

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C1325 – July 24, 2013 – Ezra 8:21-36
The Second Return

If you would turn in your Bible to Ezra 8 we will pick up where we left off last time. Last time we saw how God worked by historical circumstances to set it in the heart of King Artaxerxes to seek out Ezra and send him back to the land of Israel in order to re-instate the proper worship of YHWH who dwelled in Jerusalem. The great Persian King was facing the threat of a Greek navy who had already defeated the city of Memphis in Egypt along the Nile River. The Greek navy then became a threat along his western front composing the Mediterranean coastline. The king responded militarily of course but he also responded by shoring up his defenses along that coastline. One of the means of defense in the king's mind was to ensure the proper worship of gods and goddesses that inhabited the regions along the coastline. These gods would have inhabited Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. And who better to go to Palestine and restore the worship of the God in Jerusalem than Ezra? The world's leading scholar, practitioner and expositor of the Torah, the official document outlining how the God of Jerusalem was to be worshipped in the Temple. Therefore the king avidly displayed his favor upon Ezra, granting him the right of return along with anyone who wanted to return including priests that would properly administer worship in the Temple, tax exempt status for all who served in the Temple worship, financial support for the journey, lavish gifts of gold and silver for the Temple, local taxes designated for the Temple service, Ezra's right to hand-pick judges who would judge according to the Torah, an education program headed up by Ezra to train people in the Torah, and executive powers given to Ezra to execute the judgments of the Torah. This was a matter of national security. The king made any and all provisions necessary to satisfy the God of Jerusalem and procure from Him good favor so that the wrath of the Greeks would be repelled successfully and he could have calm on his western front.

Ezra interpreted all these provisions as the good hand of God upon him since it was evident that God had providentially set these desires in the king's heart. When the time came to depart and they were camped by the river of Ahava he noticed there were not any Levites so he sent some leading men to gather some. In the process God raised up a number of right hand men to go back with him; Gershom who descended from Phinehas and had a heritage of standing up against immorality; Daniel who descended from Ithamar and had a heritage of faithful service as priests; Hattush of the royal house of David; and most prominently Sherebaiah, a man of great insight into the Torah. In sum, from the king's point of view the provisions were procuring God's protection of the King against the dangers of the Greek navy; from God's point of view the provisions were procuring God's protection of His chosen people against the dangers of increasing apostasy from the Law of Moses.

When the full number had gathered at the river of Ahava, somewhere near the vicinity of Babylon, there were approximately 5,000-10,000, men, women and children prepared to make the arduous 900-mile return journey. They were going to be crossing dangerous territory with precious and valuable possessions. How were they going to make it safely? Ezra 8:21 answers, **Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.** This is a famous verse. When the Pilgrims set out from Delft, Holland to Southampton, Britain where they would board the Mayflower, this is the last text their pastor preached on. John Robinson was his name; he was a Reformed Separatist and had decided that if the majority of his congregation wanted to go to the new world in America then he would move the church there. He was instrumental in acquiring the necessary funds and looked forward to a better environment for training his congregation in the word. However, only the minority wanted to go so he sadly stayed behind. However, for those who did decide to go he chose this text to preach from; fasting and praying humbly to God for a safe journey across the treacherous waters for all. Though he himself did not go he influenced them strongly through written correspondence. Four years later he died of the plague. It was his preaching on this text that made him famous.

