

Sermon – 23/11/2008 pm

Ezra Arrives in Jerusalem

Study Text: Ezra 7:1-10

Here in chapter seven of the book of Ezra we meet the man himself, Ezra the priest and scribe. Ezra means ‘help’ in Aramaic. His name probably means ‘God helps’. Ezra led a second group of exiles back to Jerusalem, most likely in the year 458BC. The first group came up with Zerubbabel, and after some delay finished rebuilding the temple in 515BC. There is a gap of almost sixty years between the end of chapter six and chapter seven, as alluded to in the words *after these things* (7:1).

When the first group returned Cyrus was king of Persia. When the temple was finished Darius was king. When Ezra came up Artaxerxes was king of Persia (7:1). He ruled from 464-423BC. During the sixty-year gap Xerxes/Ahasuerus was king. The Jews continued to face opposition during this time (4:6). Most of what we know from this time comes from the book of Esther. In the providence of God this Jewish woman became wife to king Xerxes and saved the Jews from annihilation.

Sixty years means a generational change. The initial resolve to worship the Lord according to what was written in the book of Moses and to live as the holy people of God was not maintained. In particular they did not uphold the requirement to be a separate people. They began to compromise with pagan neighbours in worship, and to intermarry with them. We will learn more of Ezra’s ministry later. For now we will take a closer look at this great man of God.

Skilled Scribe

Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses (7:6). Ezra could trace his family line back to Aaron the chief/first priest. As with the first group to return it was important for him to establish his pedigree, particular because he was a priest. Remember how Zerubbabel told some priests not to minister until they could prove their heritage. They were not starting a new religion but re-establishing true worship according to what was written.

In Jewish tradition Ezra is regarded as a second Moses. If the coming out of Babylon up to Jerusalem is pictured as a second Exodus then here is the second Moses. Ezra was an expert in the law. He was not a giver of the law like Moses but certainly knew the law and taught it to the people. He was an exponent of *the Law of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given* (7:6). ‘Ezra more than any other man stamped Israel with the lasting character as the people of a book’ writes one commentator.

How did Ezra become an expert in the law? *Ezra prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord* (7:10). Yes, he was from a priestly family but a man is not born an expert in the law. Yes, he did have abilities given by God including the gift of scholarship – although we are not told this. What we are told is that he made a conscious decision to study the law of God.

Ezra loved the Scriptures that had been handed down to him. Previous generations had not always felt this way. They could not be bothered with reading the word of God. They thought

they could run their own lives – and of course they did. But they started to live according to their sinful nature. They started to live like their pagan neighbours. They joined their neighbours in worship and even intermarried with these ungodly people.

It is amazing how quickly people become like their heathen neighbours when they stop reading their Bible. Satan's work is virtually complete if he can stop Christian's reading their Bible or hearing the word of God.

Almost a whole generation in our nation could not be bothered reading the Bible. They were too busy getting ahead in life. Some kept going to church but their Bible sat on the bottom shelf in pristine condition. They soon became 'Christmas and Easter' Christians. Their children never heard the Bible read in the home so grew up ignorant of God's word. They have become 'wedding and funeral' Christians. These are the only times many in our society come inside a church building.

Like the Psalmist before him, Ezra loved the word of God. He meditated on it day and night. He committed himself to study the law of the Lord and no doubt committed much of it to memory. From his study he learned the will of God. From reading the Scriptures Daniel learned that the exile would end after seventy years. Ezra learned wonderful things also. He learned how he should live to please God and glorify him. He learned how God was to be worshipped. At that time the people of God were to worship him in the house of God in Jerusalem.

Ezra made a request to the king, the details of which we are not told (7:6). Most probably he asked the king to send him up to Jerusalem so he could worship the God of heaven. Maybe some report had come to him like the one that came to Nehemiah, but we are not told. The Apocryphal book 2Esdras says that the word of the Lord came to Ezra him telling him to go and tell the people of their sin. Like Nehemiah it would have taken courage and much prayer to approach the king. Ezra acknowledged that the good hand of the Lord was upon him at this time (7: 6, 9, 28).

Put Into Practice

Ezra not only committed himself to study the law; he practiced what he learnt. He was a man who not only knew the law, but knew the One who gave the law. He knew God to be mighty in deliverance and in judgment. He knew God was a jealous God and would not give his glory to another. He knew God was merciful and gracious towards his chosen people. Ezra was a man who feared God and kept his commandments. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength* (Deuteronomy 6:5) is what he read in the law and what he believed in his heart.

Ezra acted upon the knowledge he gained from his study of the law. With the king's permission he set out to go to Jerusalem. This was quite an undertaking. He set out on the first day of the first month – the month of Passover. Was he attempting to make this journey like a second Exodus? Some think so. It took Ezra and his group four months to reach Jerusalem travelling along the river Euphrates and then down from the north.

To do what God commands in his word includes going where he sends us. We are commanded by Jesus : *go therefore and make disciples of all nations* (Matthew 28:19). Some think this only applies to some but if you are a disciple of Jesus this command is for you. You

are in this world. You live in a nation. Are you concerned to make Jesus known in this nation, as well as other nations, or have you given up on this command?

We live in one of the most heathen nations on earth. How many of the people in your street go to church? The goddess of materialism receives most attention in our nation. Are you committed to not only hearing the word of God but to living it? Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and **to do it** (7:10).

Teacher of Truth

Finally we read that Ezra *taught statutes and ordinances in Israel* (7:10). What does Jesus tell us to do in the Great Commission? Go into all the world and make disciples, **teaching** them to observe all things I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19). Those who know the law of the Lord are commanded to teach it to others – ‘each one teach one’.

Moses commanded everyone in Israel to teach their children (Deuteronomy 6:7). As an expert in the law Ezra was called to teach in the house of God, but he like all in Israel began teaching in the home. We are to teach those whom the Lord brings before us – children, family and friends. You may be the only person in a position to teach such people if they do not come to the house of God or read the Bible themselves.

Travelling on trains and buses in India I would often think about the people sitting around me. Where were they from and where were they going. The Lord would burden my heart with the thought they might never meet another Christian. The least I could do was give them a tract or let them hear the name of Jesus. Remember the word of God is living and active. It is powerful to convict and convert. Hold the Bible up high for all to see and hear. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Ezra was not ashamed of the law of the Lord. His whole life was focused on, and directed by, the word of God. What about your life? What part does the Bible play in your life? Have you like Ezra set your heart on studying the word of God? If you can read you have no excuse for not doing so.

A poor Indian woman heard the gospel and believed in Jesus. She wanted to read the Bible but she was illiterate. She had never been to school. She was desperate to read God’s word so prayed to the Lord and now she can read. Do you give thanks that you can read this precious book and that you can carry it with you without fear of arrest and imprisonment.

Do you like Ezra do what this book tells you? Or do you tell others what to do but fail to do such things yourself? Do you send your family to church and stay at home yourself? Ezra would have been horrified to hear of such things.

Having studied and practiced what God says in the Bible will you teach it to others – from a sincere heart and in full assurance that Jesus is the way the truth and the life, the only name by which we must be saved?

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