

We are continuing our study of the Old Testament book of Ezra. It's rather strange that we've covered the first six chapters of this book and still haven't met Ezra! I must admit I've been excited to finally introduce to you this most incredible and fascinating man.

The truth is, this man, Ezra holds some personal significance for me. After graduating from college 42 years ago, I entered a pastoral training program called Scribe School. It was kind of a weird name because, as you may know, in the gospel accounts Jesus' life, most the Scribes were bad guys, along with their cronies the Pharisees. Who'd want to be a Scribe? But I soon realized we were to be more like the Old Testament Scribes. That's where Ezra comes in. He was a Scribe who epitomized the best of what a Scribe was supposed to do and be. In fact, tradition says it was Ezra who rewrote and published the 24 books of the Old Testament, which were burned during the Babylonian exile. Derek Kidner, an Old Testament scholar, wrote this about Ezra. "His name stands very high in Jewish tradition, where he came to be regarded as a second Moses, and indeed it was he, more than any other man, who stamped Israel with its lasting character as the people of a book."

Ezra was such an exemplary figure that when Lynn and I started a janitorial business to pay our bills during Scribe School, we called it Ezra Enterprises. We used to joke about our tag line: Clean your bowl, save your soul. As we take a closer look at this man Ezra, I hope you can see why I'm so excited to share his story!

Chapter 7 begins with the words, "After these things..." Well, 60 years have passed since the close of chapter 6, where we learned of the completion of the Temple in Jerusalem. It's now 458 BC. Although the Temple was up and running, the spiritual health of God's people was languishing. Ezra will focus more on that than buildings and walls. By the way, 13 years later, Nehemiah would return to Jerusalem and lead the Jews in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem while Ezra continued to focus on building the spiritual lives of God's people.

So, to begin with, I want you to notice several things about this extraordinary man named Ezra.

### **Ezra's Priestly Lineage**

First, his priestly lineage is seen in Ezra 7:1-5. The writer starts, "After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah..." I'm going to stop after verse 1 because what follows is a bunch of very hard

to pronounce names. But if you skip down to verse 5, it says, "... the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest" (v. 5). Ezra's lineage goes all the way back to Aaron, Moses' brother, and the first High Priest. The point is Ezra has the credentials—he's from the priestly line going back to Aaron.

What's interesting is that while the Jews were in exile in Babylon, Ezra and his fellow priests had to figure out how to fill their time. I mean, all the duties associated with the Temple, like offering sacrifices, were put on hold, whether they liked it or not. What does a priest do when there's no Temple to work in? Some of you might be wondering the same thing about us pastors—what does a pastor do when the church building is shut down? But, in Ezra's case, being also a Scribe, he'd have focused on God's Word. And that's the second thing we learn about him.

### **His Skill in God's Law**

Ezra was skilled in God's law. Look at verse 6a, "...this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given." So, Ezra came up from Babylon with many others. In fact, if you look down at verse 7, you'll see he wasn't alone. It says, "Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes." But it wasn't just them. Scholars estimate well over 5,000 people made this 900-mile trek, just as others had done 60 years earlier.

But what I want you to see is Ezra's commitment to God's Word. He's more than just a priest; he's a teacher of God's Word. When it says he was "well versed in God's law," the idea is he was skilled in it. The Hebrew word used here has the idea of speed. It's like he was so conversant with God's word, he could rapidly bring it to mind and apply it to situations.

There's little question that Ezra had a brilliant mind, but if you look down at verse 10, you can see the real secret to his success. It says, "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." So he was smart, but there's a lot of smart, talented people who get nowhere. You can be a great athlete, but if you don't devote yourself to your craft, you'll not succeed at the highest level. Ezra was devoted to his craft. Another translation says he "set his heart" to do this. Do what? Three things are mentioned here concerning God's Word. He was devoted to study it, to do it, and to teach it. What a great example!

