

I. Introduction

- A. Open your Bible please to the book of Ezra and chapter 8.
- B. Today, the part of the Bible we're looking at is a kind of invitation. It's an invitation to join an adventure. An invitation to risk the Great Unknown. An invitation to risk AND to the rewards that come with it.
- C. This is part 13 in our series through Ezra. The title of my talk today is: *Come Along*.
- D. Let's get right into the Bible. I'll backfill the story as it's needed..

II. *These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of King Artaxerxes: of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush... (Ezra 8:1, 2)*

- A. Then we have 12 more verses of who joined this expedition. There's a roster, and a headcount. I'll explain that in a minute.
- B. This section ends in verse 15:

III. *Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days... (Ezra 8:15a)*

A. So what's going on?

1. First... Some backstory.

- a) The book of Ezra happens around 500 years before Christ.
- b) The place is Israel and Judah.
- c) The People are God's people.
- d) The situation is exile.
- e) God's people had been in the Promised Land for centuries. That was awesome. When they maintained their spirits, life was good. When they kept their hearts warm and tender toward Christ, when they prayed, when they applied their minds to Scripture, when they turned their hearts to God, when they used their hands for the Savior and his gospel... life was very, very good.
- f) They lived truly blessed lives. God-blessed lives. They were at peace. Secure. Prosperous.
- g) But then entropy kicked in. Entropy took over their relationship with God and then with each other.
- h) The consequences were catastrophic.
- i) God had his hand of protection upon them, but they told God they didn't want it. So he lifted his hand of blessing from his own people, because God loves you too much to subsidize your self-destructive ways.
- j) Foreign armies rolled in. They destroyed their nation, destroyed their city, destroyed their temple, and sent the people out from the Promised Land and into forced exile into the nations around them.
- k) But, after 70 years, the exile is lifted. After 70 years in exile, it's time to come home. And the Jews come back to their heritage. They come home.
- l) This isn't easy. The nation is in ruins, but they come back anyway. They rebuild their homes. They rebuild their altar. They rebuild their temple. They rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- m) They restart their lives with God.
- n) This is awesome. It's a do-over. It's an intervention. It is the end of spiritual chaos. The end of emotional disorder. The end of relationship dysfunction.

2. But not all of the Jews come home from exile at once. They come home in waves.

- a) Wave 1 happens in chapter 1 of this book. About 43,000 people come home.
- b) Wave 2 happens here, in chapters 7 and 8 of this book. About 7 or 8 thousand people come home.
- c) Their leader is Ezra. He is a priest. He is a highly educated expert in God's Word, called a scribe. Ezra becomes one of the most important heroes of the Old Testament's set up for Christianity.
- d) And that's where we're at.
- e) It's going to take them four months. Four months to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem... with their families, their tents, their caravans, and the livestock.
- f) So before the expedition officially begins, they rendezvous by this river, just a few days out of Babylon.
 - (1) This is like a scene from Arabian Nights. Kids running around. Animals. Tents. Barbecues. Like a festival scene, for a 3 day stop at Ahava. Got all that?
 - (2) *Lesson 1: As Christians, we are pilgrims. This world is not our home — we're just passing through.*
 - (a) Our entire perspective is different. Life isn't fleeting. Life isn't futile. Life is not a poor player who struts and frets his time upon the stage and is no more.
 - (b) No. Life is eternal. This life, and the life to come. This present age, and the age to come.
 - (c) This life is preparation for the next.
 - i) This life is lived in a Giant Pain Machine..
 - (1) The life to come has no more sorrows and no more tears.
 - ii) This life is a life of faith.
 - (1) In the life to come, faith gives way to sight, and we shall see Him as he really is.
 - iii) In this life, we hold all things lightly, because nothing, and no one, and nobody endures.
 - (1) But in that glorious age to come, *"all things are yours.... Whether things present or things to come, all things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:21,22).*
 - iv) This life is temporary, bookended by our birth and our death, unless the Lord returns.
 - (1) But the life to come is ageless, and forever, as all the ages of eternity unfold ever-new dimensions of the wisdom, and power, and love, and grace of God.

