

Text: Ezra 7:1-10 (Pew Bible, pg.466)

Title: “By the Book”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – In the late 1800s a young man named Robert Jermain Thomas left his homeland of Wales with his young bride to set sail for China as a missionary. Soon God would move on his heart that the Gospel needed to be taken to the nation of Korea, a land that had for many years been closed to any outside influence, including missionaries. But Thomas felt that the Word of God would have an impact in that land. So he sailed on an American naval ship up a river to a port at the city of Pyongyang, now the capital of North Korea. He took a few Bibles to the shore to give to the people who had gathered there. But Robert Jermain Thomas would immediately be killed by soldiers before he was able to do any more. He was just 27 years old. The soldier who ordered Thomas’ execution took one of those Bibles to his home, ripped out the pages and used the paper as wallpaper to insulate his home. Later he sold his home to another Korean man who began to read the pages of the Bible that were plastered to the walls ... and he was saved! Many years later, that house became a church, and that simple event was part of a great spiritual awakening that swept across Korea in the 1900s. There’s power in the Word of God.

Let’s open our Bibles once again to Ezra 7:1. The greatest catalyst for rebuilding our broken world is the Word of God. The work that God does to rebuild our broken lives is by the Spirit of God applying the Word of God. As we follow the adventure of the Jews who have returned to their homeland to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple there, there’s about to be a great infusion of the life-changing power of the Word of God through the person of a man named Ezra. Now this book we’ve been studying is named after Ezra, but the fact is that he doesn’t show up until about 100 years after Cyrus issued the decree to let the Jews return to rebuild their broken world.

Ezra 7:1 - After these things during the reign of Artaxerxes...

“After these things...” signals to us that about sixty years have passed since the events of Ezra 6. For our ladies who have been studying the book of Esther this semester, what happens during this interval is that a beautiful woman named Esther becomes the queen of King Xerxes, the king of Persia. Then Artaxerxes will become the king and will assist Ezra and later Nehemiah. During this period the excitement surrounding the rebuilding of the Temple had waned. And while the Temple was rebuilt, the worship of the people of God had not been rebuilt. They were satisfied with a mediocre relationship with God and there was even compromise in their relationships with their pagan neighbors.

So the Temple was rebuilt. But the greatest rebuilding that needed to happen was the rebuilding of the lives of the people of God. And that’s where our friend Ezra comes in. We’re grateful that God has allowed us to build the buildings we need for our work as a church. But we must never forget that our greatest work is building people.

What happens here through the end of the book is that a great reformation takes place. And the pattern of Christian history is that whenever reformation takes place people begin to rebuild their lives on the Word of God. They do it “by the Book.”

QUOTE: Martin Luther, the great reformer of the 1500s, wrote: “I have made a covenant with God that He send me neither visions nor dreams nor even angels. I am satisfied with the gift of the Holy Scriptures, which give me abundant instruction and all that I need to know both for this life and for that which is to come.”

Now the verses that follow show us the godly heritage that Ezra brings with him. His spiritual pedigree is outlined for us:

Ezra 7:1 - After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

Ezra comes from a long line of reformers. II Kings 22 tells us about a reformation in the nation of Israel under godly King Josiah. And it was Hilkiah, the high priest, who discovered the Book of the Law buried under junk in the Temple. That discovery led to a great national revival. As you scan down through Ezra 7:2-4 you see several names that probably are not familiar to you. But we come to v.5 and we might recognize some of the names.

Ezra 7:5 - the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—

Ezra is a descendant of the first high priest, Aaron, the brother of Moses. Not all of Ezra’s ancestors are listed here in vv.1-5, but enough are listed to let us know that Ezra has a godly heritage that he brings to the task of rebuilding. There were great men and women along the way who kept passing the faith along to their generation. What a godly heritage!

Are we raising up young Ezra’s and young Esther’s? Are we passing the faith to the next generation? We must!

Ezra 7:6 - 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. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

Take note of that: “For the hand of the Lord his God was on him.”

READ EZRA 7:7-10.

So Ezra comes to the rebuilding project and his greatest tool is the Word of God.

QUESTION: If God has been orchestrating all these events ... if God moved the heart of Cyrus ... if God moved the hearts of the Jews to return ... if God had His watchful eye on the work of rebuilding ... if God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy and preach to the rebuilders ... what purpose did God have in sending Ezra to Jerusalem at this time? It is because the people needed the guidance of God’s Word. As we rebuild our broken worlds we have to do it “by the Book.”

Do we feed the hungry? Yes. Do we help the hurting? Yes. Do we bring relief in disasters? Yes. Do we give a cup of cold water? Yes. Do we help schools? Yes we do. But others can also do that. But no other organization has the task that the church has, and that is to proclaim the truth of God's Word and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is the power that can ultimately change lives like nothing else.

Now I want you remind you what it says about Ezra:

Ezra 7:6b - For the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

Ezra 7:9 - For the gracious hand of his God was on him.

What an amazing thing to say about a woman or a man ... that the gracious hand of God was on them! And why was the hand of God on Ezra? Obviously it was grace. No one deserves this kind of blessing. But also there was something about Ezra's life that positioned him to be blessed by God, favored by God and used by God.

Ezra 7:10 - 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.

