

LESSON 33

Ezra 7:7-9

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king. 8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

Ezra did not return to Jerusalem by himself, but instead he was accompanied by a group of Jews, including some from the various groups that we studied earlier - priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. The actual names of many of the returnees will be given in Ezra 8.

Verses 7-8 tells us that the return occurred during the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, which was 458 BC, and verse 9 tells us that the journey lasted about four months. But we will learn in Ezra 8:31 that those four months include about two weeks of preparation time, which means that the actual journey took about three and a half months.

A direct path from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 500 miles, but travelers almost always took a longer route through Northern Syria to avoid the Arabian desert (which is made even more certain by their arrival in mid-summer).

The trip by the longer route could have been 800 to 900 miles. Ezra's group would have followed the Euphrates River north from Babylon, then journeyed west across the plains to Damascus, and finally south through Samaria to Jerusalem. Covering that distances in three and a half months meant that they averaged about 10 miles per day, which is about half the usual rate of travel. The slower rate of travel was likely due to the children and elderly in their number as well as due to the large amount of gold and silver they were carrying with them.

The journey would have been dangerous, particularly at this time due to the revolt that was occurring in Egypt and the general lawlessness that accompanied that revolt. (We will have more to say about this revolt later.) But the people arrived safely in Jerusalem because, as verse 9 tells us, the good hand of God was on Ezra.

Ezra 7:10

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

One commentary I read described verse 10 as “one of the most amazing verses in the entire Bible,” and I certainly agree. It is a wonderful verse! If you highlight verses in your Bible, then either highlight this verse or throw your highlighter away!

Verse 10 is a key verse in Ezra, and is in fact a key verse in the entire Bible.

“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.”

All of Ezra’s actions in the remainder of this book that bears his name must be interpreted in light of this key verse. Verse 10 shows us the secret of Ezra’s lasting influence.

And verse 10 reinforces all of the central themes of this book - the law (the word of God), the temple (the worship of God), and the wall (the purity that God demands).

What did Ezra do? Verse 10 tells us that he did four things.

First, Ezra “prepared his heart” or “set his heart.” Ezra determined within his heart that he would faithfully and resolutely commit himself to the habits detailed in the rest of the verse. The word “heart” in verse 10 means the whole of one’s being. Religion was not just a hobby for Ezra, but was his whole life.

Second, Ezra studied the law of the Lord. He devoted his life to the reading and analysis of God’s Word. He delighted in it.

Third, Ezra practiced the law of the Lord. His examination of the Scriptures was not done simply to grow in knowledge. Ezra applied that knowledge to his life. Yes, application is required, but so is knowledge. We can’t apply what we don’t know.

And fourth, Ezra taught the law throughout Israel. He did not keep the things he learned to himself. Ezra taught them to others.

In short, he studied it, he lived it, and he taught it!

“[Ezra] is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”

In this one verse we have our own tasks when it comes to God’s word – we must prepare our heart, we must study it, we must do it, and we must teach it. All four things are required, and each one depends on the other three. We can’t live what we don’t know. We can’t teach what we haven’t studied.

Many today fail to study the word at all, and sadly that is not just true of those out in the world but is increasingly true in the Lord’s church. We were once known far and wide as a people of the Book, but I fear we are losing that reputation.

What does it mean to be a people of the Book?

- It means that we love the word of God.
- It means that we live the word of God.
- It means that we study the word of God.
- It means that we know the word of God.
- It means that we carry the word of God around with us.
- It means that we rely on the word of God.
- It means that we search the word of God.
- It means that we turn to the word of God for answers.
- It means that we teach the word of God.
- It means that we proclaim the word of God.

- It means that we delight in the word of God.
- It means that we memorize the word of God.
- It means that we instruct our children in the word of God.
- It means that we respond to temptations by quoting the word of God.
- It means that we understand the power and relevance of the word of God in our modern world.
- It means that we quote the Bible in our daily speech.
- It means that the word of our God is our standard in everything that we do.
- It means that we put the word of God ahead of our own popularity.
- It means that we compare all that we hear with the word of God.
- It means that if the price of peace is compromising the word of God, then that price is too high.
- It means that our sermons and classes begin with the phrase “Please open your Bibles to...”