- (d) Until then, we walk by faith and not by sight.
 - i) This puts our material possessions in a different framework.
 - ii) It puts our victories in a different perspective.
 - iii) It redefines our losses.
 - iv) It arranges our attachments.
 - v) It defines our detachments and recalibrates our hopes.

(a) The heavier life becomes, the more urgent it is to learn the heart of a pilgrim.

- (3) And this whole time on earth, however long or however short, is the staging area, the temporary rendezvous, for the glorious grand finale of our ultimate journey home. You are a pilgrim.

3. But the end of verse 15 introduces the first complication in the chapter.

B. *Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there. (Ezra 8:15)*

1. The nation of the Jews was a confederation of tribes.
2. All the tribes were there but one. The sons of Levi didn't show up for the journey home.
 - a) There were a couple of priests there, who were Levites.
 - b) But there were no non-priests there, who were Levites.
3. This was a problem, because the priests and the Levites were the engine of the religion and their faith.
4. They needed Levites, and Ezra is going to put out the call for some.
5. Before you're too hard on the sons of Levi, let me give you this factoid. When the Jews came to the Promised Land, way back in the days of Joshua, they divided up the land. They pulled out the maps. Every tribe of the Jews got their own plot of land.
6. And that's important because, in an agrarian culture, land meant money in the bank. The land was called their inheritance.
7. But there was one tribe that did not get a land inheritance. Can you guess?
8. The Tribe of Levi. The Levites were supposed to set up around the temple, and serve the priests. They would be supported by the sacrifices and gifts of the the other tribes.
 - a) *"Therefore they shall have no inheritance among their brethren... (Deuteronomy 18:2)*
9. So the sons of Levi did not have a land inheritance, unlike everybody else. Can you blame them for not showing up?
 - a) But wait a minute... here's the rest of the verse.
 - (1) *"Therefore they shall have no inheritance among their brethren; the LORD is their inheritance, as He said to them. (Deuteronomy 18:2)*
 - (a) I would suggest it is doubt about that second part that keeps most believer-priests living beneath their inheritance.
10. But let's hit pause here for a second.
 - a) Here is the place God invites them to be: The Promised Land.
 - b) Here is the place they find themselves: Exile.
11. Let's put ourselves in their shoes.
 - a) Over here is the place God invites us to be: The spiritual promised land, of simply walking with God, day by day, in the Word of God, and in the fellowship of God's people.
 - b) But over here is the place so many Christians find themselves to be: In the spiritual exile of whatever.
 - (1) You're too busy. You don't care. You have other priorities. You're mad at God. You're heart isn't in it...
 - (a) I'm not judging. I'm just probing.
12. The call goes out. There will be an expedition to the place you belong. The place your heart craves. The place you were created for.
13. But when the journey gathers, some keep people are AWOL. Why?
14. Because when you boil it all down, they think they have no inheritance waiting for them if they walk with God.
15. Just like the sons of Levi in Ezra's day. So what did he do?

IV. *Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leaders; also for Joiarib and Elnathan, men of understanding. And I gave them a command for Iddo the chief man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say to Iddo and his brethren the Nethinim at the place Casiphia--that they should bring us servants for the house of our God. (Ezra 8:16, 17)*

A. Ezra sent messengers, and said, "Come along..."

B. He sent messengers to the Dynamic Dozen. Eleven men of understanding. Plus a highly respected leader of the exiled Jews named Iddo.

1. *Lesson 2: Though our lives on earth are temporary, they are profoundly meaningful for eternity.*

- a) There is a place for you. I don't mean geographically.
- b) I mean spiritually. A spiritual promised land. A place you fellowship with God.
 - (1) **Lesson 3:** *For the child of God, the Promised Land represents the sweet spot where you experience maximum grace from God, God receives maximum glory from you, and the world receives a maximum testimony of God's grace.*
 - (a) It's not an easy life, but it's the closest thing to an ideal life that anyone can have, living in the giant pain machine of the fallen world.
- c) Listen, heaven is a gift. You don't earn it. Don't work for it. If you have received Jesus as your Savior, then heaven is your destination. Faith alone through Christ alone.
- d) But once you are saved, the quality of your life in heaven is directly linked to the quality of your life on earth.

