

# **Ezra Devoted Himself to Study, Obey and Teach the Bible**

Ezra 7:1-28

Key Verse: 7:10

By Sarah Barry

**“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 gracious hand of his God was on Ezra. The book of Ezra is not so much about Ezra and what he did as it is about the God of Ezra. Ezra devoted himself to study, obey and teach the Bible in the place God put him, and to the people God sent him to serve. He was keenly aware of the problems of the world of his time and his eyes were open to see the problems of God's people whom he taught and for whom he prayed. We can see from this book that Ezra had a deep love relationship with God. He also loved God's people. The hand of God was on him. The phrase (or its equivalent) "the hand of the Lord his God was on him" is repeated 3 times in this chapter and three more times in Chapter 8. (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18,22,31) As we study chapter 7 we want to learn the God of Ezra, who is the God of heaven and the God of Israel. We want to know him and draw closer to him. We want to learn from Ezra how to devote ourselves to the study of and obedience to the word of God, so that God can use us as Bible teachers for our times.

## **1. Ezra comes to Jerusalem**

Look at 7:1 **“After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes King of Persia,”** Ezra came up from Babylon to Jerusalem. He arrived in seventh year of King Artaxerxes, 57 years after the rebuilding of the temple had been completed. So, "After these things" refers to chapter 6, the events of nearly 60 years before--to the building and dedication of the temple of the Lord, and the returned exiles' joyful celebration of the first Passover in the new Temple.(See 6:19-22) At that time God filled the hearts of the people with joy because, as he had moved the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, to begin the construction of the temple, he had also moved the heart of King Darius to enable the completion of the temple of the Lord. They rejoiced in God who kept his promises. They rejoiced to see the hand of God at work in their midst. They rejoiced because God gave them joy (6:21).

Now, nearly 60 years after these joyful events, Ezra came up from Babylon to Jerusalem. During those years, many of the people who had returned from Babylonian exile earlier had enjoyed their freedom. But they had forgotten God

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and his word. On the other hand, Ezra, growing up in Babylon in a godly family, (perhaps also influenced by Daniel) set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach it. He had been prayerfully studying, living, and teaching the Bible. Ezra was a direct descendent of Aaron the first high priest. But it was he himself who made a decision to devote himself to the study of the Scriptures. The king called him, **“Ezra the priest, teacher of the law of the God of heaven.”** Verse 6 says, **“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.”** Furthermore, he had a personal relationship with God. **“The hand of the Lord his God was on him.”** He was conscious of God’s presence with him.

## **2. Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord.**

Read verse 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.”** He devoted himself (set his heart) to study and obey the word. Verse 6 says that he was well versed in the Law of Moses. To be well versed in the word of God starts with our attitude toward the Bible. The Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God. We may not understand everything, but when we make a decision to accept it as God’s word, and prayerfully seek to put into practice what we do understand, God’s Spirit works to teach us and lead us into his truth.

In his autobiography, Billy Graham tells about a turning point in his life. His good friend and fellow evangelist, Charles Templeton, decided to go to Princeton Seminary. He had begun to have doubts about the inspiration of the Scriptures. Billy also read famous theologians like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr who believed the essentials of the gospel, but questioned the absolute authority and inspiration of the Bible. Billy was attending a conference in Forest Home, near Los Angeles. There he met several people who challenged his simple faith in the Bible. He also had several discussions with Henrietta Mears, the conference director, who loved Jesus and believed God’s word. He struggled for several days, then one night he went out for a walk in the woods. He took his Bible and opened it on a stump, knelt down and talked with God. “God, there are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution.” Then the Holy Spirit helped (him) to say it. “Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word - by faith! I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be your inspired Word” When Billy got up from his knees that night he sensed the presence and power of God. Billy Graham’s life and ministry changed from that point.

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The Bible is not like other books. It is God's word, his revelation to us. We do not approach it with a critical mind, but with a humble, learning, prayerful heart and mind. Ezra made a decision to devote himself to the study of the Bible. This requires time and commitment. We should read carefully and pay attention to what the Bible passage says. It is a help to memorize passages and to write down our reflections. Seminary training may or may not help us become well versed in the Bible. Some people find that studying Greek and Hebrew sharpens their understanding of the Bible text. Others find it more helpful to pay attention to the context. We should try to find the meaning the writer of the passage intended. I have found that some form of inductive Bible study (observation, interpretation and application) helps me pay attention to what the Bible is saying. After studying and meditating on the passage itself, we can use whatever tools we have - Study Bibles, commentaries, dictionaries, etc. Our teacher is the Holy Spirit, the Author of the Bible. So we must ask his help. In the spirit of Ezra, we too must devote ourselves to the study and observance of the word. Our Bible study should lead us to God. The Bible is about Jesus. When we are well versed in the word of God, our hearts and minds seek God's solutions and God's direction in the Bible. The Bible is a love letter from God to me. It is not a rule book.

