

# CARRYING A TREASURE

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 8

Eighth Message

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*Ezra 8*

It was my girlfriend's twenty-first birthday. I wanted to do something special, so I arranged for a double-date to go up to San Francisco. We went to an Italian restaurant in North Beach and then swing dancing. Everything was amazing until we got back to the car. Or rather, until we got back to the place where I had left the car.

Apparently, I had parked in front of a driveway, so my car had been towed. This was before everyone carried a cell phone, so I had to flag down a police officer to find out where my car was. After a few hiccups, including taking a cab to an abandoned lot and having to find another cab to take us to the actual impound location, we finally found where my car had been towed. Unfortunately, their credit card machine was broken, and I needed \$300 in cash to get my car out.

Fortunately for us, there was an ATM 8 blocks north on Market Street. So my date and I walked up through the city well past midnight, took out \$300 cash and carried that money back through a not-so-nice part of town to retrieve my car. I still remember how nervous I felt—dressed up with \$300 in cash in my pocket walking late at night through an unfamiliar city.

As we continue our series in the book of Ezra called "Return and Rebuild," our passage this morning is a story about a journey. At the beginning of the book, we hear about the first return from exile: Sheshbazzar and the original group of returnees. Today we'll hear about the second return: Ezra, whom we met last week, and another group of returnees.

Their journey will be long. Not only will it be long, but it will also be dangerous. And the journey won't just be long and dangerous; they will be carrying an incredible amount of wealth along the way. By watching these Jews, we're going to learn about carrying a treasure.

Whenever we read the Scriptures, we're always asking a few different questions. We want to understand this story in its original context. Today we have a fascinating narrative of several thousand people

travelling over 900 miles around a massive desert while carrying tremendous amounts of wealth. There's a lot to understand.

We also want to understand what God is telling us today through this story from so long ago. So as preachers, when we study a passage about treasures being transported across the desert, we pray for God to give us some direction as to what this passage says to us here and now. As I prayed about this, God kept drawing my attention to a passage in 2 Corinthians 4 where the apostle Paul talks about "treasures in earthen vessels."

In that passage, the treasure that Paul refers to is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." What a phrase! The light. This light brings knowledge. The knowledge is about glory—the glory of the face of Jesus Christ.

Simply put, the treasure in 2 Corinthians 4 is the gospel. A story about a God who went to unbelievable lengths to restore life to his creation who had rejected him and chosen death. The apostle Paul says that we carry that treasure within us.

This morning we are talking about traveling through a dangerous place carrying something of great value. We started off thinking about me doing that with my date on her twenty-first birthday. We'll read the details of a group of Israelites doing this 2500 years ago. And we'll apply it to ourselves, as we carry the truth of the gospel in this world where we live.

The journey story in Ezra follows a common pattern. Very soon after the trip begins, problems start to arise which have to be solved. Each problem is larger than the last. But God comes through to solve all those problems, and the journey is completed. Let's see what we can learn about our own journeys as we read about the problems and the solutions of Ezra's journey so very long ago.

## The journey begins

In the last chapter, we heard about Ezra deciding to leave Persia and join the returnees in Jerusalem. As

chapter 8 opens, we hear about the group of people who are going with him.

**Ezra 8:1-2:**

**These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king: 2 Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush.**

The list of people continues for another 12 verses. All told, there are around 1500 men, which probably means about 5000 people with women and children. Fifty thousand people came back with Sheshbazzar. This time, there's a tenth that. Historians estimate that 2-3 million Jews were living in Persia at this time. Fifty-five thousand of them chose to return. That's less than 3%. Returning to Jerusalem was not a popular decision.

Part of that probably had to do with how difficult the actual journey was. Let's take a look at their path.



You'll notice that the path goes up north to get around a massive desert. This journey is about 900 miles. If you're thinking of taking that journey yourself, you'll be happy to know that Google maps can give you a walking path.

Here's the map for today:



Google says the journey will take 245 hours. But Google isn't figuring on ancient roads, caravans of livestock, and families with children. It took Ezra and his group around 3.5 months to make the journey. Five thousand people were travelling on foot through dangerous territory with a lot of money.

What could go wrong? We're about to find out.

**Problem one – the right people**

Ezra began his journey by staging everyone near a river. The first problem comes when Ezra looks around and realizes who is part of this group. Or, more accurately, he realizes who is not part of this group.

**Ezra 8:15:**

**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.**

Ezra realizes that there are no Levites in his group. This was a problem because of the valuables they were going to carry. The book of Numbers makes it clear that Levites were the only members of the community who were supposed to be carrying the gold and silver of the temple. We heard last week about how dedicated Ezra was to the Law, so there's no way he's going to transport temple valuables without Levites.