The little word "for" can also be translated "because." God's hand was on Ezra because... In fact, the Hebrew word there is word that sounds like our word "key." What was the "key" to Ezra being favored and blessed and used by God in this way? Ezra 7:10 there are three verbs that show us three passions Ezra possessed in His life that were the keys to His usefulness by God. And these are the very same keys for entering the life of God's abundant blessing, favor and power for service:

ILLUSTRATION – Now if you have your keys in your pocket or your purse, take them out and just hold them.

- A key unlocks something that's locked up
- A key starts something
- A key allows access

Jesus said, "If you continue in my word you are my disciples indeed. And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." He also said, "If you obey my commands you will abide in my love even as I have kept my Father's commands and abide in His love."

"Ezra had devoted himself" ... set his heart ... made up his mind ... focused his attention on ... purposed in his heart to do something. Today, I'm praying that the Word of God and the Spirit of God will spark something in you that will cause you to focus your attention like never before on living your life by the Book, the Word of God. Here are the keys that open the door into the blessing, the power, the favor of God:

1. LEARN THE WORD

Ezra 7:10a – "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study ... of the Law of the LORD"

“Study” means an energetic effort to find God’s truth revealed in the Law of the Lord. It means to seek ... to search ... to investigate ... to inquire.

Now we learned early about Ezra’s passion for the Word of God.

Ezra 7:6a - 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.

When it says Ezra was a teacher it means he was a scholar in the Law of Moses, or the Torah. The Torah is sometimes called the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is the Law of the Lord that was given to Moses and includes all the commands that God wanted His people to follow as the unique people of God. This was the Bible of people in OT times.

So Ezra was a teacher was “well versed” in the Law of Moses. That means that he knew the Word of God backwards and forwards. And the Bible here tells us that one of the reasons that God’s *hand* was on Ezra was that Ezra’s *heart* was on the word of God.

QUESTION: When you think about how you spend your waking, non-working hours each week, where is the Word of God in your schedule? How much time do you spend reading the newspaper or surfing the web? How much time do you spend on social media? How much time do you spend watching television, sports or videos? How much time do you spend playing video games? How much time do you spend reading secular books or magazines? I’m not saying that any of those things are necessarily wrong. God allows us to enjoy things in life, including these things I’ve mentioned. But where in all of this is the Word of God? How much time, in comparison, do you spend reading and studying your Bible, and in prayer? How does that compare to the time you spend on other things?

Some of you know the passing percentage of your favorite NFL or college quarterback, but you don’t know where to find the Fruit of the Spirit, or the Ten Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount in your Bible. Some of you spend hours a day connecting with people on Facebook or Twitter, but just a few minutes at most connecting with God in His Word. What’s the deal?

If you want to see the hand of God on your life in a powerful way, set your heart of the study of God’s Word. So the first key is to learn the Word. The next key is to...

2. LIVE THE WORD

Ezra 7:10a - For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD...

To observe doesn’t just mean to observe something like you observe fish in a fish bowl. In the Bible, the word “observe” means to obey. The English Standard Translation says this:

Ezra 7:10 - For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it...

Jesus had this in mind when He gave the Great Commission to His followers:

Matthew 28:20 - and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Notice that Jesus doesn't just say to teach others what He had commanded. He said to teach them to obey what He commanded.

Keep your finger in Ezra 7 and turn into the NT to James 1:22. Look at what it says...

James 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1:23 - Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror

James 1:24 - and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

James 1:25 - But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

ILLUSTRATION – So the Word of God is a mirror. As we read it, it reads us. It reflects the condition of our hearts, souls and minds.

James 1:23 - Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror

Someone joked that James said this one is like a “man,” because a woman would never do that. Guys, suppose that you are getting ready for work and you cut yourself shaving. So you grab a little piece of tissue and you put it on the cut to stop the bleeding. You go on about getting ready and you take another look in the mirror and you see that you've got this piece of bloody tissue stuck to your face. But you get distracted doing something else and you walk away. So you show up at work and you wonder why everyone is looking at you funny. Then it occurs to you. You saw it in the mirror, but you walked away forgetting what you looked like, and now you're embarrassed.

James 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

So we need to learn the Word and live the Word and, the third key is that we need to ...

3. SHARE THE WORD

Now back to Ezra 7.

Ezra 7:10 - 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.

“Decrees,” here, are general principles of God’s Word, and “laws” are specific practices. And these things have to be shared ... they have to be taught to us by pastors and preachers, by Bible study teachers with preschoolers, children, students and adults.

And don’t make the mistake of thinking that this is just for the holy men and women like preachers and missionaries.

Colossians 3:16 - Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

We need to teach and admonish one another with the wisdom of God’s Word. We need to teach our children the Word of God. Of all the things you could give your children, the priority must be to give them the Word of God. Talk about the “Lord of the Word,” and the “Word of the Lord.” Share the Gospel with them. Treasure Jesus and His teachings in your homes.

Some of you have been soaking like sponges. You’ve sat through years of Bible Study Fellowship; you’ve sat in hundreds, if not thousands, of Sunday Bible Study classes; you’ve heard hundreds, if not thousands of sermons. Are you sharing and teaching what you have learned?

Hebrews 5:12 - In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

“By this time you ought to be teachers...” It’s time to take the next step ... to go to the next level.

CONCLUSION

It’s not surprising that God, when He begins a work of rebuilding He will bring us to a new relationship and a new passion for His Word. And as we do we discover that the only way to live our lives under the blessing hand of God is to live them “by the Book.”