

Guard Your Heart

Ezra 8:24 ESV (Pg. 224) Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them. **25** And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered. **26** I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver, and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold, **27** 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold. **28** And I said to them, “You are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the Lord, the God of your fathers. **29** Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord.” **30** So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.

- I. Ezra and Nehemiah tell how the Jews exiled to Babylon returned home. Nehemiah tells how the dilapidated walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, while Ezra speaks of the Temple's restoration, which Nebuchadnezzar had ransacked 70 years earlier.
 - A. Ezra was a priest who was allowed to return to Jerusalem to restore the priesthood and the sacrificial system by Persian King Artaxerxes (the Persians had conquered Babylon in 539 BC).
 1. In Chapter 8, Ezra plans to travel to Jerusalem with some priests to teach the statutes of God, but that no Levites were found within the group to help.
 2. The tribe of Levi were entrusted with the work of assisting the priests. All priests came from Levi, but not all the Levites were priests; only those who descended from Aaron, Moses' brother.
 - B. But Ezra searched and found 38 Levites, along with 220 other servants for the Temple work. After spending time together fasting and praying for God's favor and protection, they set off on their long journey home after 7 decades!
 1. We began the story here today. A massive offering of precious metals had been given by Artaxerxes and others for the Temple. The silver weighed 25 tons, with 3.75 tons of gold. In today's dollars, the value was \$241,125,000!
 2. This was a major operation, that's why they prayed for God's protection! The trip would be around 550 miles, on foot or on camels or donkeys. The group might be threatened by bandits, so God's protection was vital for success.
 - C. While they could have asked the Persian king for a military escort, they declined to do so because of how they'd boasted in the reputation of Israel's God.
 1. **Ezra 8:22 ESV** For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.”
 2. They chose to trust the power of God; knowing he protects those who do his will. If we claim to follow God, we must trust everything to his goodness.
 - D. Ezra weighs out the offering to 12 of them, dividing responsibility among them.
 1. “You are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the Lord, the God of your fathers.”

- a) Ezra points out that by virtue of their calling, the priests have been set apart by the Lord. He reminds them they are holy to the Lord - set apart.
- b) But the freewill offering is also holy. It has been consecrated to God, to be used for his purposes, and to bring glory to his great name.
- 2. Ezra gives them a solemn instruction: **“Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord.”**
 - a) The priests and Levites are to guard the treasure, even with their lives if necessary. This is because both they and it are holy. They weren't called to simply be the mouthpieces of the nation, or even just its religious leaders. They were to be the guardians of what God had declared sacred.
 - b) Ezra tells them that at the end of their long journey, there will be an accounting, and the scales had better balance! What was entrusted to them in Babylon must safely travel to Jerusalem. If it is stolen by thieves, or pilfered by the priests themselves, they will be held accountable.
- E. **“So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.”** With determination and steadfast vigilance, the Priests and Levites delivered the treasure to God's house, newly rebuilt in Jerusalem, their ancestral homeland.
- II. As I read this passage this week, I saw immediate applications for the lives we are presently living for Christ Jesus. There are many ways this concerns believers:
 - A. First, Christians, must understand the nature of priesthood. Priests do a few things. They represent God and communicate his will to the people to whom they are sent. They also mediate between God and those same people. So the question for today is “who are the priests in the church”?
 - 1. Some might guess that it is pastors or elders or other church leaders. But Peter said that all of us comprise a “royal priesthood”...“called to show forth the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light”.
 - a) We represent God by influence; by being “light and salt” in our generation, making his will known by declaring the gospel.
 - b) We mediate in much the same way. **2 Corinthians 5:20 ESV Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.** We live in the midst of a world alienated from God by sin, and we stand between God and man, announcing that they can be reconciled to him through Christ.
 - 2. If you are a believer, you must be a part of that “royal priesthood”. You are not just a follower of a religion, or a church-goer. You are a representative of the holy and almighty God, mediating his message to the fallen world. Do you do that honorably, and faithfully, with commitment and a serious heart?
 - a) Some claim to be servants of God, but their lives are indistinguishable from the lost. They desire the same things, act the same way, and respond to offenses and injuries the same as the perishing world does.
 - b) But priests in the Old Testament were required to be different, to stand apart from what was common. God expects his New Covenant priesthood to be holy as well. For example: **Philippians 2:14 ESV Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and**

innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

- c) Ask yourself, “Am I shining like a light, or am I hidden in the same darkness that the world is held hostage by? The standard for the priests of God is that You come out from among them, and be separate.
- B. This becomes vitally important when we discover the salvation we have received from Christ is a treasure; much like the one entrusted to the priests and Levites in the time of Ezra. Yet this treasure is infinitely more valuable! **2 Corinthians 4:7 ESV** But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. The treasure that Paul is referring to is the knowledge of Jesus Christ, his glory and saving power.
 1. But this treasure isn’t stored in vaults, or committed to armies; we carry this treasure in “jars of clay”; bodies of flesh: frail, faulty, often stumbling.
 2. This is so we can demonstrate that our is not faith in what we or any other person can do, but in what God alone has already done. We are but brittle clay pots, yet we carry a treasure of vast worth, showing the world that “the hand of our God is for good (salvation) on all who seek him”.
- C. It is God that saves us and keeps us to the end! But though this is true, in the Bible we are called to diligently guard the treasure from all ungodly assaults.
 1. Our heart (soul) is the target for all the fiery darts of the enemy. The heart is comprised of our thoughts, our will/decisions, and our emotions. Satan wants to shatter the fragile clay so that the treasure inside is jeopardized.
 - a) Remember, according to Paul, the “treasure” is the knowledge of Jesus Christ. What is in jeopardy is not your salvation, but your confidence and faith that Jesus is strong, that he is beautiful, and that he is enough.
 - b) The devil magnifies your problems, so you forget the power of Jesus resident in you! He penetrates your heart so you believe the desires of your flesh are more beautiful than Christ. He points to what the world offers so you feel something is lacking, though you have Jesus!
 2. **Proverbs 4:23 ESV** Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Priority one is to guard our hearts. The KJV says “Keep your heart with all diligence”. An unguarded heart will certainly be corrupted.
 - a) The priests in Ezra’s time were living in a foreign land, given a treasure, and tasked with delivering it safely to God’s house in a far away land.
 - b) Their journey would be filled with peril. Enemies would show up that would try and take the treasure committed to their care. So they must keep their eyes on the horizon and their hands on their swords. The lazy or apathetic priest would be filled with shame if he arrived in Jerusalem with some (or all) of the treasure missing from portion allotted to him.
- D. You and I live in a world that, as believers, is foreign to us. This world is not our home, but we must travel through it on the way to our true and lasting homeland. We have been tasked with carrying our priceless knowledge of Jesus Christ, and with it our growing sanctification, safely to our homeland, where we will cast it all down as crowns at our Savior’s feet one day in worship.
 1. But on our journey we have enemies; three in particular. They would all love to crack the jar of clay, and take or deplete what has been given to you.

