter 8 this morning let's keep this long view in mind everything that Ezra does in this chapter is done for the sake of re-establishing the people of God so that they can be taught nourished and disciplined by the word of God and so that they should live their lives under his blessing and that's surely what we long I hope we long to see happening in Scotland a re-establishing of the churches of God by bringing them the word of God without which life and vitality are impossible well now as we look at Ezra chapter 8 let's notice five things that Ezra deeply understood and five things which we need also to understand first

Ezra understood the history of Israel and the makeup of the people of Israel look at verses 1 to 14 for a moment chapter 8 verses 1 to 14 it looks rather like a random list of names but it's not verse 1 these are the heads of their fathers houses and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me with Ezra from Babylonia in the reign of Artaxerxes the king now there's a careful ordering and arrangement of these names the first two names mentioned in verse 2 are members of priestly clans Gershom descended from Phineas and Daniel descended from Ithamar so the Israelite priesthood is represented and it's given great prominence by Ezra by the fact that these names are put at the top of his list the next name still in chapter still in verse 2 is Hattush a descendant of David so in verse 2 we have the priestly line from Aaron and the kingly line of David represented we then have 12 more verses in this paragraph verses 3 to 14 and each of those 12 verses describes one family a lay family not a priestly or a kingly family but a family of ordinary Israelites so do you see the shape of the section the priestly line the kingly line and then we have 12 ordinary family lines it's the people of Israel in miniature so the point is being made that the people of God

[20:26] Israel are returning to the promised land as a reconstitution of Israel but there's another very interesting feature to this list and here's the second thing Ezra understood the cost of following the Lord we won't turn back to chapter 2 just now but if we were to turn back to it we would read there the names of all the Israelites who had set out 80 years previously in the initial wave of returnees back in 539 BC when Cyrus first issued his decree now chapter 2 contains a much longer list of names than we have here in chapter 8 but and this is the striking thing with only one exception all the family names that appear here in chapter 8 also appeared back in chapter 2 so what must have happened in 539 BC many Jewish families set out for Jerusalem but clearly they did not take all their family members with them families were split those in a family who were bolder or more willing to trust the Lord they launched out and they crossed the desert while other ones stayed in Babylonia and the descendants of the ones who stayed in Babylonia came on 80 years later when Ezra asked them to join his new expedition in 458 BC so I think you can imagine some of the tensions in families back in 539 BC crossing that 900 miles of desert would have been as big a step for them as it would have been for a Scottish family or an Irish family in 1880 to emigrate to

America or Canada it meant goodbye forever imagine a Scottish family going to America in the 19th century there was no hopping on a British Airways jet was there and flying back from New York in 6 hours a Jewish family in Babylonia well they might be quite well settled there making a tolerable living and then when Cyrus the Emperor said Jews must return to Jerusalem think of 35 year old Benji a Jewish man married with 4 young children he might have said to his mother and father well mother father

I've decided I'm off to Jerusalem the Lord has provided me now with a new start I'll be off with my wife and children we'll be going next week you can imagine his mother Benji don't do it don't go you can't take our babies away with you we're never going to see you again and in all probability they never did so there would have been pain and upset in many families and discussions running on for decades as to whether Benji had done the right thing but then 80 years later more members of those same families burned their bridges trusted the Lord and set off leaving behind the relative safety of Babylonia and setting out with Ezra on an adventure with an uncertain outcome Ezra knew that he was asking these family heads to take courage and put their trust in the Lord now think of us there will be times in our lives as a church when we have to burn our bridges and set out into an uncertain future trusting the Lord didn't we have to do this a number of years ago we burnt some bridges then didn't we entrusted the Lord no doubt we'll be asked to do other similar things in the future which may seem costly and very uncertain but let's allow

Ezra's band of pilgrims to encourage us well think of us on the individual level sometimes we have to launch out leaving a safe situation and setting off into something new and potentially difficult well let's take the long view and be encouraged by Ezra he was brave he rounded up his fellow travelers and they set off we'll see in a moment how hard that was but the Lord protected them and brought them safely to their destination thirdly Ezra understood the people's greatest need now just have a look at the paragraph that begins at verse 15 verses 15 to 20 it looks rather bland on the surface but when you look carefully at that paragraph you realize that it's full of tension and drama verse 15 Ezra speaking I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava and there we camped three days has anybody here ever been camping?

yes think of this campsite there were many hundreds of people there verses 2 to 14 list at least 1500 men and if you look down to verse 21 you'll see that children and goods are mentioned as well whole families are involved you can be certain that if the children were there the mothers were there as well and the goods supplies for a four month desert trek have you ever taken your family on holiday for one week?

how much baggage do you have to take for one week? as you weigh it on that thing at the airport four people let's say going away for a week 100 kilos you're still counting aren't you?

