

EZRA, A MODEL FOR EVERY SERVANT OF GOD

Ezra 7:1-10

By Dub McClish

Introduction

Ezra lived during Judah's period of captivity in Babylon in the fifth century B.C. He led a group of Jews back to Judea from their land of captivity in about 457 B.C. He rose to considerable prominence in a pagan court (Ezra 7:6, 11-28), after the manner of Joseph, Moses, Esther, Nehemiah, and Daniel. His earthly distinctions are discussed in Ezra 7:1-9, and they were many: (1) He had a distinguished ancestry, being a direct descendant of Aaron (vv. 1-5). (2) He was a "ready scribe" in the law of Moses (v. 6). (3) He was highly favored by the Persian monarch, Artaxerxes, so that all of his requests pertaining to his return to Judea were granted (v. 6). (4) He was so much respected by his own people that approximately two thousand of them trusted him to lead them on a grueling four-month trek across hundreds of miles of arid and dangerous territory (vv. 7-9; 8:1-22).

All of these are exceptional tributes to the greatness of this man, but his greatest distinctions are not found till Ezra 7:10. I submit that this verse furnishes an ideal formula for success in serving the Lord, whether young, old, rich, poor, elders, deacons, preachers, one-talent or five-talent saints. It reads as follows: "For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of Jehovah, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances." Let us now study this model servant of God to the end that we might emulate his example.

Ezra Set His Heart

This is another way of saying that he had an ambition, a determination, a purpose, a goal that constantly moved him. What his manifold purpose was we shall discuss momentarily, but for now, consider the essentiality of this quality itself. Michelangelo was so consumed by his art that frequently he would not take time to take off his clothes to sleep for a week at a time. George Frederick Handel, the famous composer, was so determined and set in his purpose to create beautiful music that he wore the keys of his harpsichord to the shape of spoons by his unrelenting practice and experimentation.

Our Lord was completely consumed with His purpose in coming to earth and with the determination to fulfill it. Often He would withdraw from His enemies who were seeking opportunity to kill Him or He would tell those He healed to tell no one of their faith in Him as the Christ, because His "time had not come." At the tender age of twelve years He was aware that He must "be about his Father's business" (Luke 2:49, KJV). He declared on one occasion, "My

meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). In His prayer to the Father He declared, “I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do” (John 17:4) Finally, as He hung on the cross as the Atonement for our sins, He could say, “It is finished” (John 19:30). He had His eye and His heart set on His great purpose for coming among us from an early age, and He was never detracted from it, even though He knew it would eventuate in the cruelty of the cross. Thank God, our Lord “set His heart” on our redemption and pursued that aim tirelessly.

Why was Paul such a spiritual dynamo and how did one man accomplish so much for His Savior? To a great degree, it was because he was driven by great purpose. His letters are punctuated with such indications: (1) “For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). (2) “I am set for the defence of the Gospel” (Phi. 1:16). (3) “Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phi. 3:13–14). It is a foregone conclusion that he could never have been what he was nor have accomplished what he did in the kingdom had he not been a man of set and purposed heart.

It follows as the night does the day that if we **would** be what we **can** be, we **must set our hearts and set them on the right things**. We more often fail to fulfill our potential as servants of God for lack of purpose and determination to accomplish it, than for lack of talent or money. Some elders are knowingly leading the church into apostasy as quickly as they can. However, many of the congregations that have drifted from Scriptural moorings in recent years have been allowed to do so by elders who simply were not set in their hearts to adhere strictly to the Truth. By the time they arouse from their spiritual stupor and see what has happened (if they ever do), it is often too late. It is clear from the Scriptural qualifications for elders that they must be men who have great purpose and determination to uphold the Truth and oppose any error that threatens the flock (Tit. 1:9-11; cf. Acts 20:28-31).