- a) The **world** distracts us, so that it may persuade us to trade the inner, eternal treasure, so we can acquire fading, passing play-things.
 - b) The flesh fills us with desires for pleasure, stuff and status so that we will pursue immediate gratification instead of waiting for the greater reward.
 - c) The devil constantly discourages us by telling us the journey is too long and the task too hard. He accuses us constantly, trying to convince us that God's love could never be granted to someone like us; that even if we complete the trip, we'll be turned away by an angry, vengeful Father.
2. But none of this is true! God's treasure is far more valuable than any so-called wealth the world can offer. Anything that is given up in this life for the sake of your eternal inheritance is not lost, but invested. And the devil is a liar who cannot speak the truth. You can depend upon the love, support, and acceptance of your Father to see you safely all the way home!
- III. So how does one "guard the heart"? Many Christians worry only about their actions; what they do, but all actions begin in the heart. If Eve hadn't listened to the serpent's lies and embraced them in her heart, she wouldn't have eaten of the fruit.
- A. **Luke 6:43 ESV** "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, **44** for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. **45** The good person **out of the good treasure of his heart** produces good, and the evil person **out of his evil treasure** produces evil, for **out of the abundance of the heart** his mouth speaks. What's inside of you will come out eventually!
- 1. We must pay close attention to what we are allowing to be deposited in us.
 - a) We live in a screen-dominated world. I am not Amish, and am usually found with a phone nearby. But any of us say the majority of what we get on those screens is spiritually beneficial to us in anyway?
 - b) Never before have we had more distracting amusements at our fingertips, some seemingly harmless, but incredibly time-wasting, like video games and social media. But there are also soul-killing poisons on our devices, like the porn that is more easily obtained than at any other time in history.
 - 2. I wish guarding our hearts was as easy as disconnecting, but sometimes what I put into myself is just as damaging! Worry, doubt, fear and unbelief wreak havoc on all of our hearts because they fly in the face of God's truths. We also speak horrible words to each other and even to ourselves.
 - a) But if all we were attempting to do is have more healthy self-talk and eliminate negative people from our lives, that still wouldn't be enough!
 - b) You can tell yourself you're "good enough, smart enough, and doggone it, people like me" all day long. You can meditate, thinking happy thoughts in the lotus position all day long, and still lose your treasure.
- B. What we need is the knowledge of Jesus! That is the treasure we're carrying! In other words, The treasure that we are guarding, is actually guarding us!
- 1. We fortify the knowledge of Jesus by turning our ear to his Word, and actually obeying what he says! This is what Moses meant when he told the Israelites: **Deuteronomy 30:19 ESV** "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, **20** loving

the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

- a) Life has been set before us in Christ; and yet death (through sin) is always waiting to lure us with false promises and empty hopes. What will you choose? Choose life, and you and your children will live, loving and obeying God, and holding fast to him as he holds fast to you! Life is only found at the cross. The place of death is where life begins for us.
 - b) This means that as we die to ourselves, our desires, our agenda, this world, and the approval of others, the treasure grows brighter. Paul calls the treasure “that life that truly is life”. Interestingly, when he says this, he’s comparing spiritual treasure to worldly wealth in 1 Timothy 6:19.
 2. God’s Word builds up our defenses against the bandits of the world, the flesh, and the devil like nothing else can. David said **Psalm 119:11 ESV I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.** But the Bible is not only a defensive weapon, but an offensive one as well. Paul says we are to take up the sword of the Spirit “which is the Word of God”.
- IV. Just like the priests in Ezra’s day, there will be an accounting for how we handled the Lord’s treasure. **1 Corinthians 3:11 ESV For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.** I don’t want to suffer loss in that day!
- A. What a great day of glory it will be to deliver this treasure to the house of the Lord, eternal in the heavens! There, the knowledge of Christ that we have carried with us all these years will be transformed into eternal praise, eternal joy!
 1. The beginning of 2020 gives you a great opportunity to re-commit yourself to guarding your heart, and protecting the treasure that God himself has placed within you.
 - a) Remember, the treasure is not your goodness or potential, It is the saving and sanctifying knowledge of Christ, who keeps and empowers.
 - b) There is no way for the Christian to guard his or her heart except through the cleansing power of God’s word. We must read it, study, love it, and live in it. As we neglect or abandon it, we jeopardize our souls.
 2. Let’s pray that God will send his wisdom, conviction and endurance that we may finish our journey through the world, all the way to his eternal house, in our true heavenly homeland, where we shall dwell with him forever!