And how fitting that whenever a dangerous journey is being embarked upon this text is chief. Ezra is the human originator of it. He and his entourage were setting forth on a very treacherous journey as we will see. And in his calling for a fast and prayer we learn more about the man of God Ezra; not only was he a scholar, a practitioner and an expositor of the word of God, he was also a prayer warrior, one of the essentials of being a practitioner for God has called us to be a praying people. But it all begins in verse 21 with a proclamation of **a fast**. Let's make several points about the doctrine of fasting. First, there are three types of fasts in the Bible. The one outside the Bible is the medical fast and that's to remove toxins from the body but as far as the Bible is concerned there are three spiritual fasts. First, the normal fast which is where you don't eat food for some period of time but you do drink water. These fasts may range last longer periods of time, up to 40 days. Second, the partial fast which is where you don't eat certain foods for a period of time but you do drink water. Third, the absolute fast and this is where you eat no food and drink no water for up to three days, it's a short fast. The **fast** proclaimed by Ezra was probably the most common fast found in the Bible which was the normal fast from sunrise to sunset where you abstained from all food but you drank water. Second, why fast? What is the purpose of fasting? There are a few reasons. First, it's to give more time to praying and studying the word of God. If you think about it, the time spent in preparing three meals a day is quite a bit of time. You can easily spend 4-5 hours a day just preparing food. So fasting provides more time for prayer and study of the word. Second, it gives you greater focus and concentration on God. Physiologically, when you eat what happens? Your blood rushes to your digestive system taking it away from where? Your brain. So if you fast the blood can be dedicated to your brain meaning you can think better, you can focus better. So fasting accomplishes at least two things practically; first, it gives you more time for praying and studying the word and second, it gives you better concentration and mental focus during that time. Third, why would you fast? What's the point? Because there is some impending crisis or need. It could be a dangerous situation, it could be temptation, it could be a deadline, it could be traveling mercies, anything that requires more time in prayer, study and focus on God. Fourth, what does fasting accomplish? What is it doing to us? To God? Several things are involved here. First, when we fast it obviously strains our physical body. It deprives the body of what it is accustomed to. So it causes physical deprivation. What this does is it points to our need, to our weakness. Now that said we should never think that

because we have caused physical deprivation that we can manipulate God into doing what we want. God does not respond to us simply because we physically deprive ourselves of something. There's more to a true fast than that. The fasting is not the end to a prayer being answered, it's a means to an end as we'll see in a moment. So I take it there can be those who use a fast ritually, just as an end to get God to do something for them but all it is is a ritual. For example, with Esther, I take her request for Mordecai and the Jews of Susa to fast as a ritual fast. She was calling for an absolute fast, no food or water for three days and the interesting thing is there was no mention of prayer. That's interesting because normally when you read of fasting you also read of prayer in conjunction with the fasting. But not in Esther and therefore I take it that the author purposefully left out any mention of prayer because it was just religious ritual. There may have been Jews that prayed but if they did we don't know anything about it because it's not mentioned. So God wasn't responding to their little religious ritual. God's not even mentioned in the book and yet He's the main character. What God was doing was not responding to little miss spiritual Esther, God was responding to His own covenant promises by raising her up and putting her in the king's palace to protect the extermination of the entire Jewish people. So there can be fasting as a ritual and the Bible is not for that. Just because you don't eat doesn't mean you can jerk on God's chain and get an answer. However, I do think that when fasting is accompanied by prayer it promotes what we know as perseverance in prayer, it gives us more time to pray and more concentrated prayers. Jesus spoke about the importance of persevering in prayer. Remember the parable where the widow kept coming to the judge who did not fear God asking him to give her legal protection? After many failed attempts the judge finally said, "Even though I do not fear God I will give this widow legal protection, otherwise she will keep coming and wear me out." Finally she got a response. How did she get a response? Persistence. It paid off. So if an unjust judge will respond after being bugged day after day how much more promptly will our just Father in heaven respond? So persistence in prayer is an element of prayer and I take it that some, not all, but some of our prayers are conditioned on persistence. God wants us to come to Him over and over about some issue. He's conditioned some things on that persistence. What does fasting do? It gives you the time to be persistent. Fifth, what about fasting for our dispensation/age? Should we fast? John Wesley said, "Some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have completely disregarded it." Most of us fall in the