I've been reading through the Psalms, and I came this week to Psalm 119. Do you know it is the longest chapter in the Bible? It has 176 verses! Guess what? Almost every single verse mentions God's Word. So many great verses! Verse 11, *"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."* Verse 18, *"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."* Verse 105, *"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."* It goes on and on!

The greatest thing about God's Word is how we see ourselves in it. About eight years ago, 75-year-old Marion Shurtleff purchased a Bible in a used book store near her home in San Clemente, CA. After returning home, she discovered a couple of folded pages tucked inside the Bible. The contents of the yellowed paper contained a child's handwriting that looked familiar. To her amazement, she discovered her name at the top of the first page. When she looked closer, she realized she was actually reading a four-page essay she'd written as a ten-year-old to earn a merit badge for the Girls Scouts in Kentucky—more than 2,000 miles from where she'd just bought the Bible. She said, "I recognized my handwriting. I was shaking, literally. I was crying."

Although it remains a mystery how the essay ended up in a Bible in a used bookstore halfway across the country, one thing is certain, when we look deeply into God's Word, we see something of ourselves. We see people just like us; people who pursue faith and hope in God, people who battle depression, doubt, lust, and pride. As we read the stories in God's Word about Abraham, Ruth, David, Mary, and Ezra, we also recognize our own story.

We may not be called to be a Scribe, but we're all called to be students of God's Word, and we're all called to put it into practice, and at some level, we're all called to teach it to others. I think about this as it relates to parents. Parents of school-age kids are struggling right now. I mean, after a long summer, what parent doesn't look forward to school starting? But it's not happening, at least in a way that gets them out of the house! I see how that's impacting my kids as parents of small children, and I feel your pain! One thing I love about our CPCKids team is how hard they're working to provide resources for you parents to teach your kids.

Whether your kids can go to school or not, your home is always a place of learning. You have the privilege of helping them see themselves in the pages of Scripture. And that starts with you—you study it, practice it, and then teach it. I may be making you feel guilty right now, and that's the last thing you need. But if your kids just see you doing that, if they "catch" you doing that, if they often hear of what you are learning about yourself in God's word, you'll be making a good start.

## **His Courage and Faith**

And I'm sure for Ezra, his skill in God's Word led to the next thing: his courage and faith. Look at the end of verse 6b. It says,

*"The king had granted him everything he asked..."* Ezra asked—that's important. Ezra asked the king for permission to go back to Jerusalem. He took the initiative! That took courage and faith.

And then, if you go to the end of the chapter, Ezra says something else along the same lines. He says, *"...I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me" (v. 28b)*. So not only did he need to get permission from the king, but he also had to rally the troops; to convince the Jewish leaders in Babylon to make the trek to Jerusalem and start a new life.

I think sometimes we're far too passive. We talk about "waiting on the Lord," accepting our circumstances, and blooming wherever we're planted. And there are times we need to do that. But sometimes, we need to take the initiative to make a change. Sometimes, waiting on the Lord is a copout. Sometimes, we need to muster up the courage, take the initiative, and step out in faith.

I think of the story of Ruth, who has a book named after her in the Old Testament. Ruth, a Moabite woman, followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel. They're both widows. They're dirt poor. I can imagine the two women sitting at the breakfast table with their heads in their hands, nothing to eat. Suddenly, Ruth has an idea, and she presents it to Naomi, "I'll go to the field and glean among the ears of grain..." She's referring to something God had put in His word as a means to take care of the poor. When wheat and barley fields were ready for harvest, some of the grain was allowed to fall to the ground so the poor could gather what they needed. The purpose of the law was to feed the poor, people like Ruth and Naomi.

And then, Naomi, who's probably too old or too depressed to work, says, "Go for it, Ruth." So Ruth heads out to the fields. And it says she just "happened" to walk on the field of Boaz. Boaz is a good man, a godly man. He notices Ruth and asks about her. He learns she's the Moabite woman who'd returned with Naomi. She asked permission to glean in his fields. This ends up being a wonderful love story—not only does Ruth get the meal, but she also gets a husband, and together they have a child who'd be the great-grandchild of King David!