That is what it means to be a people of the Book! The denominations have largely cast the Bible away – but that must never be true of the Lord’s church.

Isaiah 5:24 - Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Hosea 4:6 - My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

What you don’t know can destroy you!

Many who study, fail to do what the word commands them to do.

1 John 5:3 - For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.

John 14:15 - If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Obedience is what happens when study and love come together.

Ezra loved God's word, and Ezra loved God's people. And because Ezra loved both, Ezra told God's people what they needed to hear. Ezra taught the truth in love.

R. L. Whiteside - Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.

What must our own attitude be toward God's word? Ezra 7:10 tells us.

We must set our heart to study it, and to do it, and to teach it. God's word cannot be just an afterthought or a weekend hobby to us. Our entire life – both individually and as a congregation – must be centered on the word of God. When we move away from God's word, we move away from God. When we neglect God's word, we neglect God. When we fail to love God's word, we fail to love God.

If we are no longer seen as a people of the book, then what is the answer to that problem? Verse 10 gives us the answer – “Ezra had set his heart.”

The answer is **focus**! Ezra had devoted himself to God's word – to studying it, to obeying it, to teaching it. In short, Ezra was focused on God's word! Absent focus we will accomplish nothing, and that is not just true in our service to God. Excellence and achievement in any area demand focus.

We live in the great age of distraction, and it shows. If we are mediocre and lackluster in our service, then it is likely because we are distracted by other concerns.

Matthew 13:22 - As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Matthew 6:21 - For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

If we want to know what is important to us, we need to look at what we are focused on – if we want to know where our treasure is, we need to look for our heart.

And where would we be without the Bible? We would know from the creation that God exists and that God is powerful (unless we were fools), but we would not know anything more. We should thank God every day that he has given us his word.

Ezra was focused on God. Ezra was focused on his mission. Ezra was focused on God's word. And just look at what he accomplished for God and for God's people!

Ezra 7:11-14

11 Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel. 12 Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time. 13 I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. 14 Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand;

Verses 11-26 contain a letter from King Artaxerxes.

As with the other letters by Persian kings that we have seen in this book, some question the authenticity of this letter. As before, they say that the letter is too Jewish to have come from the pen of a Persian king. They also complain that the letter gives powers to Ezra that are much more extensive than one would expect.

But, as before, the answer is simple – the king undoubtedly had help in writing this letter. In fact, Ezra himself was likely responsible for writing much, if not all, of this letter, and then afterward the letter was approved by the king.

As for the powers granted to Ezra, Nehemiah was also granted extraordinary powers just 14 years later by this same king. We will see in a moment that the political situation surrounding these events likely played a big role in the powers that the king gave to Ezra.

The authenticity of the letter is further shown in its use of Persian terms such as “king of kings” in verse 12 and “seven counselors” in verse 14 (the latter being something that we also saw in Esther).

The letter shows familiarity with Persian customs, and one commentary noted that the letter has a similar form to other Persian letters of the time that have been uncovered.

While the introduction to the letter in verse 11 is written in Hebrew, the letter itself in verses 12-26 is written in Aramaic, the language of official correspondence in the Persian Empire.

This letter does not just send Ezra off on a mission. Instead, the letter sends Ezra off on a mission with the funds and resources that he needed to accomplish that task.

As we read through the entirety of the letter, we will see that it contains five stipulations:

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1. It authorizes Ezra and those with him to go to Jerusalem to see that God’s law is observed.

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1. It provides a grant to buy sacrifices and temple vessels.

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1. It commands the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra.

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1. It frees all the temple officials from taxation.

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1. It authorizes Ezra to set up a judicial system.

As with Joseph many years before and as with Esther just a few years before, Ezra had authority in a foreign government, and, as with Joseph and Esther, that authority was part of God’s providence in

using Ezra to fulfill God's purposes for his people. (And again, as for those who say Christians should stay out of politics, I'm glad Joseph, Esther, and Ezra didn't do that!)

Why did the king send Ezra on this mission?

We have already mentioned one reason – God wanted the king to send Ezra on the mission. But there may have also been a reason in the king's mind that had to do with what was going on elsewhere in his kingdom (and this also was most likely part of God's plan to make sure the setting was right for what God planned to accomplish through this king).

