

SET YOUR HEART

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 7

Seventh Message

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Priestly pedigree, scribal skills

In *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, a senior devil advises a junior devil who is charged with discouraging a new believer from obeying “the Enemy,” who is God:

The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. . . . The more often he feels without acting, the less he will ever be able to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.”¹

Finally, in Ezra 7, we’re going to meet the man for whom the book is named. Ezra was a man who converted the word of God into action. He not only knew the word, he also did the word. How did he convert the word into action? The short answer is he was intentional: he “set his heart.” The long answer is . . . well, let’s look at Ezra 7.

When we decided to preach through the book of Ezra, Paul Taylor told me he wanted to do Ezra 3, which depicts some people rejoicing and other people weeping when the foundation of the temple was finished. Well, I wanted to preach Ezra 3. However, I cut a deal with him. I said, “All right, I’ll give you Ezra 3 if you give me Ezra 7.” Deal. I really wanted to preach Ezra 7 because of my affinity for one verse in it: Ezra 7:10.

In Ezra 6, the returned exiles celebrated the completion of the temple and then observed the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, both of which commemorated the exodus, when the Lord rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt. Exodus 7 picks up the story fifty-seven years later.

Ezra 7:1-6:

Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest— 6 this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

The narrator takes pains to demonstrate Ezra’s priestly pedigree, showing that his line goes all the way back to Aaron, the first chief priest of Israel. He’s a no-doubt-about-it priest, qualified, at least by heritage, for the task God has given him to do, which first of all involves journeying from Babylonia to Judah.

Moreover, Ezra is a scribe, “skilled” in the law: he knew it, he could interpret it, and he could teach it. The first five books of what we call the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, constituted the law, which the Lord revealed to Moses so that he could pass it on to the people.

Ezra’s priestly pedigree and scribal skills, however, may or may not mean anything to a pagan king. It’s the “hand of the Lord” that makes Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, favorably disposed, even to the extent that he grants Ezra everything he wants.

The secret of his influence

Ezra 7:7-9:

And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the

temple servants. 8 And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him.

Ezra leaves Babylonia, but he doesn't leave alone: he's accompanied by a host of other Jews who will help in the worship ministry of the temple. A successful journey was by no means a given. However, Ezra and his fellow travelers were able to make the four-month journey in 458 B.C. (the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign), again, because hand of the Lord was on him, in this case to provide and protect.

Why was the hand, or this case, the "good" hand, of the Lord on Ezra? Because of Ezra's devotion to the law of God, as we will see in Ezra 7:10.

The basic meaning of the word translated "law" (*torah*) is "instruction." The secret of Ezra's influence was his devotion to the instruction of the Lord. The instruction of the Lord is not only in the first five books of the Scriptures but in all the Scriptures. As we devote ourselves to the word of the Lord, the hand of the Lord—that is, his empowering presence—is on us, whether we feel it or not.

What did Ezra do because of his devotion to the law?

Ezra sets his heart

Ezra 7:10:

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.

Ezra set his "heart": his whole being. He "had" set his heart—at some point prior to the events described in Ezra 7. He had decided to devote himself to the law, and he continued to devote himself to the law, in three ways.

First, Ezra had set his heart to "study" the law. The basic meaning for the word translated "study" is "seek." When Ezra studied the law, he made a quest.

Second, Ezra had set his heart to "do" the law. He didn't seek the law simply to know it. He also sought the law in order to put it into practice.

Third, Ezra had set his heart to "teach" the law—specifically, the "statutes and rules" contained in it. As a priest and a scribe, he had a particular calling to pass on what he learned and lived.

Set your heart

Therefore, "set" your heart. Determine to orient yourself to the word of God. Be intentional. Be spontaneous, sure, but also be intentional. Make a plan to engage the word. Consider employing multiple approaches.

I follow a daily Bible-reading schedule that takes me through the Scriptures in three years. I also go on at least one three-day retreat a year during which I read one or two texts repeatedly. Moreover, I'm always diving deep into a text from which I'll be preaching from, such as Ezra 7.

Eric Soderberg, one of our elders, tells of one of the ways he engages the word:

About ten years ago, I read Psalm 24. Then I read it again the next day. I kept re-reading it almost every day, for about the next two years. I memorized it. When I woke up in the middle of the night, for whatever reason, I would recite it to myself. Slowly, I began to pause for longer and longer after reading it.

