

Ezra 8:1-20 "The team for reformation"

Brothers and sisters, as we continue in the faith of those who have gone before us, what do we need in order to do the work of God in the midst of difficulties?

Because of the spread of the corona virus, many people are working from their homes, normal schedules are disrupted, many meetings are canceled, and a lot of decisions must be made in a short amount of time. Added to this, last week there was a sudden drop in the price of crude oil. Concerns about the virus have influenced manufacturing throughout the world, causing a shortage of certain products. Many people are very anxious. During this time of great uncertainty, what do we need in order to continue in the faith of our spiritual forefathers, and do the work of God?

Two weeks ago I met with an older man who is an acquaintance of mine, and we talked about various things. This gentleman is in his 80's, but for 60 years, he worked for a Japanese bank. He told me that he had taken over responsibilities from a senior colleague. For awhile, he worked as the secretary for the senior colleague. He went with him to various meetings and carried his briefcase. As his secretary, he learned so much. When we hear stories of believers who are in their 80's, I am caused to think about how we can carry on their work as Christians here in Tokyo. As we continue in the faith of those who have gone before us, what do we need in order to carry on God's work in difficult times? From the reading of today's Bible passage, three answers become clear. The first is: Let's understand our role, or function. Secondly: Let's recognize what is needed. And thirdly: Let's experience God's grace.

1. Let's understand our role, or function.

Ezra 8:1-14

Ezra 8:1 "These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king:"

Ezra, the author of this book, was proficient in the law of Moses. In verse 1, he states the historical facts, ". . . in the reign of Artaxerxes the king:" These events are not myths. They are actual historical events. King Artaxerxes ruled the Persian empire, which is now Iran and Iraq, from 465 until 424 BCE.

Two generations before Ezra, in the time of his grandfather, the Israelites were defeated by the Babylonians, punished, and taken away as prisoners. In 605 BCE, many notable Israelites were taken from Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, to Babylon and lived there for 70 years. However, in 537 BCE, the Babylonian empire was defeated by the Persian empire. As a result, many Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem. They were led by Zerubbabel. Many people returned with him to Jerusalem and began to rebuild the temple.

In the generation following Zerubbabel, we have the scholar, Ezra. He was still in Babylon, but was requested by the Israelites in Jerusalem to teach them God's Word, particularly the deep meaning of the laws of Moses.

Ezra 7:10, "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."

In addition to understanding his role, Ezra gathered people around him.

Ezra 8:1, "These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king:"

The heads of their fathers' houses and the genealogies of those who went with Ezra from Babylon are recorded. In mentioning these names, it's as if Ezra is saying these are historical facts. The individual families are mentioned.

Ezra 8:2, "Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush."

The households are recorded in verses 2—14, but I would like for us to pay special attention to just two things in particular. First, the sons of the priests are mentioned—Phinehas and Ithamar. After that, the sons of King David

are mentioned. Sons of priests and kings were different than common, ordinary people. Secondly, the sons of the common families are listed. Please notice that there are 12 common families. If we consider Israel's history, 12 is an important number. The nation of Israel was born out of the 12 sons of Jacob. When the Israelites left Egypt, there were 12 tribes. As with that journey out of Egypt, in the time of Ezra, God was continuing to carry out his purposes in history through his people who left Babylon. Under the leadership of Ezra, God's people took over the responsibilities from the people of Zerubbabel's time. We could also say that they took over the role of their fathers from Moses' time. Therefore, the names of those who joined Ezra in returning to Jerusalem in 458 BCE are listed.

Let's understand our roles and purposes.

What was the work that God had for those who went with Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem? It was to teach the Law of Moses to those Israelites in Jerusalem. It was for this purpose that Ezra returned with them to Jerusalem. In a similar way, we may ask what is God's work for Christians today? One aspect of his work is for us to engage in teaching God's Word to other Christians. Therefore, let's consider how we can be involved in this aspect of God's work. Among us, there are some who are teachers, but most of us are not. However, even if we are not teachers, we can participate in sharing God's Word with his people. First, let's pray that God's Word will be faithfully taught in Grace City Church Tokyo. Also, let's encourage and pray for Pastor Fukuda and our elders, Steve Sacks and James Wright, that they will have wisdom and appropriate times to faithfully teach God's Word. And, let's lend our support to training others who can teach God's Word. Even if we are not elders in the church, through various ways we have a duty to teach each other. For example, in our conversations, we can share God's Word with each other. How about taking up the challenge of leading a community group? Also, let's value the opportunities to receive God's Word. Before hearing the Sunday messages, how about reading the Bible passage, thinking about it, and praying through it?

Let's understand our role and function.

