

AM Ezra 7 A Model to Follow

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Date: 07 June 2026

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[0:00] The book of Ezra to chapter 7. Ezra, the son of Saraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shalom, son of Zadok, son of Ahitob, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Merioth, son of Zerahiah, son of Uzi, son of Buki, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eliezer, son of Aaron, the chief priest.

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. 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.

And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 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. 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.

[2:24] 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.

Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, peace.

And now I make a decree that any one of the people of Israel or the priests or Levites in my kingdom who freely offers to go to Jerusalem may go with you.

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, 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, 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.

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.

[4:03] 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. The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem.

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. 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. Up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cores of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much.

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.

We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, customs or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

[5:38] 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. 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.

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 and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counsellors 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.

Amen. May God bless this reading of his word. Let us pray. Turn again with me to the book of Ezra. I want to focus our attention really on verse 10 of chapter 7.

[7:16] I wish perhaps some of you also follow the daily reading calendar that was drawn up by Robert Murray McSheen. And I remember a few months ago reading this section and this verse just leaped off the page.

And I thought I must preach on this. It's one of those verses that you just think it's just made for a sermon. Let me give you some background first of all before we look at the verse in particular.

The book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah tell the story of God's faithfulness to his covenant people. They were a people who had sinned and turned away from him.

And who had disobeyed his law and forsaken the terms of his covenant and who had been punished. That punishment took the form of the destruction of Jerusalem.

This was a punishment that had been foretold through many generations. But the warnings had not been heeded.

[8:49] One of the warnings comes in the prophecy of Micah. Chapter 3 verse 12. Zion shall be ploughed as a field. Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.

And the mountain of the house a wooded height. The mountain of the house being the temple mount. The mount on which the temple stood. It would be a wooded height.

It's like driving down the Edinburgh Road into Dumfries and you come through, is it Lockerbriggs? Is that what you call it? And you see the old factory on the left.

And there's really quite sizable trees growing out of this derelict building. And this is what the temple mount was going to be.

A wooded height. Derelict trees growing wild where once the people gathered for the worship of God.

[9:50] And God's judgment of his people Israel began in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who besieged Jerusalem in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, in 587 BC.

And as the book of Daniel puts it in its opening verse, or verses, and the Lord, this is so significant, and the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.

This, make no mistake about it, was the Lord's doing. And it was what he had said he would do at the time he had made his covenant with Israel.

If you want a key that helps you interpret the whole of the Old Testament, then Leviticus chapter 26 and Deuteronomy chapter 28 are the two very important passages in the Old Testament that set out in the clearest possible terms what the Lord said he would do to his people if they would turn away from him and break his covenant that he had made with them.

Listen to these words from Leviticus 26, 27 to 33. But if in spite of this, that's all the warnings and partial judgments that God would bring upon his people for their rebellion and sin.

[11:28] But if in spite of this you will not listen to me but walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you in fury. And I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins.

and I will lay your cities waste and make your sanctuaries desolate and I will not smell your pleasing aromas.

And I myself will devastate the land so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. And I will scatter you among the nations and I will unsheathe the sword after you and your land shall be a desolation and your cities shall be a waste.

But the Lord also provided a way of salvation and restoration in the terms of his covenant too. Of this he also spoke in Leviticus chapter 26.

But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me and also in walking contrary to me so that I walked contrary to them and

brought them into the land of their enemies if then their uncircumcised heart is humble and they make amends for their iniquity then I will remember my covenant with Jacob and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham and I will remember the land I will not spurn them neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them for I am the Lord their God.

[13:29] And the Lord is true to his word. And when the allotted time had passed we read in the opening verses of the book of Ezra in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing whoever is among you of all his people may his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord the God of Israel.

And in the first wave some 42,360 Jews returned to Judah from Babylon under the leadership of Zerubbabel and others.

You can read about that in Ezra chapter 2. The returning exiles rebuilt the altar and in spite of much and long and continual opposition they eventually after many years rebuilt the temple and reinstituted the worship of God at the temple.