At some point, I started waiting to see what part of it repeated itself back to me, what the Holy Spirit seemed to be calling to me. I'd then re-read or recite that part again and listen some more. Thoughts would form. Other passages of Scripture would come to mind. When I met up with people to hang out, I'd discuss it. It was being woven in many layers into me.

Eventually though, I decided to move on. I would scan the books of the Bible and pick one, sort of at random. I'd read through it, listening for a passage that the Spirit seemed to be calling to me. I might read a whole book and nothing would surface. So, I'd pick another one. Eventually I'd stop somewhere and spend several months there—again, re-reading it almost daily, and listening for what parts seemed to be calling to me.

Some days, I'll be drawn to a particular word. I'll look it up, find where else it is used, soak in just that word, maybe for a day or a week, then go back to the passage as a whole. Once in a while, I'd take a note or two. But, I've found that writing can detract from listening, so I don't write much.

The word of God is vast beyond all measure, deeper than the ocean, higher than the sky. It never ends. It is alive. It likes to hang out together.

Seek the word

Set your heart to “seek” the word of God. Make a quest. Each time you open the Scriptures, it’s an adventure.

Who knows what you will find? You may find something you’ve never seen before. You may find something you’ve seen a thousand times before but see it in a new way. What will you find? Perhaps insight. Perhaps direction. Perhaps encouragement. Perhaps a challenge. Perhaps a memory. Perhaps something that makes sense of everything. Perhaps you will find a new world.

Not least, set your heart to seek God in the word of God. Who is he? What has he done? What is he doing? What will he do? Especially, seek for how he reveals himself in Christ. Seek Christ in the word, both how he is revealed in the New Testament and how he is anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Who can resist a good treasure hunt, a good mystery, a well-wrapped gift? The treasure, the mystery, the gift is God himself. In all his splendor, he is waiting for us in the Scriptures. He is waiting for those who set their hearts to seek him in the word. “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

Do the word

Set your heart to do the word. Set your heart to seek God in the word of God so that you might do it. Paul promises that if we behold the glory of the Lord as he is revealed in Christ, the Spirit will transform us so that we will be more like Christ, thinking and acting more like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). Living the word is the best way to live, because the word orders us into healthy relationships with God and others.

Oftentimes, this isn’t all that difficult. A few years ago, when we were preaching through the Sermon on the Mount, I was studying Matthew 6:25-34, which begins, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life...” Command: do not be anxious. Can I do that? Seems like a tall order.

As I studied, Jesus’ words in the next verse grabbed me: “Look at the birds of the air . . .” To be honest, up until then, it had never occurred to me to take Jesus literally. For all the times I had read Matthew 6:26, I had never actually obeyed them, even though they’re very easy to obey. I had never, upon reading Jesus’ words, gone outside to look at the birds.

Maybe if I looked at the birds more, I’d be less anxious. When you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. Aren’t you at least a little less anxious when you concentrate on birds?

James says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). If the word gives you something easy to do (“Look at the birds”), do it. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

Teach the word

Finally, set your heart to teach the word.

For years, I had heard Steve Zeisler, a former pastor of our church, tell the story of his first sermon here, which featured a comparison between David and Solomon. He called the sermon “wretched.” Many years ago, a mutual friend of ours, Mark Mitchell, had just completed a doctorate in preaching. Steve and I, along with another one of our pastors, drove to see Mark at Central Peninsula Church, where he served as a pastor, to learn from him. Indeed, I learned a few things.

At one point, I asked Mark what motivates him to preach. He said one of the things is the knowledge that God could use any one sermon to change someone’s life. For example, he cited a sermon by Steve. “That sermon changed my life,” Mark told us. As Mark described the sermon (a comparison between David and Solomon), I recognized it as Steve’s first sermon at PBC. That was the wretched one!

Today, Steve, comments, “I still think any objective evaluation of the sermon would conclude that it was pretty bad, but the instruments God uses are up to him.” You never know how something from God’s word can impact a life.

Now, you don’t have to be a scribe, like Ezra, or a pastor, like Steve, to teach the word in an impactful way. Mostly, you just have to be ready to pass on what’s been meaningful to you from the word. If it’s meaningful to you, it might be meaningful—and helpful—to someone

else. Often when Eric Soderberg meets up with people to hang out, he'll discuss with them whatever text he's been pondering.

If you don't seek the word, you can't do the word. If you don't do the word, you can't teach the word—not without being a hypocrite, anyway. Seeking the word, doing the word, and teaching the word combine to form a virtuous cycle, mutually reinforcing one another. Therefore, like Ezra, set your heart to seek the word, do the word, and teach the word.