But what does this tell us about how God works? Ruth doesn't sit around and moan about how hard life has been. She doesn't sit around and wait for God to act. She does something. She takes the initiative, and God uses that. That's what we see Ezra doing here. He asks the king. He musters up the courage to gather the leaders. Sometimes God gives us an idea and then calls us to step out in courage and faith.

We have one woman in our church, Damaris Avila, who, during this pandemic, wanted to do something about folks struggling to make ends meet. She built a small pantry in her front yard—kind like one of those neighborhood library boxes. You can take from it or add to it. Now those pantries are all over San Mateo!

On Mother's Day, that same family wanted to create flower bouquets for anyone who wanted to give one to their mother. They got local grocery stores to donate flowers and promoted the bouquets through Next Door. On Sunday morning of Mother's Day, there was a line that went around the corner of people who wanted flowers.

Now how did that happen? Damaris says the idea just popped into her head. She believes that God when plants those little seeds in our mind, we should act on it, trusting he'll open and close doors as he sees fit. That's often how God works. We have to be willing to take a step of faith. We often have to overcome our fears. That's what Ezra did.

### **His Integrity and Wisdom**

And what helped in this is Ezra was also a man with wisdom and integrity. And we see that mainly in this very long letter King Artaxerxes sends with Ezra as he heads back to Jerusalem. It's recorded in verses 11-26. It's a fascinating letter. We're not going to read it all, but the king basically gives Ezra a blank check. He shows great respect for not just Ezra but Ezra's God. He authorizes the giving of many silver and gold gifts to the temple. He gives Ezra government money to spend on sacrificial animals and the promotion of Temple worship. He even allows Ezra to draw on the king's treasury for whatever he needs. He's given latitude to make his own decisions about how to spend the money best. The king even gives him tax-exempt status.

Why would he do this? Like other monarchs of the Persian Empire, he wanted to placate the gods of the people and the territory he'd conquered. He believed it was a wise policy. That's why he says in verse 23, *"Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons?"* So he's kind of covering his bets by pleasing all the gods out there.

But this also tells us something of Ezra's character. The king trusted Ezra. Why else would he write in verse 18 to Ezra, *"You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God."* He knew Ezra wouldn't line his own pockets with all this money. He knew Ezra was a man of integrity and wisdom. Look what he writes in verse 25,

**And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.**

Ezra was a man not just of integrity, but of wisdom. Not only would he allocate resources wisely, he'd also wisely appoint the right people to leadership.

What we need today are men and women of wisdom and integrity. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer could almost hear the stomping of the Nazi Gestapo boots to take him away and execute him, he wondered what kind of people the church was going to need most when the war was over. He wrote,

**What the church will need, what our century will need, are not people of genius, not brilliant tacticians or strategists, but simple, straightforward, honest men and women.**

Amen to that!

When we talk about integrity and wisdom, we're all a work in progress. I once told a story in a sermon about how I lied about something. Afterward, someone said to me, "How could you do that? You're a pastor. How could you admit you lied?" I can't recall what I said, but I wish I said integrity and wisdom aren't possessions we have once and for all. We're all on a journey to integrity and wisdom, and none of us have arrived. Sometimes it's two steps forward and three steps back! But let's not let that keep us from pursuing it passionately like I believe Ezra did.

### **His Grateful Praise**

There's one more thing I want you to see about Ezra. He could have all of these wonderful attributes, but if he lacked this last one, I'm not sure he'd have been a person any of us would have liked hanging out with. It comes out at the end of the chapter where Ezra says,

**Praise be to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. vv. 27-28a**

So when it's all said and done, Ezra wasn't a man who took credit for any of this. He's a man who looked to God with gratitude and praise. He recognized that apart from God, none of this would have happened.