latter category, we think it's unnecessary and never give it a thought. I would challenge that. I think we are overlooking something for the sake of convenience without any real textual reason other than the fact that on one hand we are not commanded to fast. However, on the other hand it is practiced by early believers in the Church like Paul (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23). And let's face it, if you skip a meal in order to pray does that show God you have a great concern on your mind that you want Him to give attention to? Yes. I take it then that there is a place for fasting when you want to express a dire need to God. And I take it that skipping a meal is not going to kill you though most Americans might pass out if you said that. American's love their food or whatever it is they are consuming. But if they'd just give up one meal it would give them additional time and focus to present their requests to God. But again, having said that you should not conclude that you can manipulate God by fasting. There is a physical affliction that comes with fasting but physical affliction does not coerce God into answering your prayer. At the same time it does show Him how concerned you are over the matter and that you are diligently seeking an answer. There is more to it than fasting, there is the proper mental attitude fasting is to bring about and we'll look at that in a moment. It's that attitude that is the key, what the fasting can do is bring about that mental attitude as well as give you more time to pray and more focused prayers. So it does have a valid place in the Christian life and if you do decide to fast just do it in secret. There's no reason to tell someone you're fasting or go around looking haggard. If you're going to do that you might as well not fast at all because you're just trying to get people's attention not God's attention and that's not right. Fasting is to be a private thing and not a public thing between you and the Lord giving you more time to pray and study the word so you can focus and concentrate on Him in hope that He will answer a persistent prayer.

That is what Ezra proclaimed the fast for in verse 21, this was a joint fast because they were going on a joint journey, they had a dire need for travelling mercies, but it wasn't just fasting alone. The fasting was designed to produce the proper mental attitude. What mental attitude? Verse 21, humility, **that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.** What's humility? It's admission that we are dependent upon Him and not ourselves. How does fasting do that? How does it foster a recognition of our dependence on Him? What happens when you don't eat? Your stomach growls, you feel

hungry, you may even get a headache. Suddenly you realize how utterly dependent you are upon His provision. So the humility here is the proper mental attitude and it's far more important than the fasting itself. But the fasting can help bring about the humility that is necessary to approaching God in prayer. So Ezra proclaimed a fast in order that they might humble themselves and with that proper mental attitude he says they sought from **God a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.** They wanted a safe trip. It was a large caravan, probably 5,000-10,000 people, a very vulnerable group, particularly for children who typically in these caravans spent the days running around with their friends far out of the sight and mind of their parents! Remember Jesus at age 12 was missing for an entire day in the caravan returning from Jerusalem to Nazareth. So it was prospectively very dangerous, and they also carried many highly desirable **possessions** that made it even more dangerous.

Verse 22, why? Why did they fast that they may pray with humility? Why not just ask the king for a military escort? If the king had provided all this so far then surely he would order a security detail to accompany them to ensure his success on his western front? Fourteen years later Nehemiah enjoyed a military escort when he returned (Neh 2:9). Why not Ezra? Ezra says **I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him."**

What was the key reason Ezra didn't request army protection? Shame. What would Ezra have been admitting if he requested an army escort? That his God was not big enough to take care of his caravan. That his God was weak. And if his God was that weak then why in the world would the king have confidence that this God could protect his western front from the Greek navy? If He couldn't even protect this caravan of travelers from a few bandits along the way then He'd be worthless against the Greeks. So Ezra **was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect them from the enemy along the way.**

Now if Ezra had not revealed certain details about his God, namely the blessing and cursing that this God was capable of then Ezra may have very well requested protection. But having revealed that Ezra saw the incongruity in requesting protection. And **So, verse 23, we fasted and sought our God**

concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty. He listened because of the humility in which they made the request that had been induced by the fasting, not because of the fasting in and of itself.

Verse 24, **Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers;** who were these men? We met **Sherebiah** last week in verse 18, he was one of “the sons of Mahli” who had “insight” into the Mosaic law. So he was a right hand man. **Hashabiah** we don’t know much about, but we can gather that he was a trustworthy and well-respected man of integrity and along with them **ten of their brothers**. How many in all? **Twelve**. How many tribes of Israel are there? **Twelve**. So one man per tribe of Israel; not that the men were each from different tribes, they were all from the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe which represented all twelve tribes before God.

And in verse 25 we see what duty Ezra set them apart for. **And I weighed out to them the silver, the gold and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes and all Israel present there had offered.** Someone had to be responsible for the vast sums of money the king and the people of Israel had offered for their return. So these twelve are assigned to the office of treasurer. They’re going to be responsible for taking care of the money. In that day they did it by weight. The only way you could steal was by manipulating the standards used on the balance or manipulating the balance itself but that’s why they refer to it as weighing out and not counting, they weighed out the gold and silver.

