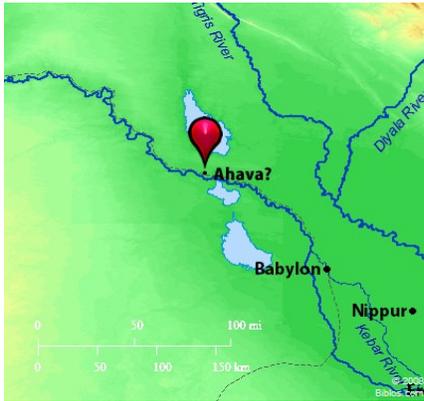


Ezra Trusting God alone

Ezra 8:15-31

So Ezra, having secured royal permission, puts his party together to return to Jerusalem. It wasn't as large as the party that returned under Zerubbabel and they met at a canal that runs to a town called Ahava. Nobody's quite sure where that actually was.



The best theory seems to be that it was in northern Babylonia near the River Euphrates. Some say it is a place called Hit in the east of Syria. The Euphrates was the border between the province of Babylonia and that of Trans-Euphrates which Judah was part of. Crossing that border took them out of their comfort zone because they were leaving one of the comfortable and prosperous parts of the Persian Empire and going into the relative wilds of Syria and Judah.

Why had these people, or their parents not left Babylonia in the first wave? Because they had made their lives in Babylonia. They were comfortable and free to do business and live their lives provided they never left Babylonia under Nebuchadnezzar's empire – they were never slaves. Under Cyrus and afterwards they were free to leave but many didn't – they were comfortable. Ezra was called out of his comfort zone? Why? As we'll find God called him to properly re-establish Jewish law and practice in Judah: something that hadn't happened properly as yet.

But he was being called out of his comfort zone in Babylon. What comfort zone is God calling us out of? Examples?

Ezra's move from his comfort zone seems pretty typical of what happens when people are called to do something new and challenging. First of all they perceive God's blessing on what they are doing. The permission of Artaxerxes was a powerful encouragement. It came after a generation of disappointment where the Jews were not allowed to develop themselves as a nation and practice their faith as they wanted. Now they had the opportunity. As we found last time, Artaxerxes didn't just give them permission, but he made sure that they were well resourced to do it, which went much further than they probably expected and was the practice of Cyrus in the past.

Their second encouraging sign was that as they planned, the obstacles that appeared fell away. We read this in verse 15 onwards. *I found that there were priests in the group, but no Levites. 16 I sent for nine of the leaders: Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, and for two teachers, Joiarib and Elnathan. 17 I sent them to Iddo, head of the community at Casiphia, to ask him and his associates, the Temple workers, to send us people to serve God in the Temple. Good – and answer to prayer, but more than that: verse 18 Since the gracious hand of our God was upon us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the descendants of Mah'li son of Levi son of Israel, namely Sherebi'ah, with his sons and kin, eighteen.*

Sherebiah was brilliant. He didn't just make up numbers, he looked after stuff and made sure it got safely to

Jerusalem. He was just the kind of guy that Ezra needed – practical and dependable for what was going to be a dangerous journey.

And that was the challenge – a dangerous journey.

21 There by the Ahava Canal I gave orders for us all to fast and humble ourselves before our God and to ask him to lead us on our journey and protect us and our children and all our possessions. 22 I would have been ashamed to ask the emperor for a troop of cavalry to guard us from any enemies during our journey, because I had told him that our God blesses everyone who trusts him, but that he is displeased with and punishes anyone who turns away from him. 23 So we fasted and prayed for God to protect us, and he answered our prayers.

31 It was on the twelfth day of the first month that we left the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. Our God was with us and protected us from enemy attacks and from ambush as we travelled.

There are some situations where we have to trust God because we have no choice. There's no other option, no other way. We see the call, we see the road, we see the dangers and we have no answer to them other than the hand of God. The times I've been in this situation are many. A call, and end but no safe route, not enough resources. Do we wait for safety, do we wait for resources. Sometimes. And what happens – the opportunity passes.

Why does God call us and then put us in this kind of situation? Why does he always seem to give us this "faith margin" Why – because we have to put our money where our mouth is. We are called to be people of faith. To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see. That is what we have to go with for the rest of our lives because we won't know how real heaven is until we get there. We may not know that, but we can get to know God and his ways by proving him in life by moving in faith towards what he calls us to even if He doesn't give us all the pieces. That's faith. God actually puts us into that position. Its part of our growing process.

So if we believe that God wants us to have a Parish Nursing ministry, then we trust He will give us the resources. If we lack people or resources in areas of ministry in the church but believe God has called us to those ministries, then we ask Him to raise up the people and resources we don't yet see. In both cases, we have no idea how such resources are raised. But we see the mission and the power of God. And like Ezra and his people, when we trust God and make the journey, He builds us up and causes us to grow as we see His blessings upon us.

So what do we do as we face the challenge? Do as Ezra did. Commit it to God with prayer and fasting. It's something we so rarely do – either the prayer or the fasting. Yet great moves of faith start when we spend time before God, recognising our weakness, the difficulty or even the impossibility of the situation, but recognising that we have a God who has the power to change the situation, turn minuses to plusses, make the difficult easy and the impossible possible. What a wonderful God we have. And when we see His power at work, we know all the other promises are real too and that builds us up in assurance and faith.

Let's pray

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