Even though my mother studied at the university and held a job as a social worker, she still questioned her purpose in life. However, after she became a Christian and became a mother of two children, she understood that God's purpose was to use her to raise her two children, and to be at the center of her family. She knew that God's desire was for children to be taught the words of Jesus, so she often read Bible stories to my brother and I. My mother knew that it was God's desire that the Good News be proclaimed throughout the world, so she gave offerings and frequently prayed for mission work in Africa and Australia. She understood her role to be that of assisting in carrying out God's great plan for this world.

People today—especially young people—often say that it's quite difficult to find one's purpose in life. It's been said that this is because we've become so individualistic. Our own hopes and desires become central. But from today's Scripture passage, we see the importance of understanding our role within God's work. If we say that in Grace City Church Tokyo, teaching God's Word is important, let's think about ways that we can contribute to this work. However, just because we understand that it's good to be involved in God's work, for a variety of reasons it often doesn't become a reality.

Fortunately, it's different with Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel of John 17:4, Jesus says, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do."

As Jesus relied on his Father and prayed to his Father, he was able to accomplish the work the Father gave him to do. Jesus led a life that was completely centered on God the Father. His thoughts, his words, and his actions were all according to the Father's will. As a result, Jesus manifested the Father's glory and character to us. In spite of this, Jesus was nailed to the cross and received the punishment for our sin. He took the place of us who are self-centered and unable to reveal the Father's glory.

The former bank employee whom I met with 2 weeks ago, told me that after he graduated from the university and began to work at the bank, he became very busy, was tired on the weekends, and gradually quit going to church. For 15 years he didn't go to church, nor did he tell people around him that he was a Christian. However, after 15 years something occurred in his life which caused him to go to church and confess everything to God. As a result, he experienced God's forgiveness. He discovered the importance of God's

Word and he began going to church each week. His life as a bank employee also changed. As he and his wife went every week to worship, he received courage and wisdom. Moreover, he was able to tell his coworkers that he is a Christian. The first point: Let's understand our God-given role.

When we're in a tough situation, what do we need in order to continue in the faith of those who have gone before us and do the work of God?

The second point: Let's recognize what is needed.

Ezra 8:15-17

Ezra 8:15, "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."

1500 men gathered together with Ezra. With women and children included, there were probably around 5000 people who gathered outside of Babylon. Babylon was a city along the Euphrates River, which today would be the center of Iraq. In order to protect Babylon, there were various canals outside the city. It was near one of these canals, or rivers, where Ezra gathered the people. There they camped for 3 days. The distance from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 1450 kilometers and took about 3.5 months to travel. Around 5000 people were gathered together, which provided a good start. However, as Ezra reviewed the people, he noticed the common people and the priests, but of the 5000 gathered together, he did not find any Levites. As a matter of fact, in the previous generation when Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem to establish the temple, there were only a few Levites with him. This time there were none. Why was that a problem? Although it was the priests who served in the temple, it was the Levites who were not priests, who had the responsibility to transport, or move, the articles used in the temple. It was written in the Law of Moses that this function was to be performed only by the Levites. If there were no Levites in the group, they would not be able to obey this law of Moses. Even though Ezra was returning to Jerusalem to teach the Law, at this very first stage, he, himself, would not be able to fulfill the law! This was a huge problem.

Ezra 8:16, "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,"

In confronting this problem, surely Ezra prayed and sought the Lord's guidance, but, surprisingly, this is not recorded. What is written is Ezra's brisk actions. He gathered people together. Then, in verse 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." Ezra knew of Iddo at Casiphia. Perhaps this place was something like a monastery where Levites gathered together. Ezra told those whom he had gathered together, to go to Iddo to ask him to "send us ministers for the house of our God."

They recognized what was needed.

Ezra and the people he was with, left Babylon, and while they were camped near the river, they realized that there were no Levites among them. I think there are various ways they could have responded. They could have ignored the problem and carried on with their plan. It's possible that they could have interpreted the Law of Moses according to their own convenience and decided that it was okay that they didn't have any Levites in their group. However, Ezra clearly recognized their need, he gathered the people together and acted assertively. In the same way, to teach God's Word to others, Jesus commanded his disciples to recognize the need and to act assertively. In Matthew 28:19, 20 Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

I have a friend here in Tokyo who works at a company that makes masks which protect against air-borne infections. As you can imagine, with the spread of the corona virus, the demand for these masks is great. My friend's company works in cooperation with the Japanese government as well as governments from other countries. They have to make many important decisions in a short amount of time. In the past 6 months, my friend and I have met every week. When we meet, we share openly and honestly about our needs. Right now, this includes talking about the virus. As we share openly about our needs and share ways we are working to

meet those needs, it becomes a very encouraging time.

Let's recognize our needs.