They observed the Passover the Feast of Unleavened Bread and you can read about those things in Ezra chapters 3 to 6 and now in chapter 7 we read about the coming of Ezra from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

this man had a flawless pedigree. His family history was outstanding for he was born a son of Aaron the chief priest as verse 5 of chapter 7 tells us and we're told it was this Ezra this Ezra a son of the very first high priest of Israel who went up to Jerusalem from Babylonia.

[15:47] We're also told that he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given. And a further piece of information we're given about Ezra perhaps hints at the position that Ezra may have occupied within what we might call the imperial civil service of Persia because we're told in verse 6 and the king granted him all that he asked.

Now these words might be a hint that Ezra had some kind of access to the king of Persia who at this time was King Artaxerxes and he reigned from about 464 to 424 BC.

It's speculation but perhaps Ezra served the king as a special advisor what they call spads these days special advisor within the department of Jewish affairs perhaps he was the permanent secretary or whatever so it's quite possible that the letter that we've read in chapter 7 was a letter that King Artaxerxes may have said to Ezra draw up a letter for me so that I can sign it and it's possible that Ezra composed the letter because the detail in it seems to be beyond what a Persian king would have known with regard to the worship that took place in Jerusalem so it's possible that Ezra framed the letter drew up the letter the king read it yes I'm happy with that and signed it and this was Ezra's authorization anyway one further thing we're told here about

Ezra in verse 6 of chapter 7 is that the hand of the Lord his God was on him and that's a note that is sounded repeatedly through the book of Ezra and it reminds us that all of these events that are taking place that are unfolding through the short book fall under the powerful and holy and wise preserving hand of God's providence now Ezra's task is enormous he is to oversee the implementation of the worship of God in the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem in particular look at verse 23 of chapter 7 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 and then verse 25 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 so what a massive commission Ezra had received what an onerous responsibility lay upon his shoulders doubtless he would have fainted under the pressure but for this I took courage he says in verse 28 for the hand of the Lord my God was on me it was the Lord's doing blessed be the Lord the God of our fathers who put such a thing into the heart of the king to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty officers verses 27 28 this was the Lord's doing and it was marvelous in our eyes but there is this one verse that I want to draw your attention to in particular in the seventh chapter of

[20:20] Ezra and it's verse 10 verse 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 this verse tells us so much about the man the

man of God the man whom God had prepared and whom God used for the reforming reviving and the shaping of a whole nation it tells us three things about him that will also do us great good if we apply them to ourselves first of all he had set his heart to study the law of the Lord second he was not just content to study the law of the Lord but to do it to put it into practice in his own life and then thirdly neither was he content to keep this all to himself he wanted to use the knowledge and the gifts that God had given him in the service of the people of

God and in this case to teach God's statutes and rules in Israel so let's think about this verse under these three headings first of all he had set his heart to study the law of the Lord Ezra is an example of the blessed man of Psalm 1 blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of scoffers but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night and that's Ezra that's Ezra he had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and the language that is used here speaks of both a focused approach and an intensity of approach to set the heart means to focus one's efforts and priorities for

Ezra the most important thing he did each day was to study the word of God everything else was set aside was put if you like out of focus his mind was focused on this one thing the word of God was paramount it occupied his whole attention he set his heart he was focused on the study of the law of the Lord and that's the attitude of heart that we see in Mary the sister of Martha when Jesus came to visit their home we're told that Martha welcomed him into her house and she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his word but Martha was distracted by much serving and you know what happened next is a well known story Martha complains to Jesus that her sister!

isn't helping with the preparations for the meal and Jesus response Martha Martha you are anxious and troubled about many things but one thing is necessary Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her one thing is necessary listen to the Lord's voice speaking to you this morning he's saying one thing is necessary but one thing I do says the apostle Paul to the Philippians that I may know him that I may know him I press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus these followers of Jesus they were all focused upon the word that they might know him they might know his mind his will his heart and for us friends we need to show the same focus in our reading and studying of the

