

The Centrality of God's Word in Restoration

Ezra 7

As you know, this summer we are encouraging you to identify an area of your life with God in which you need restoration or in some cases it might not be restoration that is needed, but it is the need for God to do a new thing in your life. Your restoration might be about an area of obedience; it might be a restored hope; it might be a closer walk with God; it might be faithful service in some area.

If we had each of you get up and share what your area of restoration was, we'd probably have 100 different things that are shared. And to see restoration come about, there are probably all sorts of things that God might want to use and is using. But I believe that if we are truly seeking restoration from God's perspective then His Word will be central in that process. There is a centrality of God's Word in restoration.

Last week, in chapters 5 and 6 of Ezra, we saw how God moved through prophets and pagan leaders to enable the people to rebuild the temple. A rebuilt temple was a huge step towards the Jew's relationship with God being restored. But it wasn't full restoration. There was still more to be done. As we come to chapter 7 we begin to see the centrality of God's Word in the Jew's restoration.

In this chapter we are introduced Ezra. And it is through Ezra that we see the truth that God's Word is central in restoration. And so today, I want to walk us through Ezra 7 and then talk about a couple of principles about restoration that we see illustrated in this chapter. The first thing we read here is an introduction to Ezra.

I. Ezra's Introduction (vv. 1-10)

¹ Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra . . .

The *things* referred to here looks back to the events of chapter 6 – the completion of the temple and its dedication. After those *things* the next significant thing to happen in the Jew's restoration was Ezra going up to Jerusalem. We are told that this happened in the *reign of Artaxerxes*. Dates given later in the chapter indicate that this happened 57 years after the events of chapter 6.

Ezra's genealogy is given in verses 1-5. The genealogy provides a link all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses and a descendant of Levi. It was Aaron's descendants who became priests. And so, Ezra comes from the priestly line of Aaron, which gives legitimacy to his future actions in Judah.

⁶ This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.

Ezra was not only a priest; he was also a *scribe*. A *scribe* was one who was a student and an expositor of God's written word. Ezra was *skilled in the law*. He had wisdom and expertise in handling *the law of Moses*. We will see why in a minute.

To this Ezra, Artaxerxes *granted him all that he requested*. We aren't told what this is exactly, but most likely this refers to the authority that he gives Ezra as well as the provisions for reestablishing temple worship in Jerusalem that we read about in this chapter. Ezra received these things because *the hand of the LORD his God was upon him*. This expression communicates that God's favor rested upon Ezra. And because of this favor the Persian king was moved to send Ezra to Jerusalem with all that he needed.

In verse 7, we find a list of some of the groups of the Jews that went with Ezra and then in verse 8 it says:

⁸ He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.

Again we see this expression *the hand of God was upon him*. Here it is called the *good hand*. The gracious hand of God rested upon Ezra and it was that grace, that favor, that brought Ezra safely to Jerusalem. And then we read why the good hand of God rested upon Ezra.

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

If there was ever a model for how any believer should engage God's word, this is it. Ezra set his whole being to *study the law of the LORD*. He sought to discern its true meaning. But he didn't just gain head knowledge, he *practiced it*. He lived it. He sought to obey everything he understood from God's Word. And out of his study and practice, he set his heart *to teach [God's] statutes and ordinances in Israel*. This is why the good hand of God rested upon Ezra and this is why God sent him to Jerusalem.

Rebuilding the temple was a huge step forward in Israel's restoration. But at the heart of their restoration was restoring the people to faithfully living under the instructions of God's word to them. They needed to not only be restored to a place they needed to be restored to a person. And that would only come as the aligned their lives with God's word. And so to help bring them to that place in their restoration, God sent Ezra, one who had committed his life to knowing and doing and teaching God's word.

And so Ezra was the right man, but without the proper authorization he couldn't go and do anything. But as we've seen before in this book, God moves in the hearts of men to accomplish His purposes. He moves Artaxerxes to give Ezra the authorization he will need.

II. Ezra's Authority (11-26)

¹¹ Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:

Artaxerxes issues a formal decree giving Ezra authority to go to Jerusalem. We don't have time to read all of what the decree contains and so I will highlight portions of it. In verses 12-13, Artaxerxes gives permission for any of the Jews living in his kingdom to go with Ezra if they so desire. And then in verse 14 the letter says:

¹⁴ "Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand,

As Ezra is sent to Judah he does so with a copy of the law of God in his hands and with the authority to see if the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem were living according to it. Who better to inquire into such matters than one whose pattern of life was to study it and practice it and teach it?

In 15-20, we read about how Artaxerxes provides the things Ezra will need to ensure that proper sacrifice is offered in the temple. And then as we come to verse 21, within this letter of authorization for Ezra, is a decree that Artaxerxes issues *to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River*. Artaxerxes commands the treasurers to provide certain things as well for Ezra that will be needed for temple worship.

Then in verse 23, we see what is motivating the king to send Ezra and to be so generous to Ezra. The king says:

²³ "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.

Artaxerxes is continuing the Persian policy of encouraging conquered peoples to worship their gods in the hope that the gods would be favorable to the king. He is seeking to avoid God's wrath. And so if he can send Ezra back to Jerusalem with all the resources he needs to make sure the God of Jerusalem is happy then maybe that God will be kind to Artaxerxes and his kingdom. That's Artaxerxes' agenda. But God's agenda is to see His people restored to living in His truth and so He is sending Ezra.

