

Ezra 8 - (An X-ray from Ezra's Exodus)

The purpose of x-rays is to reveal to the eye what is not naturally possible. My dad recently went in for some x-rays. He had no symptoms, actually seemed very healthy, in shape, playing sports, and it was for some insurance purposes that he went in. The doc comes back and says, we got to talk. It's serious. Very serious. They found an aortic aneurism and then later a blocked artery. My dad was essentially a walking miracle, at any time he could go.

Without x-rays we can be blind to our health, problems can go undetected. The x-rays were able to get beneath the surface and reveal what was really going on. Critical for purposes of diagnosing problems.

That's what we want to do this morning, as we trace Ezra's exodus from Babylon, to use it as a sort of spiritual x-ray for our hearts.

You say, what are you talking about, x-ray questions? Well, x-ray questions are meant to get at your heart. I could ask you about your life, and you could give me a variety of answers, and kind of stay at the surface. The surface is not what's most important to God. What's most important is the depths of your heart. The driving force in your motivations. The why behind all your actions. Your heart, the affections, the things you love and chase. That's what x-ray questions are meant to get at.

We should say with the psalmist as we get up on the lab table, search me and know me, see if there is any wicked way in me.

1. Are you delighting in God? (The Levites are not responding to God's call)

Ezra has been called by God to lead an exodus out of Babylon to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the promised land. That's where God first brought His people. They disobeyed and were sent into exile. A first wave have returned. Now Ezra is leading a second wave of people back to the Promise Land.

Ezra begins in v.1 Chapter 8 a list of the heads of the fathers that are returning.

What's interesting is that the list starts off with two priests in the line of Aaron, and one man in the line of King David.

This is a huge deal. The time of discipline is over. Exile is over. The time for living in Babylon, serving under a foreign king in a foreign, godless culture, is over. It's been almost 200 years since they first were exiled. 100 since the first wave already left to go back.

Salvation is happening for the people of God. But the number, if you add them all up is like 1500 men, roughly 5,000 Jews. Although we don't know the exact number, there's a lot of people evidently missing.

And what's worse, v.15, **"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."**

There were no Levites. Who were the Levites? Levi was one of the 12 sons of Israel, you've maybe heard of the 12 tribes of Israel. One was Levi, and his tribe was chosen by God to basically be the mediators between God and Israel. They were to guard, protect, and cultivate the relationship between God and Israel. You see, God had chosen them and set them apart. They weren't allowed to prosper with wealth, and worked full-time at the Temple, and had to live off of the gifts of the people.. because, the Scriptures say, God was their inheritance. So they spent all their time at the Temple, a group of Levites that were in the line of Aaron were

actual priests, but they all basically were the professional religious guys, having a variety of services, from overseeing and carrying out sacrifices to teaching God's law to the people.

The point is... they were God's chosen people among His chosen people, to essentially lead the people in knowing and worshiping God.

So then we fast forward to Ezra 8, God makes provision for the Levites to return. They've been stuck in exile, under a foreign king in a foreign culture, not able to carry out their chosen function in leading the people in worship. Now's the chance. God has opened the door.

And what happens? Ezra's out at the canal, all preparations have been made, here's the big exodus, and he looks around for their worship leaders. None shows up. They should have been the first ones to sign up, leading the charge back to Jerusalem.

What is going on?

They apparently prefer exile in Babylon over living in the presence of God in His Temple at Jerusalem. They evidently got comfortable in Babylon. They liked it there. Service to God wasn't so appealing to them. Maybe they had comfortable salaries, and didn't want to give that up (and have to live off faith). Maybe they liked their normal routines and didn't want to be devoted to God.

You can imagine a little something like what happened when Moses led the people out of Egypt. They are in the wilderness on the way to the Promise Land, and what do the people do? They grumble against Moses. Why did you take us out here? We want to go back. All they could think about were the delicacies of Egypt. The pleasure of Egypt, while enslaved, were greater to them than the pleasures of God in freedom. Moses rather in Hebrews chose to be mistreated with the people of God than enjoy all the pleasures of Egypt, because he was looking to the city to come.