Bible it requires effort it requires dedication of oneself to the task in hand we need to set our heart on this can you say with the psalmist my soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times can you say with the psalmist your testimonies are my delight if you honestly can't say that then will you pray with the psalmist incline my heart to your testimonies so Ezra had this focused approach he had set his heart but these words also speak about an intense approach as well to study here speaks of a seeking a pursuing after something Ezra was intent on achieving what he set out to do with regard to the law of the

[26:08] Lord he worked hard in his studies until he achieved his goal remember what we read about him in verse 7 he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses how did he become skilled how does one become skilled in the word of God as one older mature Christian said to me when as a young student at the Irish Baptist College there are no shortcuts there are no shortcuts it takes time it takes effort to become skilled it can't be done in fits and starts it is constant it's continual it is something to be sought after something to be pursued!

There is an intensity as well as a focus in this kind of study if we are to be skilled now the root of that word skilled is speedy or quick someone who can do their work quickly is able and super competent at their tasks they make it look easy they make it look effortless

I was saying to the children earlier when you read the Bible ask questions is there a promise to claim is there a sin to avoid is there an example to follow and such like well here is there an example to follow you bet there is Ezra is an example it's a model for us to follow study study set your heart to study the law of the Lord and secondly I want to turn your attention to the next phrase in verse 10 which is vitally important and to do it how easy if we just took a pair of scissors and cut those words out from the verse and if it simply said Ezra set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to teach God's statutes and rules in

Israel we would think that the verse was complete wouldn't we but these little words and to do it are of vital practical importance they are of super importance was all this study of the law of the Lord just for the sake of accumulating knowledge of putting together some kind of theological database no it wasn't because Ezra was determined to bring all his knowledge of the law of the Lord into

practice in his own life he wanted to be he longed to be obedient to his Lord and God the word of God my friends must be worked out in the life of the believer it must show itself in obedience to all the

Lord's commands you remember how the Lord Jesus made this ever so clear to his disciples when he said if you love me you will keep my commandments and the apostle Paul also emphasized this vitally important aspect that lies behind and undergirds all Christian ministry and service turn with me to 2 Timothy chapter 2 and the verses that follow on from the one we just looked at in verse 15 see in this passage the warning about two men called Hymenaeus and Philetus in verse 17 and then look further down and see this statement in verse 19 but God's firm foundation stands bearing this seal the

[31 : 45] Lord knows those who are his and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity and then we have this interesting parable in verses 21 and 22 now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay some for honorable use some for dishonorable therefore if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable he will be a vessel for honorable use set apart as holy useful to the master of the house ready for every good work and then follows more close personal application for Timothy verse 24 so flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness and so forth so what kind of vessels are useful to the master of the house those that are cleansed from what is dishonorable and set apart as holy ready for every good work that's a heart searching application isn't it we need to be cleansed vessels when we read the word of

God and we see a sin to avoid we need to turn from that sin and ask for the Lord's cleansing and this is also very important to remember because this is what gives power and conviction to the witness of Christian people there is something it's really hard to explain and to define but there is definitely something about the life of a believer who takes God seriously who loves the word of God and whose life is lived in such a way that honors God and is also so careful and meticulous to walk according to

God's ways we see that exemplified in scripture in men such as Daniel and his three Hebrew friends Shadrach Meshach and Abednego they're different there's something about them in men such as Ezra when he in the next chapters prays regarding the sins of the people and his prayer and his example melt the nation into repentance or of a man like Nehemiah when he confronts the nobles of Judah who were so badly mistreating their fellow Jews it was the example of Nehemiah's utter integrity as well as the words that came from his mouth words of rebuke that won the day the words were backed up by a life of utter godliness and integrity and they carried a power of conviction or think of the apostle

Paul who could write and this is amazing Philippians 4 verse 9 what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me practice these things and the God of peace will be with you and he could write those words without any colour coming into his cheeks what a man of godly integrity what you have not only learned and received and heard but what your eyes have actually seen in my life you practice these things too and the God of peace will be with you to study the word but to fail to let it have full sway over our life is to invite the world's hatred and scorn and have we not had our belly full of such scorn remember the words of