Jesus has made us into a community, a body. We need each other. We each have needs, and we each have weaknesses. Even Jesus laid aside his glory. He came into this world to meet our needs and to carry our weaknesses. He shed tears, experienced pain, and was supported by the offerings of others. Because of his sacrificial love, he met our most basic need—that of releasing us from our slavery to sin, and through the cross providing forgiveness for our sin. In Christ we clearly see the depth of our sin. And, if we confess our sin, through Christ, our fundamental needs are met and we are forgiven. Praise be to God!

As I said before, because of the spread of the corona virus, many people are working from home, normal schedules are disrupted, many meetings are canceled, and many decisions must be made quickly. Added to that, last week the oil prices dropped abruptly, and manufacturers have not kept up with the demand for certain products. Many people are very anxious. However, in one sense, something good has come out of this. That is, many people realize the urgent need for wisdom. They realize the need to work together as a team. Like Ezra, let's continue to recognize that we need each other, and that we have to work together to reach the needed solutions.

The second point: Let's recognize our needs.

When we're in a difficult situation, how can we continue in the faith of our spiritual forefathers and do the work of God?

The third point is, let's experience God's grace.

Ezra 8:18-20

Ezra 8:18, "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;"

In order to do God's work, Ezra gathered together the Israelites in Babylon, reviewed the situation and found that they were missing the Levites. He quickly sent men to find the Levites. The result was that 18 Levites were brought to Ezra. How did this happen? It was "by the good hand of our God on us." However, it wasn't only 18 people.

Ezra 8:19, "also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20;"

Twenty sons of Merari, also Levites, were found. The family of Merari is mentioned in the book of Numbers as those who were responsible to carry the tabernacle of God. I think this is another reason why the Levites were essential. So, there were now 38 Levites. However, that is not all.

Ezra 8:20, "besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name."

Together with the 38 Levites were 220 servants to serve them.

The good hand of God was on Ezra and the people with him. Therefore, not only were they given 38 Levites, but also the 220 servants. They experienced the gracious provision of God. Furthermore, God's gracious provision was not merely a myth. Verse 20 says, "These were all mentioned by name." This is a historical fact.

Today as well, because God's gracious hand is upon us, he provides what we need to accomplish his work. Today, as people who trust him, he will provide for our needs as we participate in his work. This doesn't mean that he will always respond according to our expectations. He provides according to his wisdom. And, just because we know he will provide for us doesn't mean that we do nothing. Rather, like Ezra, who diligently obeyed God and experienced his provision, so also, as we rely on God, and as we accomplish his will, we will experience his grace.

For these past 2 years, I've been engaged in new evangelistic activities during the weekdays. I have 3 aims in

mind. First, is the Marunouchi office group, which means having a Bible-centered small group in each of the 40 office buildings. Secondly, we want to expand the intern training project. And thirdly, in the Marunouchi area, we want to have worship services on Sunday mornings. We are still in the beginning stage, but throughout these past 2 years, we've seen God's provision and guidance in various ways in these 3 aims. However, for various reasons, I sometimes wonder if God will abandon us. I fear that he won't provide for our needs. Why do I continue to feel that way?

There are several ways that we try to protect our hearts from that kind of fear. One way might be escapism. On a day off, I might go see a movie or do something to take my mind off of my situation. But, when I return from the day off, the anxiety is still there. Another way might be to make plans, and to focus on what I'm going to do. As I do each thing, the plan unfolds, and as the plan unfolds, I can reach my goals. As I work according to my plans, I'm not anxious. However, if things don't go according to plan, I am distressed. The only real solution is to look to Jesus. As we remember that he is our resurrected Lord, the one who is ruling this world, and the one who gives grace, our fear is replaced with greater trust in him.

We experience God's grace.

Toyohiko Kagawa was a well-known advisor to the Tokyo Welfare Service during the Depression in the 1930's, and after WWII. He wrote more than 60 books, selling more than 2,000,000 copies. He also received the Noble Literary Prize and was nominated for the Noble Peace Prize. Between 1929 and 1932, he and others began a movement called The Kingdom of God Movement. The goal was the salvation of 1,000,000 people. Even in the dire circumstances of the day, this movement continued for 4 years. Two-thirds of the Protestant churches in Japan came together, and 62,460 people made decisions to follow Christ. Mr. Kagawa believed that God would raise up a people for himself in Japan. With zeal and great patience, he gave his life for God's work, experiencing the provision of God's grace. **In our lives, let's also personally experience God's grace.**

Brothers and sisters, as we continue in the faith of those who have gone before us, what do we need in order to do the work of God in the midst of difficulties?

From the Scripture passage today, 3 answers have become clear:

- 1. Understand your role.**
- 2. Recognize the need.**
- 3. Experience God's grace.**

Let's pray.