Many preachers do not have the resolute purpose of heart toward their work and toward faithfully proclaiming the Word that they should have. Some are content to go with the prevailing flow. When they are in the company of liberals they can befriend and be chummy with them, leaving the impression of agreement with their liberal poison. When they are in more conservative company they can boldly pretend to be strong in the Truth. They may preach far more boldly in a lectureship several hundred miles from home than they would dare to do at home! (Compare this with Paul’s practice of teaching the same things everywhere in every church [1 Cor. 4:17]). Some preachers seem to have a totally “ho-hum” attitude toward the

incomparable work of preaching the Gospel. (Compare this with Paul's charge to Timothy: "Be diligent in these things; give thyself wholly to them" {1 Tim. 4:15}).

A determined classroom Bible teacher will do a better job with no modern equipment and aids than a lazy or convictionless teacher who has a roomful. One thing that young people need to be taught is to set their hearts firmly on God and His Truth in their tender years: "Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them" (Ecc. 12:1). If we can teach our children to dedicate their hearts to God in their innocent years they will have the spiritual defenses needed to withstand the coming of the evil days. How badly parents need to be men and women who have purposed in their hearts that they will provide not only the physical necessities of the children they bring into this world, but more so, the spiritual and moral necessities (Eph. 6:4). Many parents in general, and to some degree those who are Christians, have no conviction or determination about the training and discipline of their offspring, and the evils in society and the church are multiplying in direct proportion.

Good elders, deacons, preachers, teachers, parents, young people, and others who would be faithful servants of God are not born—they do not "just happen." They are the result of burning desire, set purpose, conviction, and the determination to accomplish same! Of course, the heart must be set on the proper thing or things, or such purpose of heart only makes one a more effective servant of the devil! On what did Ezra set his heart?

Ezra Set His Heart to Seek the Law of Jehovah

There is no nobler quest and purpose than this. This must be the Christian's most basic aim and activity—to learn the Book. But, someone says, "I thought our most basic duty was to proclaim the Word." Indeed, this is important, but "first things first." We cannot preach or teach that which we do not know! Could it be that one reason more rank and file members of the church are doing little or no teaching is because of the general dearth of even basic Bible knowledge among them?

In spite of the multitude of visual aids, including various kinds of projectors, video tapes, audio tapes, and attractive printed materials, we still cannot teach what we have not learned and we cannot learn without "seeking the law of Jehovah," which simply means **studying the Word of God**. God at one time inspired various ones of His people, thus giving them knowledge and remembrance of His Word in a miraculous, instantaneous manner so that they did not need to study to learn those things (Mat. 10:19-20; John 14:26; 16:13). When all of the Truth had been revealed, the gift of revelation (along with the other miraculous gifts) ceased (Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Cor. 13:8-10). Since that time at the close of the first century, men have had to study the

Word of God to learn it. God does not stick a funnel in our heads when we come up out of the baptistery and begin pouring in the knowledge of His Word. What we know we have to learn through hearing, reading, studying.

The Lord pronounced a blessing on those who hunger and thirst after righteousness (Mat. 5:6). Almost certainly he had in mind more than mere appetite for the Word in this beatitude. However, we certainly do not hesitate to suggest that in principle one's appetite for the Truth is included. Unarguably, a man is physically or mentally ill when he has no desire for food or drink. Likewise, one is dreadfully sick spiritually who has no desire for the milk or meat of the Word of God. Contrariwise, all of the blessings of God that are enduring and eternal come from our hearty ingestion of the water and bread of life (John 4:13-14; 6:27).

God's message to Israel through Hosea was, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I also will forget thy children" (4:6). Note the following tragedies of their ignorance of God's Word: (1) It was destructive and because of it they totally apostatized from the law. Only eight or ten years after Hosea spoke these words (720 B.C.), Sargon the Assyrian conquered Israel and took her into captivity, where she lost her national identity evermore. (2) The law was not withheld from them, but they withheld themselves from it. They not only rejected the law in its written form, but they also rejected the prophets God sent among them to call them to repentance. (3) Their rejection of God's law brought a corresponding rejection of them by God. (4) Their refusal to learn God's law and the eventual loss of it in the national memory would not only bring grave consequences upon themselves, but upon their innocent children as well. They would be reared in pagan idolatry without the knowledge of God-fearing parents and God would have no choice but to disown them.