- (1) The shape of your life as a pilgrim on earth sets the dimensions of your glories in heaven.
 - (a) Your character has meaning for eternity.
 - (b) Your sufferings have meaning for eternity (2 Cor. 4:17).
 - (c) Your prayers have meaning for eternity, even if God didn't answer the way you wanted.
 - (d) Your Bible reading, your worship, your service....
 - i) Every inch of pavement you progress along God's grace pathway has profound meaning for all the ages of eternity.

(2) God has linked time and eternity, and for the sake of your eternity, he wants your companionship in time.

C. Ezra even gave his messengers talking points, and a script. "I told them what they should say..."

1. We're going to the Promised Land. It doesn't look like much of a Promised Land, but it is.
2. We're going to the Promised Land. And you might not think there's a place for you, but there is.
3. You might not think that you can make it here, but you can. So, come along.

V. Vern Benner

- A. I am a pastor who didn't want to be a pastor. I kinda did. But I kinda didn't.
- B. I had this awareness, from the time I was an adorable eight year old kid, that I was going to be a pastor. But I didn't want to deal with that awareness. I never admitted it to anyone.
 1. I was embarrassed by it. Nobody knew. Not my parents, not my family, not my Sunday school teachers... nobody.
- C. My heart wanted to be a pastor, but my head said, "No way!"
- D. As I went through high school, I couldn't shake the pastor calling.
- E. In school, I was not ashamed of being a Christian. I shared my faith. I invited friends to youth group. I taught in youth group and in Bible studies. I helped as an Awana leader.
- F. When it was time to pick a college, I didn't know where to go. I should have gone to Moody Bible Institute or something, but that would take too much explaining. So I went to Wheaton College instead. But I didn't know what to major in, and I felt like I was wasting money, so I moved back home after one year.
- G. And that's where "Somebody" started opening some doors.
- H. I was running Awana clubs at a small church in Chicago. But I wanted to learn how to do a better job at that.
- I. So I started visiting a larger church that had really big Awana Clubs.
- J. I just showed up one Tuesday night... I'm this 19 year old kid... I find the guy in charge, and introduce myself. His name is Vern. Vern Benner. Here's a picture.
- K. I say, "Hi Vern. I'm Bill. Would it be okay to hang out at your Awana clubs, and learn a few things?"
- L. Vern is super gracious, and I start hanging out here and there, watching and learning. And week after week, Vern was giving me pointers. It was great.
- M. Meanwhile, I've started taking classes at University of Illinois. I majored in Classical civilization and literature... because who knows why.
- N. I also worked at a grocery store. I was a produce clerk. A union produce clerk, and I made really good money.
- O. So Christian yes, pastor no. But I could never shake that pastor calling on my life.
- P. When I was twenty years old, my phone rang. It was Vern Benner, who by now had become a mentor. I was dressed for work, white shirt, tie, black jeans. Heading to the grocery store to stack apples and watermelons. Just minding my own business.
- Q. Vern said,
 1. Bill, how would you like to quit your job at the grocery store, and come and work alongside me, as a pastor, here at our church?
- R. That phone call changed the trajectory of my life.
- S. God put a call in my heart, but I was ignoring it.
 1. But when that internal call was met by an external call, I couldn't resist. A friend came beside me, and said, "Come along."
 2. We're going to the Promised Land. It doesn't look like much of a Promised Land, but it is.
 3. We're going to the Promised Land. And you might not think there's a place for you, but there is.
 4. You might not think that you can make it here, but you can. So, Bill, please, come along.

VI. Ezra

- A. Ezra sent messengers. He called the sons of Levi by name. He told them what to say.
 1. Eliezer, come with us.
 2. Ariel, come along.
 3. Iddo, join us. There's a place for you here.
- B. Vern said, Bill, come and be a pastor.
- C. And I gave my notice at the grocery store, and for the first time in my life, I listened to God's call in my heart, and said, Yes. I'll come along... and I have never looked back.
- D. Now I want to say that being a minister, or a pastor, or in any kind of Christian ministry is not required at all to have a profound impact on eternity.
- E. It is simply that you walk with God... and just don't go AWOL on him.
 1. Lesson 4: The simple call of God on your life, is a steady, lifelong walk with him.
 - a) Don't stop short.

