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Ezra authorized by King Artaxerxes. If we are faithless, he remains faithful.

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Transcript

Ezra chapter 7 Now after this in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra the son of Saraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shalem, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Mereioth, son of Zerariah, son of Uzziah, son of Bukkiah, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest, this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given. And the king granted him all that he asked.

For the hand of the Lord his God was on him. And there went up also to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia. And on the first

day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem. For the good hand of his God was on him.

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel. Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, Peace.

And now I make a decree that any one of the people of Israel, or their priests, or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. For you are sent by the king and his seven counsellors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counsellors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem.

Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury.

And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river, whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cores of wheat, one hundred barls of wine, one hundred barls of oil, and salt, without prescribing how much. Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on any one of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province beyond the river, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment, or for confiscation of his goods, or for imprisonment.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of

the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me. Finally, in chapter 7 of the book named after him, Ezra himself comes upon the stage.

His voice isn't heard until verse 27 though. Ezra is a priest with a known lineage stretching back to Aaron, through several high priests, Zerah, Hilkiah, Phinehas, Eleazar and Aaron. We have a fuller genealogical list in 1st Chronicles chapter 6 verses 3-15.

It is quite likely that a number of names were dropped out between Azariah and Miriath. The names between these two are included in the list in 1st Chronicles. There seems to be no reason to leave them out here, and it's easy to imagine the eyes of an early scribe copying the text, accidentally skipping, as two Azariahs and Amariahs are in the list.

This sort of scribal error is known as parablepsis. Ezra is here described as the son of Zerah. In 2nd Kings chapter 25 verses 18-21, Zerah's death at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is described.

His death occurred around 586 BC with the downfall of Jerusalem. It seems likely that there were at least two or three generations dividing Ezra and Zerah. They probably aren't mentioned here as the priesthood wasn't exercised in the ordinary way during the period of the exile.

The events of the chapter are dated to the 7th year of King Artaxerxes, around 458 BC. The temple had been finished about 60 years previously, according to the typical chronology. Ezra is a priest and a devoted scribe, skilled in the law of Moses.

On these two accounts, he is well qualified for the task ahead of him. He seems to have exercised some administrative authority as a skilled scribe in the Persian Empire in addition to being a trained and gifted Torah scholar. As such a scribe, he would have been well able to teach the people and to lead a party of priests and Levites back to Jerusalem.

Although he has a high priestly lineage, however, he does not appear to be the high priest himself. Nevertheless, we should consider affinities between Ezra and Moses. Moses played a priestly role in the setting up of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system.

He led the people but also instructed the people in the law in the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra's party would re-establish a fuller and more ordered worship in the temple and he would also instruct the people in the law, much as Moses had instructed the people in the law in the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra travels from the first to the fifth month to get from Babylonia to Jerusalem, around from April to August.

The first few days of the journey seem to be days of gathering the party together and

preparing them for what lies ahead. In Ezra chapter 8 verse 31 we see that they set out properly on the twelfth day of the first month. Then we departed from the river Ahiva 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. Once again the agency of the Lord is highlighted. At various other points in Ezra, God is spoken of as stirring up the people's hearts to take certain actions.

In the preceding chapter we were told that the rebuilding of the temple took place according to God's decree. Here the Lord's agency is described as a matter of the good hand of God being upon Ezra. Ezra set his heart to study, to observe and to teach the law of the Lord and the Lord set his good hand upon him.

The hand of the Lord being upon people is usually associated with prophecy. However its use of Ezra the scribe could perhaps be seen as an extension of the notion of receiving the guidance of the Lord, typically associated with prophecy, to the skilled study of the scriptures. A man like Ezra gifted in the study of the scriptures is bringing the guidance of the Lord much as the prophet does to the people.

The role of such teachers would become much more important in the years that followed as there would not be inspired prophets in the same way. In verses 12-26 we have another Aramaic section of the book, a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest. This letter along with Ezra's expression of praise in response to it in verses 27-28 is probably taken from Ezra's personal memoirs.

King Artaxerxes and his seven counsellors send Ezra to set up the true worship of God within Jerusalem. While the king was a pagan and a polytheist this was the more general policy of the empire. He sends Ezra to superintend matters in Jerusalem but also to teach the word of the Lord.