Verse 26, **Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents, and 100 gold talents, 27 and 20 gold bowls worth 1,000 darics, and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold.** Now I don’t know if you know how much money that is in modern currency but its \$165 million. I’ve broken it all down for you here. If you think about that I don’t know if you want to be responsible for transporting that kind of money across a desert highway littered with criminals but I don’t want to. The minute this information got around the crime ring you’d be the number one target for 900 miles as you trudged forward each day. But maybe it gives you a better understanding of verse 21 and why Ezra proclaimed this big fast so that they might be humble and seek

traveling mercies. Because verse 22; he knew they would have enemies on the way. A lot of people are going to want a piece of that \$165 million.

If you look at the breakdown,

650 talents of silver (@\$20/troy ounce)	= \$ 17,218,750	(710,937.5 troy ounces)
100 talents of silver utensils @\$20/troy ounce)	= \$ 2,187,500	(109,375 troy ounces)
100 talents of gold @\$1,350/troy ounce)	= \$147,656,250	(109,375 troy ounces)
1000 darics (gold) ounce)	= <u>\$ 364,589</u>	(270 troy ounces @\$1,350/troy ounce)
	= \$164,427,089	

That's a lot of money. How would you like to carry that across the desert? It's also a lot of weight too - 32 tons. How would you like to carry that? I'm not sure how they transported 32 tons an average of 8 1/3 miles per day. But they did. My guess is they enlisted trustworthy people to aid in the transport.

Now one of the interesting things mentioned in verse 27 is **the 20 gold bowls worth 1,000 darics**. Darics are gold coins. They are the first coin money mentioned in Scripture and history. They were introduced by King Darius who we first met in Ezra 4:5. He was the king who permitted the completion of the Temple beginning in 520BC after 15 years of the work being hindered. It was this king Darius who minted the daric; a gold coin that weighed 8.4 grams. It's interesting to note because it's the first coin money used by the Jews.

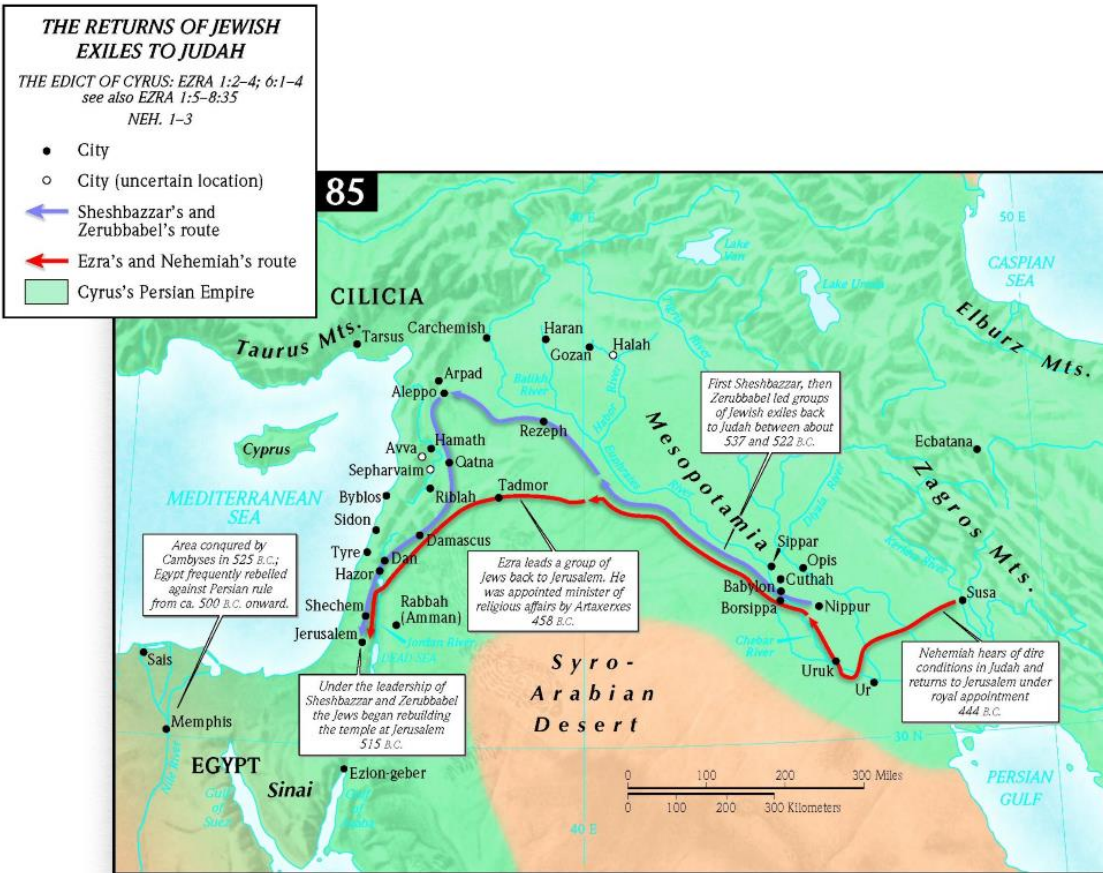
So Ezra is weighing all this money into their hands he says to them in verse 28, **You are holy to the LORD, and the utensils are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers**. In other words they were set apart, the **utensils** were set apart and the **silver and the gold** were a voluntary offering. They and the utensils and the money all belonged to who? **The LORD God**. They, as God's possessions, were being entrusted with God's possessions, if they would accept the responsibility. Keep in mind the responsibility these men were taking on. They're going to be carrying \$165 million across 900 miles of