- (1) My friend, Ken, has ridden a bicycle across the United States 7 times. He used to lead groups on this trip. They started with their bikes in the Atlantic Ocean, and finished with a splash in the Pacific.
- (2) Along the way, people wanted to quit. But they never did. Nobody gave up in Illinois. Nobody petered out in Colorado and was good with that.
- (3) A steady, lifelong ride across the country. And that is what I am inviting you to do today.
- (4) This is how you experience the overflowing amounts of grace that already belong to you in Christ.
- (5) This is how you bring God glory, and dazzle the angels, and pile up rewards in heaven.
- (6) This is how your family and friends see the life of Christ lived out again in the frail, feeble, life of a flesh and blood human being.
 - (a) There's this simple thing called a steady, lifelong walk with God. Won't you come along? That is my invitation today...just as it was Ezra's invitation so very long ago.

VII. *Then, by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, with his sons and brothers, eighteen men; and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty men; also of the Nethinim, whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinim. All of them were designated by name. (Ezra 8:18-20)*

- A. The messengers went out. We're going to the Promised Land. Come along. The response was over the top.
 1. The call from Ezra met the call of God on their hearts... and they came. Lots of sons of Levi. High quality sons of Levi.
 2. God answered their prayers better than they prayed them.
 - a) Sherebiah is called a man of understanding, and was probably the president of a seminary.
 - b) The Nethinim were experts in temple worship, and assisted the priests.
 - (1) You have over over three hundred Levites, plus, as a bonus... 220 servants of the Levites.
- B. The nation needed these people. Times were hard. They were bringing a nation up from the ashes. Rebuilding what was in ruins.
 1. The nation needed these people.
- C. But at a deeper level, these people needed the nation.
 1. They needed to be on this journey, because their hearts were designed for it.
 2. They needed to be on this journey, because being in exile will never be normal for a child of God.
 3. They needed to be on this journey, because this journey, this walk with God, isn't the perfect life, but it's the closest thing to ideal anyone could ever have.
- D. And I would just say to you... our church needs you. We need another soldier, another prayer warrior, another stretcher bearer, another giver, another scholar, another Bible teacher, another small group leader, another servant of God, another dance partner for Night to Shine, another youth leader, kids leader, young adult leader...
 1. Pathway Church needs people just like you. But at a deeper level, you need the church.

VIII. Come Along

1. So this is my last lesson for today. *Lesson 5: Come along.*
- B. Where going somewhere awesome, please come along.
 1. Come along if you feel broken, and hurt beyond repair.
 2. Come along if God has let you down, and you don't want to trust him again. By the Word and the Spirit, we'll get you where you need to be.
 3. Come along, if you're doing great, and you don't need God, but you worry that one day you might.
 4. Come along if you've got your doubts.
 5. Come along if you've got your anxieties.
 6. Come along if you suspect this whole Christianity thing is nonsense. God can handle your cynicism, and so can we.
 7. Come along if you're sexually confused... and don't trust yourself to know what's right.
 8. Come along if you're a business leader.
 9. Come along if you're out of work.
 10. Come along if you're a man or woman of understanding... we need you more than you know.
 11. Come along if you're too busy and don't have enough time... God knows how to multiply your hours.
 12. Come along if you've neglected God, and your spiritual joints are rusted tight.
 13. Come along if you're happy.
 14. Come along if you're lonely.
 15. Come along if you're grieving.
 16. Come along if you're weeping.
 17. If you're angry.
 18. If you're lost.
 19. If you're sorry.
 20. If you're old.
 21. If you're young.
 22. If you're ready.
 23. If you're not.
- C. Whoever, wherever, whenever you are... put one foot in front of the other, today, tomorrow, the day after that. Step by step to the Promised Land. Step by step all the way home.