With Ezra he sends a great quantity of silver and gold with which Ezra can buy materials for the temple and its worship. Once again God is building up his house with the gifts of Gentiles. Ezra is clearly a trusted servant of the king.

He has given a lot of prudential latitude in how he handles the expenses. The king also seems to have a measure of understanding of the worship of the Lord that may perhaps evidence the influence of high ranking Jewish officials and counsellors. Over this period of time in the Persian empire there were figures like Esther and Mordecai, Nehemiah and Ezra, all figures enjoying high office and with the ear of various Persian kings.

As a new superintendent Ezra is instructed to set up magistrates and judges, establishing the law of the king but also establishing the law of God by teaching the people the Torah. Ezra is distinguished in the eyes of the king as a man who has wisdom

that has been given to him by God. Perhaps the king has seen in Ezra the character of a man who has devoted himself to study of the word of God and wants to support Ezra in his teaching of the Jewish people.

He puts the full weight of the Persian government behind Ezra. Anyone who doesn't cooperate with the law of the king but also with the law of God will be liable to suffer death, banishment, confiscation of goods or imprisonment. Ezra is astonished and encouraged by the strength of the king's authorisation and as he gathers people together he praises the Lord for what he has done.

The king's commitment to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem recalls prophecies such as that of Isaiah 60. The Lord is starting to fulfil such promises as he is using pagan kings to rebuild his house and his walls, to glorify the temple and also to upbuild his people. A question to consider.

A number of commentators note parallels between the story of Ezra in this and following chapters and the story of Moses in the Exodus. What parallels can you see and what greater theological connections might they help us to draw? You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.

Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound.

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for if we have died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we deny him, he also will deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself. Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the heroes.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened.

They are upsetting the faith of some. But God's firm foundation stands, bearing the seal,

the Lord knows those who are his, and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.

Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies, you know that they breed quarrels.

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. From the cautionary examples of those who had abandoned him, and the positive example of Vanessa Forrest and his household, Paul turns to address Timothy more directly.

Relying upon the empowering grace of Christ, Timothy needs to teach what he has learnt from Paul to others in his turn. Paul's statement in verse 2 should draw our minds back to chapter 1 verses 13 and 14. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. The deposit that Timothy was told to guard in the preceding chapter is now one that he is instructed to entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others in their turn. For Paul, it is very important that things get passed on.

The concern here is not one of apostolic succession, so much as this is a concern of preserving the apostolic faith, maintaining it by a healthy process of tradition, handing it on to a new generation in its turn, to people who are equipped to continue that process. Employing a military metaphor, Paul charges Timothy to courageously face and endure suffering. He is to be a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

We might think here of the language of putting on the whole armour of God in Ephesians chapter 6. The Christian is a soldier fighting a battle. The stakes are life and death, and loyalty, courage and struggle are non-negotiable. Developing the military metaphor, in verses 4 to 6 Paul gives three different examples of vocations that provide analogies for the Christian faith.

The soldier, the athlete and the farmer are all different sorts of examples of diligence and hard work in pursuit of a particular goal with the promise of a reward. Paul notes the single-mindedness of the soldier. He does not get entangled in civilian pursuits.

He is there to fight a battle and to be loyal to his commander. More than anything else, he seeks to please the one who enlisted him. In Paul's use of the analogy here, the one who enlisted the Christian is Christ Jesus himself.

Whatever we do, we must do in order to please him. Paul also uses the analogy of the soldier in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verse 7. Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? The example of the athlete is one that Paul uses later on in that chapter in 1 Corinthians in verses 24 to 25. Do you not know that in the race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. The athlete competes and struggles for the sake of a reward.

However to obtain this reward, he needs to compete according to the rules. The final example that Paul gives is the hard-working farmer. The soldier is singled out by his aim to please the one who enlisted him, the athlete by his competing according to the rules and the hard-working farmer by the reward that he receives.

Each of these illustrations allows Paul to pick out a particular facet of the Christian's vocation. Paul wants Timothy to meditate upon his statements at this point, believing that he will receive greater insight as he does so. Each of the metaphors in question occur on a number of occasions within Paul's writing.

For instance the athletic metaphor can also be seen in Philippians chapter 3 verses 12-14. Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the uproot call of God in Christ Jesus.