The Levites looked saw the offer and refused it. Comfort, or scared of the journey, didn't want a change in lifestyle.

God's offer is held out to you. The promise land is held out to you. Are you willing to follow God? Are you willing to leave your old life behind? God holds out pleasures evermore to you, the forgiveness of sins in His Son, life eternal. The only way to embrace what God has for you is to repent of seeking pleasures in Egypt, (Hebrews quote on Moses).

What's holding you back from following God this morning? Is it comfort (God has commanded you to be generous and sacrificial)? Is it reputation (God has commanded you to care about what he thinks, not what the world thinks) Is it sex (God demands purity and holiness from you)?

How does Ezra respond... verse 16:

16 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; 19 also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20; 20 besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name.

Ezra knows how important this is, so first he doesn't take off without them, he needs them, and he's super strategic in how he plans to get them, he knows this is going to take some careful argumentation. I love how Ezra here couples his strategic planning with the ultimate cause, v.18 and the good hand of our God on us, they were successful in bringing a Levite leader, Sherebiah, as well as many Levites and Temple servants.

I can only imagine what that pleading must have involved. Certainly it was something like, you have no clue what you are giving up here. You think staying here in Babylon is worth it. God is so much better than Babylon. "a man who has nothing and has God, has everything, and a man who has everything and does not have God, has nothing." You've been fooled. Perhaps there was both rebuke and encouragement.

God or sin? At the right hand of God are pleasures evermore. Are you delighting in God's pleasures?

2. Are you trusting in God? (Ezra prays for the journey)

So Ezra has the whole gang, he's got all of Israel represented, he's got the Temple priests and Levites, and Temple servants. He's ready. Only one little problem. They have to travel 1000 miles, four months, with gold and silver that amounted to what scholars think is somewhere between 100-500 thousand annual salaries.

They didn't have a smartphone where they could do a mobile deposit. Thanks king, snap a couple pictures, upload it and have it deposited in your bank. Not at all. And we aren't talking about paper, actual gold and silver. 25 tons of silver, almost 4 tons of gold.

Bandits and robbers were all over the place. With 5,000 people and 30 tons of precious metal, you can't exactly sneak across 1000 miles. The expectation would have been ambush.

What does Ezra do?

21 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.

So Ezra's in a tough spot. On the one hand, he'd love some help from the king, but on the other hand, he's already told the king that God's hand is on them. Ezra is saying, I would have felt like my integrity was in question, and even more so, that the king would not understand how great Yahweh is.

Alright, he says, we got to do this by faith. We are going to trust God to deliver us and showcase His power. But we aren't going to do this flippantly. We are not going to presume upon the Lord's kindness. Therefore, we are going to cry out to God for His help. He gathers all the people and declares a fast.

Fasting is a form of prayer, we aren't sure what this exact fast entailed, but fasting usually involves the abstaining from food or food and drink. One scholar put it this way, which I like, "fasting is an earnestness in prayer that makes one oblivious to food."

It's like saying, how can I eat right now, not when I care so much about God showing up. Eating is a celebration. Like when Jesus tells the disciples not to fast because He is with them, but to fast when He is gone. So we fast when we are so earnest about something.

Are you trusting in God's deliverance?

Trial and danger are normal for the christian, and to be expected.

1. I want to focus the primary form of God's deliverance? Good Hand, saved from God's wrath. Are you trusting in church attendance, baptism, religious performance of any kind?
2. Next secondary forms in this life? Do you live your life in such a way that God has to show up?

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.

3. all who call upon the Lord will be saved. He is faithful to answer.

3. Are you faithful with what God has given you? (Ezra meticulously stewards the temple goods)

Ezra, among other things, was responsible for getting all the silver and gold to Jerusalem. He has not only prayed and asked God's favor, but now he takes necessary precautions.