You see, part of me loves preaching a sermon on how we should all try to emulate Ezra. Shouldn't we all try to be skilled in God's Word, show courage and faith, and possess integrity and wisdom? All of that makes for a good sermon. But the problem is all of us know how short we fall. Not only that, it puts the emphasis in the wrong place. It makes Ezra the hero of this story, and that's not why this story was written. Ezra isn't standing there, saying, "Look at me! This is how you should be too."

The theologian, Bryan Chapell, writes,

**God is the hero of every text. This doesn't mean that biblical characters have no exemplary qualities for us to emulate, but we must understand that when these positive qualities appear—in their lives or ours—grace is the cause... The first thing to notice about biblical characters is that they're**

**incorporated into the biblical text, not for their own sake but to show what God is doing through, in, and for them—to show how God advances his kingdom through the efforts of human beings and sometimes in spite of them.**

You see, if we don't put our focus on God, a man like Ezra can really put us under the pile. But, again, that's not the point.

## **The Good Hand of God**

Do you know why I think that? I want you to see something in this text I've purposely not mentioned until now. Three different times in this chapter, the writer uses a phrase that shows us God, not Ezra, is the hero of this text.

Remember, we read how the king granted Ezra everything he asked. Well, look again at what it says in verse 6, *"The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him (Ezra 7:6)*. I don't care how much wisdom and courage and integrity Ezra had, if the hand of God wasn't on him, he's have gotten nowhere!

And how could Ezra make this 900-mile journey on foot back to Jerusalem? Look at verses 8-9,

**Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him.**

That's the second time all the credit is given to the hand of God.

Finally, remember how Ezra mustered up the courage to rally the troops and gather the leaders to make the trek back with him. Where did he get that courage and faith? Look at verse 28b, *"Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me."* Do you see it? God's fingerprints are everywhere in this story. You could say the theme of these two chapters is, "The good hand of God was on us."

You see, it's all about God. You can't do this; I can't do this. Here's what this teaches us: If we're able to accomplish anything of lasting value in our lives, it'll be because God's good hand is on us. The Apostle Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians,

**Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 2 Cor. 3:4-5**

Jesus put it this way, *"Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5)*. Most people, even most Christians, just don't get that. We rely on ourselves to become better people. But there's another way to live, and it's the way of trusting that God has graciously provided everything we need. That's why he lives in us. Our job is to learn complete dependence on him. That doesn't mean we're passive.

Ezra was completely dependent on God, but he wasn't passive. He asked, he gathered, he led, and he prayed. It's all up to God, but God operates through human channels, even broken human channels—people like Ezra, people like you, and me.

The evangelist Luis Palau describes how this became real to him. He tells a story that took place as a young man in his first semester at Multnomah School of the Bible. Major Ian Thomas spoke at their chapel service. He talked about how it took Moses 40 years in the wilderness to learn he was nothing. Then one day, Moses was confronted with a burning bush—likely a dry bunch of ugly sticks—yet Moses had to take off his sandals because God was in the bush!

Major Thomas said,

**God was telling Moses, 'I don't need a pretty bush or an educated bush or an eloquent bush. Any old bush will do as long as I'm in the bush. If I'm going to use you, it won't be you doing something for me, but me doing something through you.**

Luis writes,

**I was that kind of bush: a useless bunch of dried up sticks. I could do nothing for God. All my reading and studying and modeling myself after others was worthless unless God was in the bush. Only he could make something happen. When Thomas closed his message, I ran back to my room and, in tears, prayed in my native Spanish. My spiritual struggle was finally over! I'd let God be God and let Luis be dependent on him.**

The most impactful people in this world are the ones who, like Ezra, humbly rely on God for everything. They've come to understand that if we're able to accomplish anything of lasting value in our lives, it'll be because the good hand of God is on us. And that's the heart of the gospel—God has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. It's true when it comes to our salvation, and it's true when it comes to just living our life.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2020 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No. 1449-5FC