Verses 8-10 are a single sentence. Once again Paul's concern here is that Timothy get his bearings. He needs to remember Jesus Christ, and from taking his bearings by reflecting upon Christ, he will have a clearer idea of how he ought to behave.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, the offspring of David. This pairing might remind us of Romans chapter 1 verses 3-4, concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. As the one risen from the dead, Jesus has been vindicated, he has been elevated by God, he is the offspring of David, he is the true Messiah.

These are absolutely staple truths of Paul's gospel, and he is suffering for this, not just

with physical lack, but also with the social shame that comes with being a bound criminal. Yet Paul's physical condition of imprisonment could not contrast more with the condition of the word of God. The word of God is not bound, it cannot be shackled, and as a result Paul is confident as he undergoes suffering for the sake of it.

In Philippians chapter 1 for instance, Paul can speak of his situation of imprisonment in a manner that expresses his wonder at the way that the Lord has used his situation to advance his own kingdom purposes. Paul will willingly undergo such suffering for the sake of the elect. By the elect here he is referring to the church of Jesus Christ.

His concern is that the riches of Christ be given to his people, and that his people be led through the trials and struggles of this age, through the shepherding that Paul and others provide, to obtain the fullness of the reward that the Lord has set apart for them. To underline his point, he refers to a fourfold affirmation. If we have died with him, we will also live with him.

If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he also will deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.

The first statement concerning dying and then living with Christ might recall Romans chapter 6 verse 8. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. The Christian's identification with Christ and his death, in Romans chapter 6, connected with baptism, is a source of assurance of future resurrection, a truth that will be important in attacking the error that Paul later speaks of. This shouldn't be seen as just a once-off event back in the time of people's baptism.

It should be seen as an ongoing participation. There was a definitive death with Christ, which must continually be lived out in the believer's life. Likewise, there is an anticipated event of future resurrection, of living with him, but also an ongoing participation in the reality-filled promise and guarantee of that by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us as a down payment.

In the present, we must endure sufferings, confident that if we do so, we will attain what we have been promised. We will reign with him. We might here recall Paul's charges to Timothy in verses 3 to 6. Those who disown Christ will be disowned by Christ.

True disciples must deny themselves and follow Christ. And as they deny themselves and acknowledge Christ, they will be acknowledged by Christ on the last day, Luke chapter 9 verses 23 to 26. And he said to all, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be

ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. After the relative symmetry of the first three statements, Paul's fourth statement might surprise us.

There are various ways that people have taken this statement. Some have taken it as a statement that Christ will save even those who waver in faith. Others that Christ is faithful in his punishing of those who are faithless.

However, I don't think that Paul is making either of these claims at this point. Rather, his point is that everything is founded ultimately upon the faithfulness of God, not upon the faithfulness of the people of God. Even when human beings prove faithless, God is still going to work out his purposes faithfully.

He will keep his promises. He will uphold his covenant. None of this ultimately rests upon our faithfulness.

And on the occasions when we have proved faithless, it is to this faithfulness of God that we should flee. We might think perhaps of 1 John 1 verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. It was the faithfulness of God that Moses appealed to in Exodus 32-34 when he interceded for Israel after their sin with the golden calf.

For the Lord to abandon his faithfulness would be for the Lord to abandon his very nature. He cannot deny himself. This should be the greatest source of comfort for those who are penitent.

Paul is concerned that Timothy and others around him are able to deal effectively with false teaching in their midst. The false teachers are particularly fond of quarrels. Their teaching leads to conflict and division.

They are unteachable and resist correction. Blind to the true substance of the faith, they are preoccupied with quarrelling about words, to the detriment of all of their hearers. The way of the false teachers is driven by pride, by desire for the praise of men and for a following around themselves.

Timothy by contrast should seek above all else the praise of the Lord. He should desire to be recognised as a faithful servant, a worker who does not need to be ashamed. And his business is with the word of truth, which he must handle with care.

Discerning true and false words and edifying and unedifying speech is the business of someone like Timothy. He must be alert to the way that false teachers and their speech impact those who hear them. He must perceive specific types of discourse and the way that they have particular tendencies, for instance the irreverent babble of such as Hymenaeus and Philetus and the way that it can spread through a community like gangrene.