In 460 BC, the Greeks sent a fleet of 200 war galleys against Persia. This fleet sailed to Egypt, gained a great victory over the Persian army and captured Memphis in the autumn of 459. This Greek victory placed the coast of Palestine and Phoenicia into Greek hands.

It was in 458, immediately after the fall of Memphis to the Greeks, that Ezra was sent to Judea "to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (7:14) and to reorganize and strengthen Israel, which was the traditional enemy of the Philistines (now in Greek hands).

From the point of view of the Persian king, a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal fortress. As long as the Greeks dominated the coast and dominated Egypt, the Persian king would support a strong Judean province headed by a Judean-Persian official and peopled by a pro-Persian population, many of whose families remained back in Babylon and Persia (as hostages if needed). This political situation likely explains the extraordinary powers that the king gave to Ezra here.

The letter from Artaxerxes begins with a typical salutation in verse 12. The phrase "king of kings" was a popular title for a Persian monarch.

Ezra is the recipient of the letter, and, as we discussed, very likely also the author of the letter, given to the king only for his signature or seal – after the king got advice from his seven counselors. (We saw this same group in Esther 1:13, where they were advising Xerxes, the father of this king.)

Verse 13 is the permission of the king allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem under the authority of Ezra. This return was not forced. This decree allowed all Jews to return to Jerusalem if they wanted to do so. As we often see in this book, verse 13 separates the people from the religious leaders, which is yet another indication that Ezra had a hand in writing this letter.

In verse 14, Ezra is told by the king to go to Judah to see if the Jews there are living according to the Law of God. Ezra was being sent to Jerusalem with the express purpose of establishing the law of God in the land.

No reason is given for this order, and most likely it originated from Ezra himself because that is what Ezra wanted to do and that is what Ezra knew God wanted him to do. Some suggest that Ezra may have received reports from Judah that distressed him and caused him to want to travel there and initiate his reforms.

And, as we said, Artaxerxes naturally saw Judah as an area that could be easily influenced by Egypt and the Greeks, and so he likely had concerns of his own that something nefarious was happening there.

The phrase “the law of your God which is in your hand” in verse 14 confirms that this was a written law, not just an oral law.

That phrase certainly means that Ezra knew and understood the law, but it may have mean that Ezra had a literal scroll in his hand. If so, then Ezra, it seems, was one who carried God’s word around with him wherever he went. Yet another lesson for us. We should never go out to battle without our sword!

Ezra 7:15-18

15 And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, 16 And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem: 17 That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. 18 And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God.

The second topic addressed in the letter from the king is the provision for the temple of God.

The Persian authorities offered silver and gold to Ezra dedicated for the purchase of animals and other offerings. This money was to be taken from the province of Babylon, which was the province from which the Jews began their journey. The monetary tribute was to be supplemented by the

freewill offerings of the people and priests who voluntarily returned to the land of Israel.

The animals specifically identified in verse 17 are bulls, rams, and lambs. Any extra silver and gold was to be used at the discretion of Ezra and his fellow priests (referred to as “thy brethren” in verse 18).

How did this pagan king know so much about Jewish worship? That question has a one word answer - Ezra. Ezra almost certainly wrote all of this for the king’s signature - including who got the excess money!

We should keep in mind that the exiled Jews were not able to keep these sacrifices while they were separated from the temple. What that means is that there must have been a very large sacrifice whenever the various groups returned.

Of course, that is big difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. Under the old covenant, sacrifices were offered at a certain point in time and at a particular place.

Under the new covenant, Jesus is our perfect sacrifice, and his sacrifice was accomplished once for all.

Hebrews 9:26 - But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

And note from that verse and other verses that Jesus sacrificed himself. We very often sing a song (“Lamb of God”) in which we are asked to sing that the Romans sacrificed Christ. That, of course, is absolutely wrong and contrary to Scripture. The Romans **crucified** Christ; they did **not sacrifice** Christ.

And we, like the old testament worshippers, are to present sacrifices, but our sacrifice is a “living sacrifice.” (Romans 12:1) That is something we can do everywhere and all the time (at least, all the time that we are “living!”).

#ezra-esther