Ezra came to Jerusalem not only with a host of other Jews but also with a letter from the king.

Artaxerxes covers all the bases

Ezra 7:11-24:

This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: 12 “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now 13 I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand, 15 and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. 17 With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. 19 The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And whatever else is required for the house

of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury.

21 “And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, 22 up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 23 Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. 24 We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

We have already heard that Artaxerxes, because he was influenced by the Lord, granted Ezra all that he asked. Now we see what the king granted him. Artaxerxes is exceptionally generous and even deferential.

Artaxerxes allows any of the Jews who so choose to accompany Ezra to Jerusalem. He expresses appreciation for the law of Israel. He makes multiple provisions for the worship of the Lord back in the temple in Jerusalem. He does all this so that the God of Israel will look favorably upon him and his dynasty. Like Cyrus and Darius, two other Persian kings who show up in the book of Ezra, Artaxerxes is careful to cover all the bases.

Artaxerxes values the law

Ezra 7:25-26:

“And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. 26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.”

Artaxerxes has already observed that the law of the God of Israel is in the “hand” of Ezra (Ezra 7:14). Now,

the king recognizes the “wisdom” of Ezra’s God that is in his “hand.” In other words, Artaxerxes recognizes the wisdom of the God of Israel contained in the law. As such, the king directs Ezra to appoint judges who are versed in the law and to teach the law to judges who are not versed in it.

Artaxerxes so values the law of the God of Israel that he wants it to be the law of the land in his province “Beyond the River”—that is, west of the Euphrates River. In fact, he orders judgment against those who refuse to obey the law of the God of Israel.

When Moses communicated the law to the people of God in the wilderness, he said this regarding the “statues and rules”: “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deuteronomy 4:6). Artaxerxes, a pagan, has taken notice, just as Moses predicted.

A letter from a supporter

When we seek the word in order to do the word, in order to become more loving and courageous, for example, perhaps others will take notice.

Chuck Colson, who was president of Prison Fellowship, tells this story:

Many years ago now, I received a letter from the pastor of one of the largest mainline churches in New York who had been sending \$25 or \$30 a month as a contribution to Prison Fellowship. He wrote to say that he loved what I was doing in prisons, but he questioned whether he could continue to support me because of my belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. I replied to his letter by explaining that I do what I do precisely because the Scriptures command me to do so. If I questioned the truth or authority of Scripture, I would not do it. “So,” I wrote to him, the thing that you don’t like about me is the thing that causes me to do what you do like.” The next month he sent double his normal contribution.

Ezra responds to what the Lord has done.

Ezra praises God

Ezra 7:27-28:

**Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers,
who put such a thing as this into the heart of**

the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, 28 and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Ezra blesses the Lord: he praises the Lord for his blessings. In this case, the Lord has blessed his people first by motivating Artaxerxes, a pagan king, to “beautify” the temple by arranging for all the sacrificial offerings (Isaiah 60:7). Second, the Lord has blessed Ezra by extending to him his “steadfast love,” which “endures forever toward Israel” (Ezra 3:11). In this case, the Lord’s steadfast love has been expressed by making the Persian king and his officials favorably disposed to Ezra.

For the third time in Ezra 7, we hear that the hand of the Lord, symbolic of his empowering presence, was on Ezra. Recognizing that the hand of the Lord is on him, Ezra has taken courage to gather fellow leaders to return to Jerusalem with him and revive worship in the temple.

The “hand” of the Lord is on Ezra because the law of the Lord is in his “hand” (Ezra 7:14, 25). Of course, the law of the Lord can be in anyone’s hand. In Ezra’s case, the law of the Lord is in his hand because it’s in his heart—because he had set his heart to seek, do, and teach the law.

The journey was daunting. The task was daunting. Nevertheless, Ezra acts—not because he is confident in himself but because he is confident in the Lord. He believes that the Lord will make a way.

The Lord will make a way

After beginning to seek the word some thirty-five years ago, I found a new world: journeys and tasks I couldn’t have imagined.

Set your heart to seek the word, do the word, and teach the word—and the hand of the Lord, his empowering presence, will be on you. Seek God in the word of God in order to do the word and teach the word. There’s no telling what God will call you to do and what he will enable you to do. The Lord will make a way.

Doing the word is sometimes difficult, but oftentimes not. Moreover, doing the word can be a lot of fun, especially when you bless people.

Endnotes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour and Co., MCMXC), 69-70.
- 2 Chuck Colson, *Chuck Colson Speaks* (Uhrichsville, OH: Promise Press, 2000), 137.