desert highway and they don't have armored trucks. These men are going to be walking targets. They might as well put targets on their backs.

Verse 29 the command, **Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leading priests, the Levites and the heads of the fathers' households of Israel at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.**" They had the same problem we have today. People will do just about anything for money. People really aren't all that different no matter when they live, they all have sin natures. There's nothing new under the sun. So they are to watch and keep the money until they get to the **chambers of the house of the LORD**. Those were storerooms reserved for the priests who served in the Temple. They were part of the Temple complex. Once they got them there and weighed them with other ministers in the Temple then they were free from their responsibility. So it was a large responsibility. Handling money is a large responsibility and if churches were more tedious regarding the measures of security put on money given there wouldn't be as many scandals. Ezra had every detail recorded. The money was weighed before they left, 32 tons, the money was to be weighed again when they arrived and carefully compared with the original record to make sure it was all there. And this is a sign of wisdom; it's not to be viewed as lack of confidence. It's to be viewed as wisdom and when done properly it protects everyone involved.

In verse 30 the priests accept the responsibility. **So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God.** Verse 31, they set out. **Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.** We're not given any details but there were **ambushes along the way** and yet God delivered them from the ambushes. So what we find here is answered prayer. What prayer? The prayer earlier in verse 21 when Ezra proclaimed the fast which produced humility, the proper mental attitude for seeking God in prayer. Ezra was ashamed to request a military escort from the king because he had revealed that their God was able to protect them. And here He does. How did He protect them? By the common expression **the hand of God**, signaling providential protection. They had travelled 900 miles with dangers along the way but providentially God had

taken care of their enemies and thus they arrived safely in Jerusalem.



We might mention that they took the dangerous route along this red line that departed from the normal trade route. Normally travel took place along the blue line which follows the Euphrates River and then proceeds nearly due south to Jerusalem. However, they traveled along the river for a while but then departed along a near due west route to Jerusalem. This was the most dangerous leg of their journey. It was a shortcut but a treacherous one. Highway robberies were common along this route. But they had prayed and the Lord had answered.