Ezra's Bible study led him to know and love God. It led him to the observance of the law, that is, to obey the law. Love for God is expressed in obedience. If we grow in knowledge, with no obedience, no love for God, we become like the Pharisees. Jesus said, **"If you love me, keep my commands."** (Jn 14:15) Moses taught, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments I give you today are to be on your hearts...Impress them on your children."** **"Be careful to obey."** (Dt 6:3,5,6)

UBF ministry began with Bible study. We invited students from Chun Nam and Chosen Universities to come to English Bible study. Many came to learn English. But Dr. Lee and I believed that God would speak to students through his word. And he did. Korean Students were poor, and fatalistic about the future. After the success of the student revolution (4/19) new hope to reunite the broken country was born. But the decisive power of the military coup de tat (5/16) crushed those hopes and left many young people frustrated and without hope. God spoke through his word. We learned that our hope is in God, not in people. We saw lives changed by the work of God's Spirit through his word. Soon students were studying the Bible together, on campus, in Korean. Their thirst was not for power or material things. It was a thirst for God and a desire to participate in what he was doing. UBF was a student movement. Through the Holy Spirit and the word of God, God

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### **3. King Artaxerxes letter to Ezra (11-26)**

King Artaxerxes addressed his letter to Ezra: **“Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, teacher of the law of the God of heaven: Greetings.”** The king knew and respected Ezra as a Bible teacher. The king knew a lot about how God should be worshiped in the Temple. The king had read the Bible! The king feared God. He said, **“Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and his sons?”** (7:23) He made it clear that he, king Artaxerxes and his seven advisors were sending Ezra to teach the Bible, especially to the exiles (7:14).

The king respected Ezra's integrity and honesty. He entrusted Ezra with a huge amount of gold and silver and instructed him to buy animals and grain and oil to be sacrificed in the temple. Ezra's obedient Bible study and his love for God gave him wisdom in the way he handled gold and silver. (7:15-20) He appointed 12 men to be responsible for the gold and silver and the other treasures they were taking to Jerusalem. He told them, **"You as well as these articles are consecrated to the Lord. Guard them well."** (8:24-29)

The king recognized Ezra's wisdom in his leadership over people. The king knew that Ezra's wisdom came from God's word. The King trusted Ezra to administer justice **"in accordance with the wisdom of your God which you possess"** (7:25-26). Ezra could do these things because he was well versed in the law of the Lord, and the hand of his God was on him.

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When Ezra was ready to leave for Jerusalem, he was worried about carrying so much gold and silver. He was ashamed to ask the king for an armed escort, because he had assured the king, **“the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him,...”** (8:22-23) After making this bold assertion, he called everyone to participate in a fasting prayer meeting by the Ahava Canal. Then they left for Jerusalem. They arrived in the 5th month of the 7th year of King Artaxerxes. The journey took 4 months. They arrived safely. Ezra knew that it was because **“The hand of our God was on us. He protected us from enemies”** (8:31) Even before he left, Ezra praised and thanked God. He had courage because he knew that the hand of his God was on him. (7:27,28)

## 4.Ezra’s Bible Teaching (9,10)

Ezra evidently grew up in Babylon. He became well versed in the Scriptures there. When he got to Jerusalem and continued his Bible study, he found the real problems of his people. They had broken their covenant with God. They had compromised with the people of the land. He saw that his people had deeply offended God. They had not kept themselves separate from the neighboring people with their detestable practices. When God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, to the **“Land flowing with milk and honey”** they enjoyed their freedom. They forgot God and had intermarried with the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites and had followed them into idolatry and corrupt practices. They broke their covenant with God. Because he loved them, he sent them into Babylonian captivity. Now, after 70 years, as Jeremiah had prophesied, they were returning. This remnant who returned had the opportunity to make a new beginning, to live pure and holy lives before God. At first, they did so. Then they fell into moral and spiritual relativism. They had intermarried with the people of the land who did not know or worship God. They were following their idolatrous religions. The leaders and officials led the way.

