

Established in the Word

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[0 : 0 0] Will you join me in prayer?

Lord, even as we have just sung, now we pray that you would speak to us that through your word, and in your word and by your word, we would hear you speak to us.

Lord, that our eyes may be lifted up to see the greatness of your glory, that our hearts may be turned to treasure you above all things, that our wills may be moved to follow you and obey you in all that you instruct us to, Lord, that we might know the depth and the riches of your love and grace in Christ more deeply, and that we would truly worship you in all that we do here, and as we scatter this coming week.

Speak, O Lord, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I've started cooking salmon this year.

If you've ever cooked salmon, it's a wonderful food. It's rich in protein and good for you. It's also hard to cook. It's really easy for it to be underdone and still a little pink, and I know some people kind of prefer that, but I'm a little squeamish, so I like my fish cooked, and yet it's really easy to overcook it and to make it really dry and pretty impalatable, and so I'm sure that's not a word.

[1 : 5 2] Unpalatable. There we go. Let's try that again. Unpalatable. So a couple of months ago, I was wandering around Bed Bath & Beyond because I had a free half hour in my life and found on the discount rack a instant read meat thermometer, which I have never had before, and it has revolutionized salmon cooking because now I stick the little thing in and I set the alarm to go off when it hits 145 degrees, and lo and behold, we have had wonderful salmon ever since.

Now, obviously eating salmon is not a very important thing in our life in the big picture. It is not a necessity, but I wonder if in other more essential things in our lives, we similarly miss essential tools that help us to do the things that we want to do well.

It could be as something mechanical and physical as we put gas in our car so that when we're driving our kids to school, we don't run out of gas and fail to deliver them on time.

It might be much less material, like trying to engage in a relationship and yet forsake love as a part of it. I wonder too if this is true in our spiritual lives as well.

Whether we are in a desire to know God conducting ourselves in a way that actually takes advantage of and utilizes the tools that God has given us to know Him rightly.

[3 : 3 6] The things that God has designed for us so that we might flourish spiritually. It is to this question this morning, I believe, that the book of Ezra speaks to.

We are in Ezra chapter 7. If you're reading the Pew Bibles, it's page 366. And if you were visiting or just knew, just remember, Ezra is the book about God returning His people to His promised land and rebuilding them as His people.

What we've seen is that after they were taken away by exile and Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was destroyed, 50 years later, God comes and He takes His people and He begins to return them in 538 B.C. onwards.

God moved in the hearts of Cyrus and then Darius, the kings of Persia, to allow the people of God to return to their land and not only to return to their land and to settle there, but to reestablish the worship of God in the temple of Jerusalem.

So they rebuild the altar, they rebuild the temple, they reinstate the worship of God that He had instructed in the Old Testament, finishing that project in 516 B.C.

[4 : 56] as we see at the end of Ezra, chapter 6. And this is what the first six chapters of the book of Ezra is about. And then as we get to chapter 7 and what comes afterwards, we see a new movement of God establishing His people, less in the physical movement of people and building of buildings and more in the spiritual building of His people in various ways.

So what is God up to in Ezra, chapter 7? Well, let's go ahead and read it together and then we'll consider what He has to say to us this morning.

Now, after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, 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 Marioth, son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Buki, son of Abishwa, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, 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, and 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.

[6 : 44] 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.

And 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 law, Lord, and his statutes for Israel.

Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe, the Lord of the God of heaven, peace. And now, I make a decree that any one of the people of Israel or their 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 freewill offerings from the people and the priests vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem.

[8 : 09] 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.

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 a hundred talents of silver a hundred cores of wheat a hundred baths of wine a 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 custom or toll on any one of the priests the Levites the singers or the doorkeepers the temple servants or other servants of this house of God 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 upon him whether for death or for banishment for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment blessed be the God 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 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 friends this morning what I want us to see is that as God is rebuilding his people he establishes them by giving them his word we're going to look at how in this passage God is raising up Ezra to be the instrument through which his word is reestablished in the people of God as they are reestablishing themselves in the promised land and then we will think about how it is that God does that as well today in the church so let's first look at how God raises up and establishes his people through Ezra bringing the word the scriptures to his people as you see in this verse we are now 50-60 years after the end of chapter 6

