

Idealism and Practicality Both Work (Ezra 8-10)

Ezra's confidence in God's help was tested when it came time for his entourage to journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. "I was ashamed," Ezra explained, "to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way." (Ezra 8:22).

For Ezra, to depend on a royal escort implied a failure to trust in God's protection. So he and his retinue preferred to fast and pray rather than seek practical assistance from the king. Note that Ezra was not following any particular Old Testament law in choosing not to receive royal protection. Rather, this decision reflected his personal convictions about what it meant to trust God in the real challenges of leadership. One might say that Ezra was an "idealistic believer." He was willing to stake his life on the idea of God's protection, rather than to ensure protection with human help. While Ezra's position was commendable, it was not the only one deemed reasonable by godly leaders in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah sought practical help from human authority, and God granted him success as well.

Ezra credits God with protecting him from the hands of his enemies along his journey. We do not know, however, if members of Ezra's party carried weapons or used them for protection. Nehemiah's workers certainly did carry weapons, which allowed them to carry out their work with less disruption. Both Ezra and Nehemiah show us that human efforts are successful when God is at work in them.