Paul in Romans 2 24 for as it is written the name of God is blasphemed amongst! the Gentiles because of you and what kind of behavior invites this kind of response verse 23 you who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law you see grace is far far far more important than gifts in the Lord's work we can speak with the tongues of men and of angels but if we have not love we are nothing but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal and oh those words near the end of the sermon on the mount in Matthew chapter 7 verses 21 to 23 not everyone who says to me Lord Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven on that day many will say to me Lord did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name and then

[37 : 50] I will declare to them I never knew you depart from me you workers of lawlessness you see it's grace not gifts that count I'm reminded of a story about a preacher that Spurgeon once spoke of I think he mentioned this in his lectures to his students it's rather humorous but also tragic this preacher's sermons were so good but his life was so bad that people used to stay about him when he was in the pulpit he should never get out of it and when he was out of the pulpit he should never get into it the contradiction of the gifted speech but the unholy life don't do what

I do do what I say is never an effective evangelistic strategy it will convince no one this is why we all need to be like Ezra in this respect men and women of integrity he set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to put it into practice that's why James says in his letter be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourselves Ezra set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it so that's the second thing one more one more thing thirdly it's also said of Ezra that he had set his heart to teach his statutes and rules in Israel to study to do and then thirdly to teach and here the focus is on Ezra's zeal in fulfilling the ministry that the

Lord had given to him here was a man who did not keep to himself the precious treasures of the word of God but who had a heart to see others come into the light of God's truth and to experience the blessings and the benefits the word of God brings here also was a man who knew that God uses means to accomplish his purposes in this case how is Israel to know how to worship the Lord how are they to please him by walking in his ways answer by the teaching ministry of priests and scribes under the leadership of Ezra how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed and how are they to believe upon him of whom they have not heard and how are they to hear without someone preaching so faith faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ this is God's purposes remember what Paul said to the Corinthians for since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom it pleased God through through the instrumentality by the means of the folly of what we preach to save those who believe the preaching and the teaching of the word of God is absolutely key and of vital importance in the foundation and building up of the church of God on the day of Pentecost the church in Jerusalem grew massively in just one day through the preaching of the apostle Peter when 3,000 were added to the number of the church and what did they do after that they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching but let's not forget the other side of that coin the apostles had to devote themselves to providing the apostles teaching and that involved much prayer and hard work that's why

Paul says to Timothy let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor especially those who labor who toil it's hard work in preaching and in teaching this is a spiritual work a work the success of which and I'm thinking of that in terms of eternity not in terms of time for there are times when Christian work seems successful now but will not be seen as successful in the day of judgment and there are times when the work of God seems unsuccessful now but will be truly successful as seen in the day of judgment but this is a spiritual work it was because the Lord's hand was upon Ezra that the work prospered it was a spiritual work needing the work of the spirit to prosper it and for this spiritual prospering he gave thanks not to himself he gave thanks to the [43:33] Lord who had prospered it this is the reason why the early apostles and leaders of the church in Jerusalem refused to be distracted from their primary responsibilities they devoted themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word you think of Paul too and his zeal in Ephesus reminding the Ephesian elders of his earlier ministry he said I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ there was a man who gave himself to preaching and teaching and so he hands on the baton to Timothy and says preach the word be ready in season and out of season there will be times when the word of God will be fashionable preach the truth in those times but when it goes out of fashion don't follow the fads and trends of the world stick to your task preach and teach the word of

God even when it's out of season reprove rebuke exhort with complete patience and teaching words that were spoken at my ordination service almost 40 years ago as for you always be sober minded endure suffering do the work of an evangelist fulfill your ministry because this is how God creates and then builds up his church in the world so let's follow the example of Ezra whatever our calling is these words apply to us all for Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules to Israel may God bless his word to us now on the back of the announcement