[26 : 00] can you especially if you have daughters can you imagine can you imagine the baggage required by this huge crowd of people the tents the pack animals the water carrying equipment for four months so there they are they're camped by the river for three days mom when are we going?

mom is it going to take us long to get there? now during those three days of being camped by the river what was Ezra the expedition leader doing? verse 15 he's reviewing the people and the priests in other words going through lists naming names family records and so on and as the three days go past he becomes increasingly horrified to realize that verse 15 none of the sons of Levi were there no Levites so Ezra says this expedition is going nowhere until we have a decent number of Levites with us just imagine the tension and consternation running through the camp as word gets around that the start is being delayed I mean it's bad enough when your flight to Tenerife is delayed by three hours isn't it?

but this this was drama in the camp and I don't suppose that Ezra was too popular so why did there have to be Levites? the answer is that from early times certainly from the time of Moses about a thousand years earlier the tribe of Levi was given a unique role amongst the twelve tribes of Israel the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe and the men of the tribe of Levi fell into two categories known as priests and Levites and the Levites functioned as assistants to the priests they had all kinds of responsibilities to do with running the temple they had to organize the sacrifices and look after the temple furnishings and so on but while Ezra certainly needed them for those ceremonial purposes his main reason for needing Levites was rather different now to see what that was perhaps you turn with me a few pages on to Nehemiah chapter 8 you'll find that on page 403

Nehemiah chapter 8 the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the old Hebrew Bible so Nehemiah chapter 8 now Nehemiah reached Jerusalem some 13 years after Ezra and Nehemiah's

great task was to rebuild the walls of the city but he and Ezra worked together closely and this 8th chapter records a great day of assembly in the main square of the city which would have been a bit like George Square in Glasgow I'll read from verse 1 Nehemiah 8 1 all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel so Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly both men and women and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month and he read from it facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law and Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose and beside him stood Mattithiah Shemah Aniah Uriah Hilkiah and Marseah on his right hand and Pediah Mishael Malkijah Hashem Hashbadanah Zechariah and Meshulam on his left hand and Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was above all the people and as he opened it all the people stood and Ezra blessed the Lord the great God and all the people answered Amen Amen lifting up their hands and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground now friends we're thinking Levites also Jeshua Bani Sherabiah Jammin Akub Shabbati Hodia Maser Kelita Azariah Josabad Hanan Peliah the Levites see that the Levites helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places they that's the Levites read from the book from the law of God clearly and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading now friends doesn't that bring tears to your eyes certainly threatens to bring them to mind it's a wonderful picture there is Ezra he brings out the book of the law of Moses that would have been a number of great heavy parchment scrolls a platform has been built something much bigger than this in the square and a desk or a lectern no doubt has been placed on it to support these scrolls and then Ezra reads out loud from the books of Moses it says from early morning when's that cock crow six o'clock right the way through till midday if Danish pastries or bacon rolls were served at nine o'clock there is no mention of them it wouldn't have been bacon anyway would it and verse three the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law but when midday finally comes you think we have long services here sometimes don't you when midday finally comes the meeting is still not finished because verse seven the Levites then go into action teaching the people the meaning of the law so that they can understand what Ezra has been reading so it wasn't enough for the words of the Bible to be read out loud there also had to be a small army of teachers who could help the people to understand them isn't that a wonderful picture of the people of God listening to the words of God and being taught the meaning of the words of God and this is why

[32 : 03] Ezra held up the departure of the returning exiles he had to have a small army of Levites with him because he knew how much he would need them to help him to teach the law of Moses to the people in Jerusalem now friends take the long view has anything changed well the superficialities may have done but the heart of the matter is exactly the same today what people need what the people need is to be taught the life-giving words of God why is it that so many church congregations in Britain today are small and discouraged and spiritually hungry it's because they're not being fed the words of God there aren't enough Levites to get in there and teach the gospel to teach the people and that's why we need to keep on giving ourselves to the task of training up small armies of Bible teachers men and women who can get into the churches and bring the bread of heaven to the hearts that are hungry now just look on still in Nehemiah chapter 8 let's look on to verse 9 to see the results of the work of the Levites verse 9 and Nehemiah who was the governor and Ezra the priest and scribe and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people this day is holy to the Lord your God do not mourn or weep for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law then he that's Nehemiah said to them go your way eat the fat feast he's saying eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready for this day is holy to the Lord and do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength so the Levites calmed all the people and said be quiet calm down for this day is holy do not be grieved and all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them so do you see how weeping turns to rejoicing as the people begin to understand the words of the Bible and you and I know just how true that is our circumstances in life can often be rather stressed and pressurized but as we come to understand the meaning of the Bible we are given a joy which cannot be taken from us verse 12 there great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them well let's turn back now to Ezra chapter 8 why were the Levites not there initially why did Ezra in verses 16 and 17