The first problem they face is that they don't have the right people for the job.

If you have ever been part of a team—a sports team, a group project in school, a workplace, or anything—you have seen this play out. You have to have the right people doing the right things for the whole system to function well.

So Ezra is looking for a group of Levites in Persia. Remember that this was a dangerous trip. Most people didn't want to go. Where was he going to find enough Levites to do the job at this stage in trip planning? This situation is the first unsolvable problem that they face. And it's the first time God comes through with a solution.

**Ezra 8:16-18:**

**Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight,**

**17 and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God. 18 And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18;**

We don't know much about Iddo except what we learn here. But he must have been the leader of a place of worship. Iddo came through, and he sent them Levites—38 of them. Thirty-eight Levites willing to uproot their lives and families by traveling 900 miles with a few days' notice. That's a miracle.

Notice the phrase used to describe the miracle: "by the good hand of our God on us." The "hand of God" showed up three times in our passage last week. We're going to see it three times this week as well: at every stage of our journey.

God's hand was on them. Their first problem was solved.

Do you ever feel like you are facing a challenge that you are just not equipped to handle? Do you ever wonder whether you have what it takes to get the job done? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you are sure that someone else could do this better than you?

That's a question that many of us face at different times. Am I the right person for the job?

In 2 Corinthians 4, the apostle Paul begins his discussion of God's call on our lives by saying this, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God ..."

Paul will go on to explain what "this ministry" is: to carry the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And we have been given this ministry not because we are capable but "by the mercy of God." God has chosen us not because of our ability but because of his mercy.

Let me make this simple. You are the right person for the job that God has asked you to do. You are the right person for the job.

Ezra needed to find Levites because God said that only Levites could carry the temple treasures. God found you and said that only you could fulfill the calling that

he has given you. I hope you know how profound God's calling on your life is.

Your calling is not to lead a happy life. It's not to figure out a way to get your needs met in your marriage. Your calling is not to find fulfillment in your life or to provide for your grandchildren or change the world through your company. You may end up doing some of those things along the way.

Your primary calling is to know Christ and carry that knowledge to the world in a hundred different ways. And you are the right person for that job. God has given you a unique relationship with Christ. He has given you a calling that takes into account your background, desires, and gifts, as well as your weaknesses, the ways that you've been broken, and the limitations that you can never seem to overcome in your life.

The job is to know Christ and make him known. You are the right person for the job.

## **Problem two – the right prayer**

Ezra found his Levites, but he faced another situation before they had started their journey. They were carrying a lot of money. Ezra had told the Persian king that they didn't need an armed guard because God would protect them. Now Ezra needs to ask God to come through and do just that.

**Ezra 8:21-23:**

**Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. 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 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 who forsake him." 23 So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.**

I love this realistic picture of Ezra. He has gotten himself in a bit of a jam. After talking a big game about God, he didn't want to ask for a bodyguard, so he fasts and prays, please God, come through.

Several years later, Nehemiah would lead the third wave of returnees. They would accept the Persian security

force and travel with the army. Some people think the point is that Ezra had more faith than Nehemiah.

But the emphasis of this passage is not Ezra's faith. It's the faithfulness of God. Notice the second reference to the hand of God. Ezra is so confident in how God treats his people. "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him."

When I was a student at Stanford, I helped to lead a group called "United In Christ", which brought together all the Christian fellowships to connect with each other. One year we held an "all-campus retreat" for Christian students from multiple fellowships. Unfortunately, we overestimated our attendance and were left owing several thousand dollars after the retreat was over.

Sheepishly, we approached several churches, including PBC, where I attended, to help us out. They graciously covered the cost for us. We had overstretched ourselves. We had been a little too confident in what we thought could happen. And then we had to ask for help.

That's what this scene from Ezra makes me think of. Just like some generous churches bailed us out, God comes through for Ezra. We read that "he listened to our entreaty." We know that God protected them.

I've heard the word "overwhelmed" a lot. Our medical industry is overwhelmed. Our supply chain systems are overwhelmed. Our teachers, doctors, and front line workers are overwhelmed.

Many of us feel personally overwhelmed. Life was challenging and complicated before the pandemic. Now there's increased tension, trauma to heal from, plans to hold loosely, and the constant question of when or if this will all be over.

Then add on top of everything else that you come to church, and the pastor tells you that you are carrying a precious treasure through a dangerous journey in the world, that God expects you to be beacons of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. What are we supposed to do with that?

In 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul has talked about being overwhelmed. So when he begins describing our calling, he continues like this in 2 Corinthians 4:1, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

We do not have to be discouraged and overwhelmed. Listen again to Ezra's words: "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him." The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him. We do not lose heart because God's hand is on you when you seek him.