We dare not either deny or ignore the parallels for our time: (1) Spiritual ignorance is eating at the spiritual vitals of the body of Christ. Many elders, deacons, and teachers would not recognize a heretic if he had a sign around his neck saying, "I am a heretic," because they are so ignorant of the Truth. In the very nature of the case, there is no doctrinal or moral error that is not anticipated and exposed by the Bible. This fact is of little consequence when people will not learn what it says. Many congregations have been lost and many others likely will be lost due to sheer ignorance of the Bible, the inability of brethren to distinguish error from Truth, sometimes on some of the most fundamental subjects, due to plain old ignorance. Sooner or later, error of one kind or another always destroys the dedicated spiritual ignoramus.

(2) There is no lack of opportunity to learn more of God's Word in our time. Every Christian home has more than one copy of the Bible, but we suspect that most are left unbothered until Sunday morning. Besides the sermons and Bible classes each week in most congregations, there are many other opportunities during the course of the year for Christians to expand their knowledge of God's Word. Our **Annual Denton Lectures** and others like it are a case in point. There must be tens of thousands of saints within one hundred miles of the site of these edifying and enlightening lectures (hundred of whom are elders and preachers), yet with all of the effort and money expended to publicize this spiritual feast we can interest only a few hundred in coming to learn! There are tapes and books by the multiplied hundreds that will help one in his Bible study. The study of the Bible should be a part of our daily regimen. The sad fact is that many of God's children cannot even be persuaded to come to the building about four hours per week to be spoon-fed. You need not inquire if such folk are studying the Word daily in their homes. Not only will they not study for themselves, many reject the message and the messengers of God who would dare preach them the Truth, driving them from their midst as they did the prophets of old. The sad truth is that saints today who are in a swamp of spiritual ignorance are not there for lack of opportunity, but because they have **rejected knowledge**. If God's people in Hosea's time had no excuse for their ignorance, though living in a time when learning opportunities were both poor and scarce, how much less excuse does anyone now living have for remaining ignorant?

(3) God will reject even His own children who reject Him. This promise is as firm as the promise to save those who serve Him faithfully. Those who "know not God and that obey not the Gospel" will have the vengeance of the just Judge of all men poured out on them, including such who are members of the church. An entire church can have its "candlestick" removed by the Lord (Rev. 2:5). God's law of sowing and reaping cannot be overturned (Gal. 6:7-8).

(4) Parents who are dedicated to the premise that an ignorant Christian is a happy Christian will bring the wrath of God down not only on themselves, but upon their innocent children. Many of those who are troubling the congregations with their agenda of liberal rebellion (including elders, preachers, and professors) grew up in Christian homes where their parents were either ignorant or where their parents did not bother to teach their children some of the most basic principles of Truth and righteousness. Many others who grew up in an atmosphere of spiritual ignorance have nothing to do with true religion whatsoever in adulthood. What tragedies ignorant parents perpetrate on their innocent children! God will have no choice but to forget such children.

Diligent study is not easy. It is among the most exhausting and difficult tasks on earth. However, it is also among the most rewarding things one can do. Take care that you do not call your preacher lazy because he spends a great amount of his time studying the Word. A host of saints are so selfish that they want the preacher out stroking them, holding their hands, petting them, and ready to come at two o'clock in the morning if they break a fingernail.

Sadly, such folk prefer somebody who can make a "nice little talk" on Sunday morning as long as he is a "good mixer," over a man who has a Word from God, dug out through laborious study, when he gets in the pulpit. I charge that our brethren, including a multitude of elders (and even preachers), have formed their idea of a preacher and his work far more from the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian "pastor" concept than they have from the New Testament! We ought not merely to **let** our preachers study, we ought to **insist** that they do so.

Someone once said to one of the preachers of a previous generation who could almost quote the entire Bible from memory, "I would give half my life if I had your knowledge of the Bible." His reply was, "That is what it has cost me!" I challenge us all to set our hearts to seek the law of Jehovah and to be unrelenting in the pursuit, as was Ezra.