[11 : 39] Artaxerxes is a later king of Persia and we have now moved almost a whole generation and in this new movement this new historical movement God moves the heart of the king to respond to what seems to be a request from Ezra that Ezra might return and bring the word of God to his people and what you see in the first five verses is a bit of his CV who is Ezra well most importantly he is the descendant of Aaron you remember Aaron the partner with Moses when God in the Exodus brought his people out of Egypt and established them it was Aaron and his sons who were the priests who were in charge of the worship of God in the tabernacle and then later his descendants in the temple this was the descendant and the lineage of the people who were meant to keep the word of God and to teach the word of God and to follow through with the worship of God according to the word of God in the temple and so

Ezra is established as one who has the lineage and the pedigree to take up this role but even more than that you see that the writer here is repeating to us over and over and over again what is the most important thing about Ezra it is that he is a man of the scriptures that he knows the law of Moses it is almost like a tagline in this in this passage if you look at look at verse 6 he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses verse 10 he set his heart to study the law of the Lord verse 12 to Ezra the priest the scribe of the law of the God of heaven and so on and so forth verse 14 and verse 21 and verse 23 in verse 25 and verse 26 over and over and over again this is who Ezra is he is the man of God's law and he is bringing it to his people and when you look back at verse 10 look with me at verse 10 because it's not just that he had a passing familiarity or that he happened to carry around a book with him but when verse 10

Ezra had set his heart to do three things he studied the law he immersed himself in it he dove into it so that he knew it inside out he probably memorized it and meditated upon it he studied God's law the second thing that he did is to do it he didn't simply read the book as a place to gain information but he said this book is the rule of my life this book is God's instruction on how I ought to live my life and so I will do all that it says and then thirdly to teach to teach his statutes and rules that he wants to not only know it and to do it to be a man who sits under God's word as he knows it but to be one who then overflows with God's word that others around him might know that his fellow brother and sister Jews the people of God would know what God's word says and this is what we see for Ezra

God's word was not an accessory but it was a necessity for his life it was the title that the king gave him one who knew God's law now we need to stop and think why was this so important wouldn't this have been normal well in fact we know that it was not though God had given his law in many ways and when you think back to the covenant that God made with his people and Moses if you will obey my commandments and follow my laws you will be my God and I will be your people yet we know if you read the story of Israel that is as the kingdom was created how quickly the kings of the northern kingdom turned away and the southern kingdom following after turned away from the law of God and the instructions that God had given them how often they went their own way how often they neglected the word of God and trusted in their own thoughts and their own ideas about what it would mean to be God's people and it got so bad that when we get to the end of 2nd Chronicles which is near the end of the history of the kingdom

Josiah is raised up as a king who loves God and wants to know him and during his reign the priest found the word of God as if it had been something that had been left in some back storage room and nobody knew where it was and nobody had been reading it and no one knew what it said for seemingly generations and he brings it back to the people and he reads it to the people and it leads them to repentance and a moment of renewal and yet it does not last such that just two chapters later in 2nd Chronicles 36 the writer says this all the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful following the abominations of the nations and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had made holy in Jerusalem and the prophet

[17 : 28] Jeremiah proclaiming to the people at the same time about the reason for their judgment said this in Jeremiah 7 23 but this command I gave them obey my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people and walk in the way that I command you that it may be well with you but they did not obey or incline their ear but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts and went backwards and not forwards from the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them day after day yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear but stiffened their neck they did worse than their fathers you see as God was reestablishing this people he was trying to heal trying to repair something that had been broken not just in the exile but long before the exile happened that God's people had forsaken his word and his instructions and had in their pride in their arrogance in their stiff neckness in their independence they had said we want to do this our way not God's way and in fact this was one of the major reasons why the exodus happened and the judgment came because the people would not turn back to the Lord and listen to his word and so as God is bringing his people back from the exodus as he is rebuilding his people in the promised land as he is fulfilling the promises that the people may have thought were gone forever

God is saying and I am going to establish my people by putting my word in the center of who you are and how you live friends I wonder if we recognize some of those characteristics of Israel in our own hearts how often do we wonder if God is really right in what he says how often do we think I know how to handle this situation I don't need God's word to tell me how to do this how often do we simply get so busy with the very mundane tasks of our everyday lives that we forget God's word one day two days maybe a week it turns into a month whether it's benign neglect or hard-hearted unwillingness to hear what God has to say to us when we want to do our own thing how much we are like