Verse 32, **Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.** Apparently they did not immediately go to the Temple but rested for **three days**. The trip had lasted from the 12th day of the 1st month to the 1st day of the fifth month, a period of around 108 days. Once they arrived, verse 33 **On the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, 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.** There are representatives from those who were local

priests as well as the newcomers. There were multiple people involved showing wisdom in the delicate procedure of weighing money and making sure everything that departed arrived. However this **Meremoth** you will find in Ezra 10:36 is one of the priests who had married a Gentile wife contrary to the Law of Moses and so he is one of the chief contributors to the apostasy in the land of Israel. Then we find **Jozabad the son of Jeshua**. **Jeshua** was the high priest some 80 years before when the Jews first returned. This Jozabad was also married to a nice pagan Gentile girl as we find in Ezra 10:23 and so he was a chief contributor in the apostasy from the Law of Moses. Last we find **Noadiah** and we don't know about him but we do know his father **Binnui** had married a little pagan girl. The only one we know was honest in the whole bunch is Eleazar the son of Phinehas who had a godly heritage of standing against immorality. So while Ezra and Eleazar don't know it now it's not going to be long before they find out that these men they're weighing the money out with are playing fast and loose with the text.

Now verse 34, **Everything was numbered and weighed, and all the weight was recorded at that time.** Apparently they got this right, they took painstaking tedious measures to ensure that every utensil and every gold bowl and every talent was carefully numbered, weighed and recorded. Again, signaling the importance and wisdom in the treasury department of an organization. Money since the fall has always and will always be a tremendous temptation and so the utmost care must be exercised in the office of treasury and the most responsible people must be put in place to handle it. Here we see that kind of wisdom being followed.

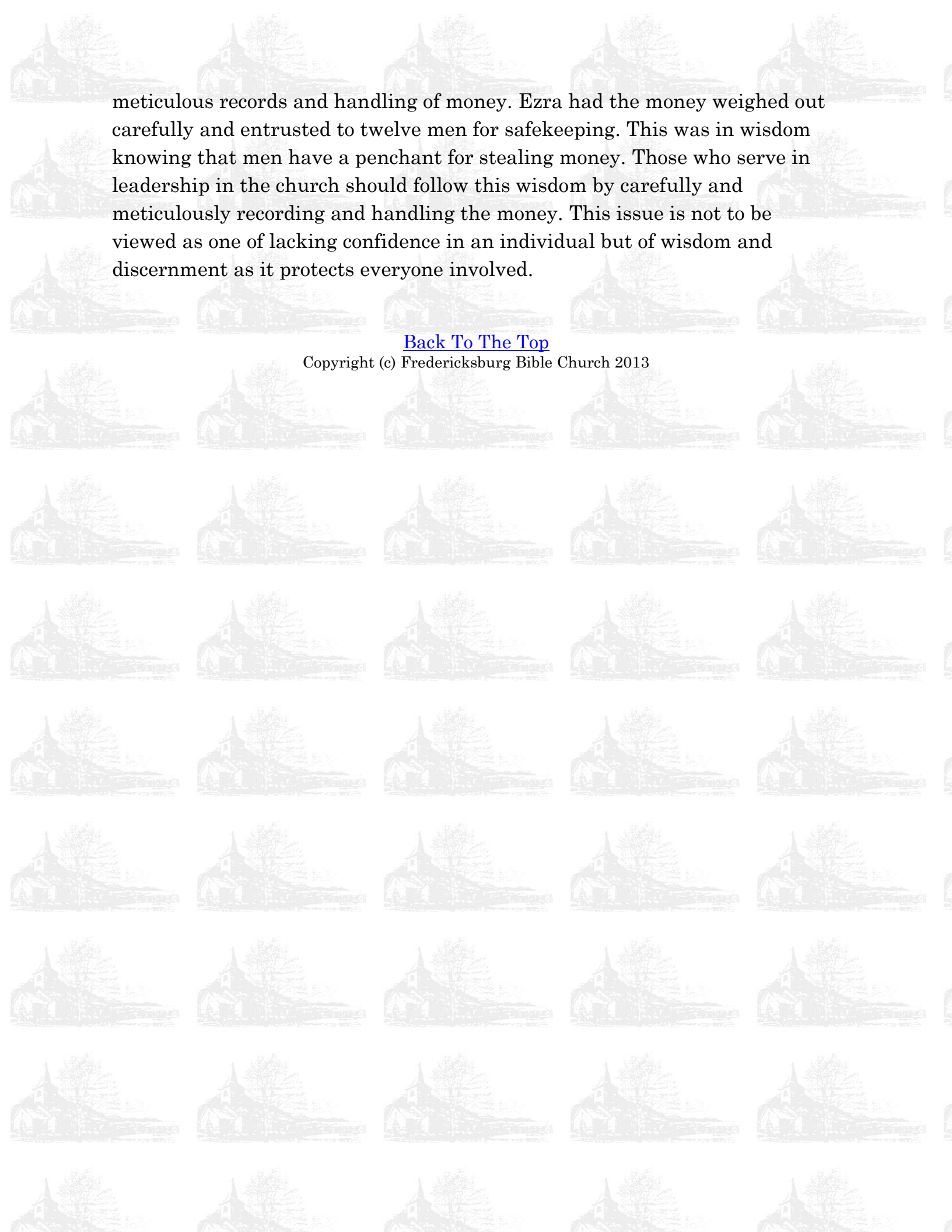
Verse 35, **The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, 12 male goats for a sin offering, all as a burnt offering to the LORD.** These exiles who came from captivity understood the way to approach God is through sacrifice. They brought many sacrifices though the amount was not nearly what was offered at the time of the dedication of the Temple 60 years before in 515BC or by no means even close to the number offered at the time of Solomon's dedication of the Temple 500 years earlier yet it clearly shows they intended to please God.