Ezra Set His Heart to Do the Law of Jehovah

Ezra's first concern upon learning was doing. It is not enough to know the Truth. The blessing comes in doing it (Jam. 1:25). His learning of the law of God was not an end in itself, merely to show off his knowledge or to display his powers of memory. The end of diligent study for Ezra was practical—to learn God's will, and then **do it!**

The power and promise of the Word of God is not in merely hearing or learning. "He that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven" is the one that will enter the kingdom (Mat. 7:21). Once Jesus asked, "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say" (Luke 6:46)? To do the will of God means to obey the Word of God, and of course, this is a paramount theme of the entire Sacred Text. It is the one who both hears and does the Word of the Lord who is called "wise" by Son of God (Mat. 7:24).

Doing the will of God is not only crucial to my salvation, but to that of those who observe me. Influence and the power of our example on others are inescapable. I am also convinced each of us has far more influence than we imagine and over many people of which we are unaware and will not be aware till the Judgment. Often a brother will say in his prayer, "Father, help us to be an example." It is superfluous thus to pray. We are all examples, like it or not, and we cannot escape being such to those who observe our conduct. What he means is, "Help us to be the right kind of example," which, indeed, ought to be our earnest desire.

We teach at least as much by the way we **walk** as by the way we **talk**. Behind every Christian, those who observe see two Christians: the professing Christian and the living Christian. It is absolutely essential that they be the same, both teaching **and** living the Truth! We dare not be like the hypocritical Pharisees of the first century, condemned by the Lord because “they say and do not” (Mat. 23:3). Luke began his great book of Acts by referring to “all that Jesus began both to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1).

Sister Scoggins was my Bible class teacher in Burnet, Texas when I was in the fourth grade. I do not recall any of her exact words or visual aids (if any) she used in our class, but I have remembered many times through the years the Sunday morning that we studied the crucifixion of our Lord and she could not keep back her tears as she tenderly read of that awful deed.

Just as right behavior enforces great principles of Truth that another may teach us, wrong behavior seriously negates the spoken Word. I know some men who are excellent students and forceful preachers of the Truth, but whose messages are difficult to bear because I know of serious character flaws in their lives. Imagine my preaching a strong sermon in your hearing on control of the tongue and purity of speech on a Sunday evening and afterward stopping by a store to buy a loaf of bread on the way home. Imagine also that I get into a loud argument with the cash register clerk and raise my voice with cursing, swearing, and taking God’s name in vain. Imagine further that you happened to be in the same store and you overheard the loud exchange and then recognized me as the one shamefully speaking. Which would make the greatest impression on you and which would you remember the longest: my sermon on the tongue, or my abuse of the tongue? So it is with all of us!

It was a matter of determined purpose with Ezra ever to bring his “doing” level up to his “knowing” level. May we all do the same.

Ezra Set His Heart to Teach the Law of Jehovah

The “statutes and ordinances” Ezra was determined to teach in Israel were obviously those earlier mentioned, namely, those of “the law of Jehovah.” Nehemiah described one memorable occasion on which Ezra so taught the people in Jerusalem (Neh. 8:1-18). There must have been many others. We have no choice in the matter. The mandate from our Master is “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). Evangelism, sounding forth the story of redemption is the life and breath of the church (1 Tim. 3:15).

Note that Ezra's determination was to teach the Word of Jehovah, nothing more nor less. We must make it the center of interest and attention in pulpit, classroom, and personal conversation. What I know of in some places is anything but this. (1) We now have classes meeting allegedly to study the Bible in some church education programs where the furniture is moved out and everyone sits on the floor. All lights are left off, except for some candles sitting on the floor. This is supposed to create a "spiritual atmosphere." However, such foolishness is more like a spiritualist's séance than it is a Bible class. (2) The common use of modern versions (most of which are perversions) of the Bible. So many different versions have been used for so long in some places that there is no common pool of knowledge and recognition of actual Scripture. This is bad enough, but add to this the doctrinal error that is written into many of these books falsely called "Bibles," which are accepted as the Word of God, and the problems are compounded greatly.