24 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, 27 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold. 28 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." 30 So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.

Ezra counts the exact amount of silver and gold they have, then he divides it up among the priests and Levites, sets them apart for this task, declares them holy and the silver and gold holy, and commissions them with this task. Ezra is overseeing the whole thing. It was his job, before God, and to possibly stand above reproach in having to give account to the king, that nothing was lost.

And as we skip down to v.33 after the journey,

33 On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Meremoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui. 34 The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

Ezra was faithful with what he was given to steward.

Are you faithful with what God has given you? Think about your time, your resources, your energy. What about your calling in life? God's passion in your heart, your skills and giftings.

We are ultimately to steward the gospel. God has given us the good deposit. How are we adorning it and faithfully passing it on?

4. Are you Building Your Life On Worship? (The climax of the exodus is worship)

Ezra and his company have made it safely to Jerusalem, with all their gold and silver still in their possession. Their journey then climaxes with worship.

35 At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, 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. 36 They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God.

Ezra and the Israelites know that it was God who has opened the door for them to come back. It's God who is being faithful to promises given to Abraham that they would be his people and that God would bless them and give them a land.

They know that it was God who called them, and who led them safely, and it is God alone who deserves all their worship.

The only appropriate thing to do once they get to Jerusalem, is to worship. For them, this was where God dwelled. **V.30, bring the gold and silver to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.**

The entirety of the Israelite's life was wrapped around God's presence in Jerusalem. They were the chosen people to be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the world. Worship is central to who they are and who God has revealed to them.

We see two types of offerings given here. First we see a burnt offering, which is this sacrifice to show God one's commitment and consecration. It's like saying, as this entire animal goes up, I'm completely consumed for you God.

Is your life a burnt offering, as Romans 12 makes clear, we are to be "living sacrifices", our lives are to be a "pleasing aroma to our God." That aroma is the fragrance put off as we burn for God. What are you committed to in this life? You have one life to live? What fragrance are you going to give off? the fragrance that says you worshiped the world, or the fragrance that says you worship God.

But something important to note here, burnt offerings are meaningless if there is not a sin offering. Our righteous acts are filthy rags before God. All have fallen short of the glory of God. We can't help but to give off a displeasing aroma. We burn for ourselves and for the things of the world.

The sin offering is what makes the burnt offering possible. It's the sin offering that restores our relationship with God, that allows our consecrations to be pleasing to Him.

This would be fulfilled in the cross of Christ. In Jesus death, he pays the debt for our sin, and he gives us His righteousness. He makes us holy. Becoming holy is not something we can do to ourselves. We must be made holy.

Just as Ezra spoke a word to the priests (who just days prior wanted nothing to do with God) that they were holy, set apart. So we hear the word of Christ come to us... you are holy. you are set apart for God.

Our lives must be built off the sin offering of Christ, and then empowered by the burnt offering of Christ, through His death and resurrection we can be forgiven, and live lives that give off the fragrance of Christ, dedicated to the mission of God.

For Ezra and the Israelites, their whole existence was based on worship. Worship was the foundation of why God had called them, and worship was the end of their journey. So too for us. Worship is everything for the Christian. We worship as the basis of the christian life, and the climax of the christian life is worship.

Conclusion:

These x-ray questions are not meant for us to go through and feel good about ourselves? If we passed, we may be in trouble. X-ray questions are meant to show us our need and point us to our Savior Jesus. You see, we are going to fail at all the points. We are going to delight in Babylon over Jersusalem. Jesus found all his joy in Jerusalem, for the joy set before him He endured the cross. We are going to fail to trust in God and fail to show His power. Jesus perfectly trusted God. We are going to fail in stewarding what God has given us. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the work that God gave Him to do. We are going to fail in our worship. Jesus was the perfect living sacrifice. Only Jesus was perfectly consumed with God.

Let's set our hope on Jesus this morning, worship Him as the One who saves us and rescues us from death. He alone as the great physician can remove our dead heart and give us one that beats for Him.