This Hymenaeus is probably referred to in 1 Timothy 1 verses 18-20. This charge I entrust to you, Timothy my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

The exact nature of their teaching is not clear. Paul says that they are saying that the resurrection has already happened. Their over-realised eschatology has been connected by some to a sort of Gnosticism.

As Christians are baptised into Christ, for instance, they obtain the resurrection of Christ here and now. Or perhaps the teaching is based in Christ's own resurrection, believing that Christ's resurrection has precipitated the arrival of the age to come and we already participate in that. Or perhaps the teaching is a greatly over-realised version of something similar to what Paul is teaching.

In the life of the church now, we are participating in the resurrection life of Christ. In baptism we were raised with him and now we are living by the life of the resurrection spirit. We are not awaiting some future event, it has already happened.

Now of course Paul does teach that we participate in the resurrection spirit, that we have already in some sense been raised with Christ. However Paul has a very strong already not yet framework for understanding these things. We still await this salvation to be realised in its fullness in the future.

There is still a final resurrection and if we only have hope in this life, we are of all people the most pitiable. All of this is unsettling a number of people within the church. And perhaps Timothy is also somewhat rattled when he sees the apparent success that the false teaching is having in these congregations.

In the face of this widespread faithlessness, Paul wants to remind Timothy of the Lord's faithfulness. The sure foundation of God is not our faith but his faithfulness. The language of the foundation might be an allusion back to Isaiah chapter 28 verse 16.

Therefore thus said the Lord God, Behold I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation. Whoever believes will not be in haste. This verse is read in a messianic way by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament.

Paul here argues that it has a seal, something that validates the one who laid it. The Lord knows those who are his and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. The Lord is building his house upon this foundation and this basis remains sure when we see people we once presumed to be Christians who have fallen away, we

should not lose our nerve, we should return once more to the foundation and take our bearings from that.

The statement the Lord knows those who are his might be an allusion back to a key narrative in Numbers chapter 16 in verse 4-5 of that chapter. When Moses heard it he fell on his face and he said to Korah and all his company, In the morning the Lord will show who is his and who is holy and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him.

And then later on in that chapter in verse 26, And he spoke to the congregation, saying, Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins. Perhaps in a manner comparable to that of the false teachers here with Hymenaeus and Philetus and others like them, in Numbers Moses and Aaron were challenged by Korah and his company. And the Lord made a great division in his people, destroying Korah and all who were with him.

Recognizing the sort of divisions made by the Lord, the faithful servant of the Lord must be concerned to cleanse himself so that he will be useful to the master, ready for every good work. The church here is spoken of as a great house, and perhaps Paul's point is that just as in a great house there are noble vessels that are put up on the shelf and honoured and treated as items of great value, while there are also other vessels that are used for common use that aren't respected at all and will soon be disposed of as they are broken or used. So the church is a place with a mixed company, with vessels of honour set apart for the master's special purpose, and then dishonourable vessels like the false teachers that will be discarded with the recycling.

As those within this house, it is imperative that we seek to be members of the former company. We will be members of this group as we cleanse ourselves, and as Paul highlights in verse 22, as we flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace. The youthful passions here are probably not primarily sexual passions.

More likely it's the passions of pride and anger that animate the false teachers. The faithful teacher approaches his task very differently from the false ones. He is irenic.

He is not someone who is seeking to cause fights. He is kind and considerate of others, seeking to understand where they are coming from and to speak carefully into their situations. He is able to teach.

He knows how to instruct and to persuade people in a way that they are receptive to. He is patient in enduring evil. Any leader will face lots of opposition.

A good leader will not make the opposition about him. The good leader can endure unreasonable treatment aimed at himself without being blown off course. When people attack him, he draws attention to Christ.

He corrects opponents with gentleness. He does not respond in kind to the treatment that he receives. All of this requires considerable self-mastery.

It requires being detached enough from other people that you are not in constant reactive engagement with them. The good teacher is engaged with people without being constantly entangled and enmeshed with them. Such a teacher is the most apt person to lead others to repentance.

He is not trying to win a fight. He is not driven by pride and wanting to get one up upon the other person. Rather he is wanting to win the person to the truth.

And his greatest hope is that the Lord would grant them repentance, that they would come to their senses and that the devil would be thwarted in his plans and robbed of his servants. A question to consider. What are some of the practices of the faithful leader that would equip him to behave in the way that Paul describes here?