(3) Many so-called "Bible classes" are now using books, tapes, and/or videos produced by denominationalists as their study materials and are advertising such materials as coming from "Christians." (4) Some churches are neck-deep in the "social Gospel," studying how they can improve man's social condition instead of studying the Bible and learning how to live so as to go to Heaven and take others with us. I have a church bulletin in my files from the Burke Road Church of Christ in Pasadena, Texas from December 15, 1973 describing their subjects in recent adult Bible classes. They included the following vital "Biblical" issues: "A minimum income should be guaranteed by the government to every U. S. citizen over 18 years of age"; "Marijuana should be legalized for everyone over 18 years, just as alcoholic beverages are today"; "Mandatory population control should be enforced on every family in the U.S. to guarantee adequate food, space, and energy for future generations."

Those who profess to preach the Gospel ought to do just that or find something else to do. I do not mean merely preaching the parts of it that are pleasant and with which few if any will disagree. To be Gospel preachers we must, with Paul, shrink not from "declaring the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). The charge to Timothy to "preach the Word" and to so with urgency "in season and out of season" is a charge to those who preach in every generation (2 Tim. 4:2). Those who are elders must demand such preaching or replace the preacher with someone who will do it. Some preachers are scared of their own shadows They are not about to preach anything that will arouse opposition from a brother or sister with money or power in the congregation. We now have many pulpits occupied by a class of preachers who do so much sweet-talk preaching that members of the church have spiritual sugar diabetes. Some congregations have gone so long without hearing a foot-stamping, pulpit-pounding, voice-raised

old-time Gospel sermon that if they heard one they would think it was false doctrine. The Madison Avenue approach of soft-selling the pleasing parts of the Gospel with three or four funny stories for every Scripture referred to in a sermon has become so wide-spread that many gullible and ignorant brethren have confused it with Gospel preaching.

The number of churches is legion in which if one preaches longer than twenty minutes, fails to make all present feel absolutely good about themselves, and says anything the least bit offensive to the most sensitive soul, regardless of how true it is, he will not last very long. I wish we could have a bonfire someday, using all of the clocks on the walls of our church buildings for fuel. It would have to be a huge one because there are so many! Far too many preachers have sold their souls to such carnal demands for the sake of a paycheck or position. There are now many congregations with the name "Church of Christ" on the sign that would not let Ezra, John the Baptizer, Paul, or even the Lord within a mile of their pulpits. Every shortsighted and sensual murmur about "negative" preaching (when all the preacher has done is preach the Gospel) is a murmur against the Lord and the likes of Paul.

About thirty years ago I had one of these "positive-only" hot shot deacons tell me, "You don't catch many flies with vinegar." Perceptive as I was, I knew right away that he was not trying to educate me on the best way to catch flies. I thanked him for the advice, told him that I was not in the fly-catching business, and went right on with my "negative" preaching.

The kind of preaching Ezra did involved reading the Word of God distinctly and (along with some who assisted him) giving the sense so the listeners could understand (Neh. 8:2-3, 8). That is precisely what Gospel preaching is. I challenge all who profess to preach the Gospel to do just that. We dare not preach more or less (Rev. 22:18-19). We have the duty and privilege to speak only as the oracles of God speak (1 Pet. 4:11).

Conclusion

Note once more the great model for all servants of God as seen in Ezra. There is a most logical and natural progression in the pattern of his life: "For Ezra had set his heart [**determination**] to seek the law of Jehovah [**preparation**], and to do it [**exemplification**], and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances [**education**]." A life built upon this fourfold purpose will accomplish immeasurable good on this earth (as did Ezra's) and will insure one's safe passage into eternal glory through the grace of God.

[Note: I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the 11th Annual Denton Lectures, hosted by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX, Nov. 8–12, 1992. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Studies in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, ed. Dub McClish (Valid Pub., Inc., Denton, TX)].