Someday God’s people would be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy nation. God would send them out to bring the Gentile world to repent and worship the only true Creator God. God will bring about the unity of all things in heaven and on earth in Christ. We studied Eph 3 and learned the secret plan of God to unite Jews and Gentiles and all people in Christ. But this was not the time for unity or compromise with the world. It was the time to be separate. It was time to become a holy nation. The most striking pictures of Ezra the Bible teacher are in Ezra 9 and 10 and Nehemiah 8. All the returned exiles assemble in Jerusalem. It’s raining, but Ezra stands up and teaches them the word of God. Ezra taught the Bible and prayed. He did not tell them to repent. He repented with them. **“I am too ashamed**

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and too disgraced, my God, to lift up my eyes to you. Our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. (9:6) He wept and tore his clothes and repented with them. He said, "We are here before you in our guilt. Not one of us can stand in your presence." (9:15) He prayed and wept until God convicted the people to repent and cast out their godless, unbelieving wives. We are shocked by this solution. But at this time, in this place, this is what God saw needed to be done to preserve his people. We cannot judge God's people of Ezra's time by the New Testament standards. But God does have a message for us in this. We learn that marriage is very important to God. God made marriage and he wants his people to include him in their marriages. In every time and place this problem surfaces in a different way. Even in the time of Noah it was godless marriages that led to God's judgment by the flood. Immorality and the breakdown of families is one great problem of our times. Without God's help and without God's word even Christians can fall into moral relativism. Various state governments have legalized gay marriage. This is clearly against the teaching of God's word.

Pastor Ron talked about Christopher Yuan in one of his recent messages. I read the book (Out of a Far Country) that he and his mother wrote. He shared some very helpful insights which he found in his Bible study. Chris discovered that he was gay when he was young. He tried to change and could not. He tried to find his identity. Finally he accepted himself as he was, a gay man, saying, "God made me this way." Chris went from bad to worse and finally hit the bottom when he found he was HIV+, and went to prison as a drug dealer. He met Jesus in prison. And he found forgiveness through the grace of God and the blood of Jesus. He devoted himself to the study of God's word. He found that his true identity was not in his sexual orientation but in Jesus. He is a child of God, accepted as he is, loved unconditionally by God. One chapter in his book is entitled "Holy Sexuality." He wrote, "The more I studied the Bible I realized that loving God was not about how I felt or what I thought." The Bible says, **"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. This is love for God, to obey his commands"** (1Jn 2:3; 5:3) He concluded that all people are called to "Holy Sexuality. This means either abstinence – celibacy - or marriage and absolute faithfulness to one person of the opposite sex. He discovered as Ezra did, that knowing and loving God is all about God's love and grace to us and our obedience. We search the Scriptures to know and love God and to find out how he wants us to live in our present environment. I am a human being like everyone else. There was a time when I was sorely tempted to give in to an immoral relationship. It is only by God's grace and mercy that I didn't. The gracious hand of my God on me. When I asked his help, he protected me. Once I was attacked by a man who tried to rape

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me, but when I cried out to God for help (as Dt tells us to do) he protected me. What I would not do for love I could not do for hate.

The Bible tells us that as Christians, we belong to God. We must keep the blood bought covenant which Jesus has made with us. It is a matter of life and death. As Christians we must eschew sexual immorality and honor marriage and teach our children the importance of keeping themselves pure before marriage and faithful after marriage. Ezra was not teaching works salvation. He was not using the Bible as a rule book. He could be a Bible teacher because the hand of the Lord was on him. He was full of God's grace and full of joy. (27-28) He thanked and praised God. Ezra had many reasons to be proud. He was a Bible teacher recognized by the king of the Persian Empire. He had enormous wealth and great authority given him by the king. He was the leader of a large group of priests and Levites who were going to Jerusalem on a great mission, at the king's command. But Ezra was not proud. He knew that the Lord, the God of his ancestors had moved the king's heart. He also knew that he could only be successful in this mission if the Lord were with him. He confessed, **"Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered the leaders from Israel to go up with me."** And so Ezra went to Jerusalem in the 7th year of king Artaxerxes, a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. **"For Ezra had devoted himself (set his heart) on the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."**

May we also devote ourselves to study the Bible, obey it and teach it to God's people in our time. May the hand of the Lord be on each one of us.