Verse 36, **Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps and to the governors in the provinces beyond the River, and they**

supported the people and the house of God. They got the full support of other administrators in the region and so the Temple is going to have the full support the king was looking for.

Let's summarize and see what we can learn. When Ezra and the people set out on the 900 mile journey from the river of Ahava to Jerusalem Ezra proclaimed a fast so that they would feel the pains of hunger and be humbled as they sought the Lord in prayer for traveling mercies. This was essential in Ezra's eyes since he had revealed to the king that his God was able to protect them from any dangers along the way. Imperial soldiers would not be necessary. Making the journey intensely treacherous was the fact they were transporting \$165 million along a very dangerous desert highway littered with criminals just looking for a handout. Twelve men took on the responsibility of transporting this money faithfully and they weighed out the sum carefully and recorded all the details. When they arrived they rested for three days and then took all the money to the temple and weighed it out carefully with some of the soon to be discovered apostate leadership. Then they offered sacrifices to the Lord and delivered the king's edict to the surrounding government officials.

In conclusion what lessons can we learn? First, we may fast in order to develop a humble attitude for petitioning God. Ezra proclaimed a fast for this very purpose. Fasting is, of course, not what secures an answer to prayer but it can produce humility as we feel the pains of hunger setting in. Humility in turn is the proper attitude when we approach God in prayer. Fasting also gives us more time for prayer and better concentration. Persistence in turn can be one of God's conditions for answering prayer. If you have a serious issue and desire an answer to prayer it is appropriate to fast in order to become humble and present your requests to God persistently. Even then this does not guarantee the answer you are looking for; you should not be dissuaded from humble and persistent prayer. Second, we should not claim one thing openly about our God and then act in a contradictory fashion. Ezra had claimed great things about his God's protective abilities. To then turn around and request a military escort from the king would have been a travesty. It would reflect poorly on God. Likewise we should not claim things about God (even though they may be true) and not live accordingly. When we do reveal things about our God we then have an obligation to live accordingly, otherwise it is a poor reflection on our God. Third, the wisdom in careful,



meticulous records and handling of money. Ezra had the money weighed out carefully and entrusted to twelve men for safekeeping. This was in wisdom knowing that men have a penchant for stealing money. Those who serve in leadership in the church should follow this wisdom by carefully and meticulously recording and handling the money. This issue is not to be viewed as one of lacking confidence in an individual but of wisdom and discernment as it protects everyone involved.

[Back To The Top](#)

Copyright (c) Fredericksburg Bible Church 2013