Israel in this way how often we forsake God's word and yet the good news is that just like Israel God is pursuing us to call us to himself it's remarkable when you look through this chapter 7 that the other theme besides the establishment of God's word is that God has done this God moved in the heart of Artaxerxes God's hand was on Ezra God provided all the things necessary for them to return the decree of the king the supplies for the worship in the temple the freedom from taxation in the land beyond the river which is basically Jerusalem and the promised land again that God provided all of these things so that they could go and dwell in the land and be provided for so that they could focus on knowing

God in his word just as God's hand worked through Nebuchadnezzar to take them into exile just as God's hand had worked through Cyrus and Darius to return them to the land now God was raising up through Artaxerxes Ezra to establish the word among the people God raised up a man who would bring this to the people in a special way and through him God was saying to his people if you are to be my people you must have my word and you must make it central to who you are and I will move the heart of kings and kingdoms so that you will have my word so we see this is the next building block just as through

Zerubbabel and Yeshua God established the people back in the land they settled they built the altar in the temple now God through Ezra is establishing the word of God the law in the people and what we will see in the coming chapters is God is going to keep working on other aspects of the people of God their dependence on him in prayer and in fasting we will see their purification of the people at the end of the book of Ezra as he addresses some of the ways that they have wandered from his law this is what we will see for the rest of the book of Ezra as God in these building blocks continuing to reestablish his people to be the people that God had called them to be but we see however that this is not just an isolated incident in the storyline of the scriptures this is not simply how

[23 : 44] God was restoring what was broken in Israel at that time but we see that God is always establishing his people through the scriptures through his word and specifically now for us in the church age today this is still what God is doing among us think with me about the sweep of what we see in the rest of the Bible about the word we see that the church was foretold to be to be to be a place where God would dwell among his people in the law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people and then as Jesus comes on the scene and as he enters into his ministry and is sent out into the wilderness and is tempted by the tempter he turns and the first thing that he says to them to him in response to the temptation to do things outside of

God's plan is this man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God Jesus as he enters into his ministry is establishing this is what it means first of all he's quoting from Deuteronomy 8 he's using the Old Testament scriptures to combat this temptation to forsake God's ways but then the very thing that he quotes is to say we cannot live apart from God's word just as bread is necessary to sustain our physical bodies so it is that the word of God the scriptures are necessary for us spiritually to flourish and to live we see this as God establishes the church in Acts 2 42 when the new believers after

Jesus resurrection gathered what did they do they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching as a central practice of what they're doing and then you see as Paul's giving instruction to Timothy in 1st and 2nd Timothy passing along to the next generation of leaders what does it mean to be God's people he says devote yourselves to the public reading of scripture to exhortation and to teaching in 1st Timothy 4 13 of course in 2nd Timothy 3 15 and 16 he reminds Timothy how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching for reproof for correction and for training in righteousness and friends we see this throughout not only the rest of the scriptures but then the rest of church history up to this day that where the word of

God is established the church of God flourishes and the people of God remain faithful and we've seen the church wander away again and again and God call her back again and again to the scriptures and when this is the centerpiece of how we know God then the people of God flourish and are the people that God designed us to be when the word of God is proclaimed and preached and studied and shared and obeyed when it is treasured and honored and passed along from generation to generation this is when God's people flourish so the question for us what will we do with it will we continue to try to cook our salmon without a meat thermometer will we continue to try to know God and ignore his word to us we continue to try to find our way spiritually and yet ignore the very thing that

God has given us his revelation to us do we believe with desperate need that God's word is essential to our lives or do we see it as simply accessory you know I recall sitting with a woman who was facing a terminal illness as we were talking about her life and how she was doing it was remarkable her joy her happiness her contentment and you know one of the things she said is I've been in a lot of pain recently I'm glad I studied God's word before because I can't do it now I can't focus I can't concentrate but it was so clear that God's word had been so established in her heart that as she faced what is for all of us one of the hardest things in life

[29 : 21] God's word established her it's a remarkable thing so the question for us is will we be those who follow in the pattern of Ezra will we be women and men who study the word of God who do the word of God and who teach the word of God now you may be sitting there saying yes but I don't know where to start let me give you some help first of all get a Bible sorry it's really basic get one of these find it pull it down off of your bookshelf pull it out of the closet wherever you have one make sure you have one if you don't have one take the one from the pew in front of you it is our joy for you to have it make sure you have one and