have to send a rather weighty delegation of senior men to a man called

Ido at a place called Kasiphi with an urgent demand to recruit men to join Ezra on the journey so as to be ministers for the temple why were the Levites not showing up initially well we're not told but it's not hard to guess the reason presumably it was safer and more comfortable just to stay in Babylonia who wants to leave his comfortable little house with its orchard and cornfield and vegetable patch to go trekking across 900 miles of scorpion infested desert but you'll see from verses 18 to 20 that about 40 men were persuaded to come and as verse 18 emphasizes it was due to the good hand of God being upon them so let's take the long view the recruiting and the training and energizing of modern day Levites is a crucial ingredient in the reestablishing of the gospel in Scotland we've just had our servants of the word training conference at Bath Street in this very room a few days ago with about 100 people here it's a training conference aiming to teach and encourage young Bible teachers a few older people slip in but it's mainly the younger ones and during a coffee break two or three days ago

I was talking to one of the conference members an older man from Aberdeenshire and he put his hand to his chin which was covered with a grey beard and he said to me I'm a grey beard but I'm thrilled to see so many black beards here all these young men assistant pastors young senior pastors Cornhill students UCCF staff workers relay workers and a number of others including some fine young women he was thrilled to see these energetic young adults committing themselves to the work of Bible teaching Dick Lucas I think on Wednesday stood up and gave a talk at the conference there was Dick age 90 a kind of Ezra like figure and he gave us a fascinating historical study or overview of training for Christian ministry from the 16th century to the present day and his message to us all was let's get on with the training let's fill Scotland with Levites he didn't put it quite like that but that's what he meant now think for a moment of our Iranian congregation here as you know something like 150 Iranians are piling into this building every Sunday evening and it's great to have them why is it why do they come is it just that they're being welcomed and plied with tea and cake is it just because they're receiving help and support with asylum applications and so on no it's not the main reason why they're coming is that their ears are being opened to the life-giving bible gospel man cannot live by bread alone there they are they've fled an oppressive Islamist regime they're dislocated they're far from home and family many of them quite upset and depressed but they are hearing the life-giving words of the bible and many are realizing that the bible brings life in a way that the quran never can and as you know a number of our congregation are acting as levites to them putting in long hard hours yes helping them with asylum applications and english language learning but above all helping them to understand who jesus is and what he has done for them our iranians need levites just as the people of ancient israel needed them so this process of training and commissioning bible teachers that's a process that our church can joyfully put its weight behind think of our paul brennan paul brennan is being made into a kind of senior levite tonight at kelvin grove he's going to be ordained ordination means recognition and authorization recognition of suitable gifting and appropriate training and sound moral qualities neither a drunkard a womanizer light fingered with money or an angry person recognition of these things followed by authorization authorization by the church to do the work of a pastor preacher and teacher and we need to have a constant stream of embryonic levites in the pipeline many of whom after suitable training may be sent elsewhere in the way that we've just sent Rupert Hunt Taylor off to Edinburgh friends it is a very great privilege to be involved in this kind of training and sending and some of you who are sitting here this morning looking so demure and as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouths will one day need to become Levites either as full time Bible teachers or doing that work alongside your day job Ezra said we're not budging from this river bank until we have Levites on board so that when we get to Jerusalem we can fill the streets and the lanes and the passageways and the winds of the city with the word of the Lord and isn't this what weary old Scotland so much needs today don't you feel the weariness and the misery of so many faces that you see as you walk through the city streets the people of Scotland today are drinking at the fountains of atheism agnosticism hedonism and in some cases perverted eros no wonder there's so much sadness and weariness and confusion what the country needs more than anything else is armies of Levites who will bring the word of the Lord with love and compassion not just into the churches but into the streets the towns the villages the businesses the places of industry and learning and in Ezra's day chapter 8 verse 18 it was the good hand of our God that caused the Levites to step forward and prepare for service the Levites responded but it was the Lord who