Have you ever been calmed down by someone's touch?

I can think back to several scenes where this was true for me. I remember sobbing as we drove home from putting our dog to sleep early in our marriage. Rachel reached out and touched me, and I could feel comfort flow through her to me. After going through some difficult family stuff, I remember a time when a friend asked, "Can I give you a hug?" And once again, comfort flowed through their touch.

The next time you are overwhelmed, can you be comforted by the hand of our God, which is in you for good? This is the turning point in the story of Ezra. As soon as we hear that God listened to their prayer, we know things will turn out okay. Now we get to see how.

### **Problem three – the right plan**

The third problem is the one that has been looming on the horizon all along. The returnees have their Levites. They have the hand of God on them. But they still have to make a dangerous 900-mile trip carrying a lot of money. To solve this problem, Ezra makes a plan.

#### **Ezra 8:24-26 and 28-29:**

**Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them. 25 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. 26 I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver, and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold,**

**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. 29 Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord."**

It's not obvious to us how much gold and silver this is, but the numbers translate to about 35 tons of metal—over 70,000 pounds. It's around \$250 million worth of temple articles. Now, it's a bit tricky to imagine them carrying this much metal so far. It's possible that we have the conversion wrong or that something is off. But in any case, the point is simple. They were carrying a lot of money.

It makes my ten-block walk south of Market Street carrying \$300 at 1:00 am seem like no longer a big deal.

Ezra planned to split up all the treasure between different people. It's a basic diversification strategy. Spread out your wealth, so if one Levite gets attacked, at least you don't lose everything.

Again, I love what this says about Ezra. He fasts, and he prays to God for safekeeping. But he doesn't just go about his business being foolish after that. He still makes a plan. He still has a strategy. He prays, and he plans. That's why it doesn't make sense to pit him against Nehemiah and say that Ezra is spiritual while Nehemiah is practical. Ezra prays and plans. Incidentally, Nehemiah does both too.

Because of this plan, everything arrived safely. One last time we hear about the hand of God in verse 31.

**Ezra 8:31:**

**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.**

The returnees' final and biggest problem was solved. The hand of God delivered them from the hand of the enemy. It worked to find the Levites. It worked to pray and fast. It worked to come up with a plan. Everything came together, and three impossible obstacles were overcome.

One last time, let's look back to 2 Corinthians 4. In verse 7, the apostle says, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

We carry around this treasure. Remember, the treasure is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

How much would you pay to extend your life by one year? Let's say that you could buy one additional year of a healthy life. What would that go for on the open market? \$1000? \$100,000? \$1 million? Let's say the supply was unlimited. Let's give it a discount and say \$100.

Now, multiply \$100 by an infinite number of years. How much is that worth? How much is the offer of eternal life worth? It is quite literally incalculable. It can't even be put into a number.

This is the treasure you carry. You carry an incalculable treasure.

Carrying a treasure is a dangerous business. This particular item of great value can't be stolen like a bar of gold, but it can be hijacked. We can forget we carry it. We can be careless with it. We can give up on the journey altogether.

Ezra split up his treasure among twelve Levites to ensure it would safely travel the distance. Didn't God do the same? He entrusted his treasure to twelve men who would carry it to the world. Each time they met someone else and split up the treasure between them, they both still carried a treasure of infinite worth. Do the math: what's infinity divided by 2? Infinity.

So this treasure was sent out in earthen vessels to cross vast distances at great danger to the ones who would carry it. Finally, that treasure reached us, and now we carry it as well. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ within us. Not because we're particularly prepared to carry a treasure. In fact, it's the opposite. We carry it to make it abundantly clear that the surpassing power belongs to God.

## Conclusion

My date and I made it through south of Market carrying \$300 and retrieved my car from the impound lot. Fourteen months later to the day we got married. And now, twenty-two years later, we have five teenagers. It's a good thing we had some practice with dangerous journeys. And we're still surviving that journey.

Ezra and his group reached Jerusalem with all the money intact. The last few verses of Ezra 8 describe a huge worship celebration. Wouldn't you celebrate if \$250 million were successfully transferred to the temple budget?

Now all of us find ourselves on this journey as followers of Jesus carrying the treasure of the gospel. Just as we know how the story ends in the book of Ezra, we know how the story of our journey ends as well. Sorry for the spoiler, but the treasure finds its way into the temple. In fact, the whole earth becomes the temple of God in some kind of mystical new creation, and God's people live forever within the beauty of that temple, worth far more than \$250 million.

But for now, while we are still on our journey, God is watching over us. The hand of our God is for good for those who seek him. Seek God. Be comforted by hand. And be careful with the treasure you carry.