Verse 25:

²⁵ "You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them.

The *wisdom of God* that was in Ezra's hand was the law of God. From the wisdom that Ezra found there he was to *appoint magistrates and judges* who would judge all the people; most likely meaning all the Jews who lived in Judah. These are civil leaders who would enforce civil laws. And so, Ezra is authorized to not only establish appropriate temple worship, but also more broadly he is to see to it that the people are observing the king's laws as well.

The king talks about two kinds of Jews here – those who know the laws of God and those who are ignorant of them. And for those who are ignorant of God's laws, He gives Ezra authorization to teach them. It makes sense that there would be many who were ignorant in light of the collapse of Jewish religious life for so many years due to the exile.

In verse 26, the king then gives Ezra authority to implement different kinds of punishment for those who *will not observe the law of . . . God and the law of the king*. Artaxerxes' desire is that people would observe both of these laws.

And so Artaxerxes gives Ezra authority and he gives him provisions. He sets Ezra up to teach the law of God in Judah and to call people to obedience to it. What Artaxerxes does for political purposes to ensure that there is peace in the western part of his kingdom, God is actually orchestrating that the Jews' restoration might continue.

Now, as we come to verse 27, we see Ezra's response to what the king offers. He offers praise to God.

III. Ezra's Praise (v. 27-28)

²⁷ Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes.

Ezra understands that the favor he is experiencing does not start with an earthly king; it starts with the King of kings. He knows that God is the One who moves in the heart of Artaxerxes to give Ezra favor such that the king sends Ezra with authority and provision to help accomplish God's purpose of restoring His people. Ezra doesn't miss this and his heart-felt response is to praise God. Restoration is not complete. There is much work to be done. But he sees God's hand moving and so he praises Him.

The last part of verse 28, says:

Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Once again we see the phrase *the hand of the LORD my God upon me*. God's favor rested upon him and strengthened him for that task before him.

And so that's the chapter. We are introduced to Ezra. We see the authorization that the king gives to him to go up to Jerusalem and we see his response of praise. As we consider this passage, especially in the context of the rest of the book of Ezra and even Nehemiah, which continues the story of their restoration, there are a couple of principles that stand out.

First, **God's Word is central to our restoration.** Yes, they had returned to the land. Yes, they had rebuilt the temple. But their restoration would not be complete until they were walking according to the law of God. And so that is why God moves in the heart of a pagan king to send Ezra to them.

As you continue through Ezra and Nehemiah, you increasingly see how central God's Word is to their restoration. For instance in Nehemiah 8:13 we read this:

¹³ Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.

And so Ezra reads and reads from the law of God and the text tells us that as they hear the Word and understand it, they are moved to make some decisions to obey God. Nehemiah 10:28-29 says this:

²⁸ Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, ²⁹ are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes;

As they hear God's Word, it does a work within them. They are convicted. Nehemiah 9 tells how they confess their sins to God and here we see them making some commitments to *keep and observe all the commandments of God*. God's Word was central to their restoration.

And it will be central in your restoration as well. Sometimes we just want to get to where we are more comfortable, but restoration will always be about being in a right relationship with God and it is only through God's Word that we understand what that looks like. We need the truth that God's Word provides – truth about our situation, truth about ourselves, truth about what God desires. If you are seeking restoration in any area of your life, but you are not engaging God's Word in that process, you are going to miss some aspect of the restoration that God wants.

We also need the motivation and the convicting power that God's Word provides. It is so clear in Nehemiah that the Word of God is the power that moves them to conviction and to confession and to commitments that honor God. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that God's Word is "*living and active*." There is a power in God's Word that transforms us.

And so, if you are seeking restoration, let me encourage you to be engaging God's Word. And if you really have no idea about how to do that, ask a more mature believer. Ask one of our elders. Ask me. It is vital. God's Word is central to your restoration.

There's a second principle that is illustrated in this chapter: **Your life with the Word might make a difference in other people's restoration.** Without someone like Ezra the Jews most likely would not have found their way back to full restoration. God raises up Ezra to go to the people and uses him to help bring about their restoration.

I want to read Ezra 7:10 again because this says what Ezra's life with the Word looked like:

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

As I think back on different times where I was seeking some kind of restoration, I have often been drawn to people who have this kind of life with God's Word – people who understand God's Word and who live it. These are the people to whom I'm drawn to go for wisdom. I've found that God has spoken to me through such people in ways that help me move towards restoration. He has motivated me through such people. Their life with the Word has made a difference in my path to restoration.

As I've reflected on this chapter this week, I've thought, how great would it be to have a church full of people like Ezra – people who set their hearts to know and to do God's Word and who can then influence others out of that experience. Maybe there would be less need for restoration if this was true. But certainly it would help others move towards restoration.

Let me encourage you to spend some time reflecting on this passage this week. Ask God if you have this kind of life with His Word. And if you sense that you don't, ask Him to help you come to the point where you do. It will be good for you. And it will be good for others because God might want to use you in other people's restoration.

God's Word is central in restoration. Amen.