impelled them fourth the last two points are much briefer don't worry fourth

[41 : 24] Ezra understood the need for congregational prayer look at verses 21 2 and 3 the Levites are now gathered everybody's ready to go but Ezra holds up the departure once again and this time for a very different reason he sends an announcement through the camp we're going to fast we're going to humble ourselves before our God in other words we're going to recognize our frailty and our weakness and we're going to ask God to give us a safe journey and it's in verse 21 that Ezra mentions the children and the goods the campsite was full of children and children are obviously vulnerable and as for the goods we'll just look on to verses 26 and 27 where the goods or some of them are described a talent of precious metal weighs about 75 pounds as your footnote will tell you so this expedition was carrying an awful lot of precious metal rich pickings for desert bandits but verse 22 helps us to see why Ezra was so insistent on a time of prayer 22 for I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way since we told the king the hand of our

God is for good on all who seek him and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him you see Ezra had been to see the king Artaxerxes we first learn of that interview back in chapter 7 verse 6 where Ezra writes the king granted Ezra all that he asked for notice this key phrase the hand of the Lord his God was on him now that's the key phrase of the whole book of Ezra you might almost subtitle the book the hand of the Lord our God and here it is again in chapter 8 verse 22 at your majesty Ezra would have said your majesty most excellent Artaxerxes I would have you know sir with all due respect to your royal person that the hand of the God of Israel is on his people to protect them and fulfill his purpose for them now how could Ezra having said that to the king come back to him a little bit later and ask for a troop of Persian soldiers to accompany them and protect them oh

Ezra the king might have said has the hand of the Lord your God grown a little bit tired since you last spoke to me does the Lord your God need a few Persian soldiers to help him out I thought he was invincible but perhaps I was mistaken Ezra couldn't risk that kind of comment the Lord's reputation was at stake so he said to the people we must fast and pray and they did as verse 23 tells us when the people of God get together and pray they express their frailty and need they needed to pray on that riverbank in 458 BC just as we need to pray at our prayer meetings in 2016 AD I am weak but thou art mighty that's the conviction which is at the heart of every prayer meeting when a congregation prays it is recognizing the real state of things human weakness and divine power Ezra understood this and he teaches us to follow his example fifth and last

Ezra understood the need for good administration and this is what the last part of the chapter is all about verse 24 trustworthy men are selected by Ezra verse 25 the precious goods needed for the temple are weighed out and counted and listed verses 28 and 9 Ezra solemnly charges the selected men to guard all the goods and make sure they reach Jerusalem in safety verse 30 the selected men take charge of the goods and prepare to take them to Jerusalem excuse me Ezra cries out a young man from the back of the congregation do we need to know all this stuff this is back room boy business isn't it we don't need we really have to but it's so boring I mean we've prayed haven't we isn't that enough sit down young man says Ezra we do need to know about these things what you call boring administration is absolutely vital to the success of our expedition now take the long view admin admin that comfortable red chair that you're sitting in how did it get there good admin the roof over our heads why is it not leaking usually good admin the musicians how did they know which pieces to play this morning good admin these yellow leaflets that we have how do they get together with all the information good admin not by magic in

Ezra's case the admin all worked verse 31 the expedition set off verse 32 they reached Jerusalem four months later verse 33 all the goods were carefully weighed out verse 34 everything was properly catalogued and in the last two verses 35 and 36 sacrifices are offered and final administrative but very important details are sorted out so from the pen of Ezra we're given a vivid picture of how this unique expedition was carried out unique in many ways it was a kind of second exodus but from the long view there was much about Ezra's work that we have in common with him the need for Levites the need for prayer the need for painstaking administration if the church of Jesus Christ is to prosper and be healthy but if

[47 : 37] Ezra thought having reached Jerusalem safely that his trials were over he was mistaken he was soon to discover that when the laws of God are faithfully taught and pressed into the people they can unearth resistance and sin and this unearthing can lead to pain and trouble as we shall

see next week in the final episode of the story let's bow our heads and we'll pray we thank you dear heavenly father for the example of your servant Ezra for his devotion to your law and to teaching it and his devotion and love for your people help us too as we seek to honor your son Jesus to love all of the Bible we pray that you'll raise up more teachers who will press your life-giving words into every part of Scottish society so that your name may be hallowed and the name of our Lord Jesus covered with glory Amen Amen God Amen