I know for some of you that you read this on your digital paraphernalia of whatever sort and that's okay but I will still implore you get a physical copy of the Bible and have it available in your life put it on your bedside table put it on your breakfast table put it in a place where you will see it and be reminded of it and then start reading it read it every day if you don't know how to do this there are lots of reading plans I think there's some back called something in gold anyway what's it called anyway it's back there it's a yellow pamphlet with a reading plan okay if you want help because you think if I read it I don't understand it there are some great books out there that can be companions to your daily Bible reading there's one by there's one called

For the Love of God by D. Carson that just takes one of the passages in a this is what's going on in this passage it's a wonderful help for you to begin to do that and I know I said get a book but you know what the ESV Bible app is awesome it has those reading plans built into the app you just have to click along the icons on the bottom go find a plan and you know what if a year long plan is way too to help you get started with doing it and I know some of you are thinking I don't have two minutes to rub together my entire day you have no idea how busy I am well you know what the ESV Bible app you can hit the little play button and it will read it to you you don't even have to look at it the word of

God will be read to find a way to hear God's word every day and if you find yourself reading it and you don't know what to do with it then come talk to us come talk to the pastoral staff come talk to the elders talk to your small group leaders talk to your friends say how do you read the Bible how do you find it profitable there all sorts of great materials out there to just simply get you started simple questions like what does it say about God what does it say about humanity what does it say about sin what does it say about salvation just ask those four questions it'll be a great time but read God's word listen to God's word now look

I want to confess to you that as I prepared for this I was convicted when I wake up in the morning you know what I tend to do I pull this out it's on silent right now but and I turn it on and you know what I don't do I don't go to my Bible app and read my Bible first I often check my email or I check the news or I see if the Golden State Warriors won or whatever it is and I was challenged as I was thinking about this to say for me to follow in the pattern of Ezra how do I make reading my Bible the first thing that I do in the morning and I know if you have a screaming baby it's not going to be the first thing in the morning you're going to get to do but make it the first thing you do when you have the Bible and friends it's not just reading it but it's also meditating on it the

[34 : 37] Bible isn't just a data book for us to get info out of and so we're meant to read it and to chew on it and to think about it so how do you keep God's word in front of you during the day do you put post it on your mirror in the morning while you're shaving that have scripture so that you can remember God's word your screen saver the thing that when your screen goes blank what comes up put God's word on it if you want a devotion that helps you meditate on God's word Spurgeon's morning and evening is a beautiful short devotional reading to just read alongside God's word where he will help you think deeply about a small portion of scripture for a few minutes and again there's an app for that if you can't get the book part there's an app for it that you can get for free meditate on God's word in your own life but meditate on

God's word in our community as well obviously I'm preaching to the crowd because you're here but make sure that you value the preaching of God's word when you go on vacation think about joining a small group so that every week basically what we do in small group is we take God's word and we meditate on it together we discuss it and talk about what does it mean and how is it supposed to change our life that's what small group is is a chance to meditate on God's word together now I know some of you may be here and you're wondering well I don't know if I trust God's word and that's a question that's reasonable there are lots of people asking questions you read popular media and there are all sorts of direct and indirect insinuations that God's word is not actually that this Bible is not actually trustworthy friends I'm not going to give you an apologetic this morning for it but what

I do want to say is there's a book stall downstairs and there's some great books down there Peter Williams Can We Trust the Gospels a great book to start with to answer some of your questions about is this really reliable there's another one down there by Paul Barnett are the New Testament documents reliable there's another much bigger one on the Old Testament by Kenneth Kitchen the old on the reliability of the Old Testament there are good answers to the questions that you have don't allow yourself to wander in doubt but pursue the answers that you're seeking because they're there so study God's word but we also need to set our hearts ready to obey it this is what John Stott a great 20th century Christian statesman said we need to repent of the haughty ways in which we sometimes stand in judgment upon scripture and must learn to sit humbly under its judgments instead if we come to scripture with our minds made up expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of

God's then indeed he will not speak to us and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices we must allow the word of God to confront us to disturb our security to undermine our complacency and overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior friends this is not what we would expect when we as finite human beings come to the word of the God who created the whole universe that he would turn our lives upside down by his word at times encourage you and exhort you let God's word teach you to obey what you love and what you hate what you think is right and wrong what you think is eternally important and what is frivolous how to conduct every area of your life from how you go to work to what you do with your money to how you pursue your marriage or your singleness what you do with your sex life how you raise your children what you do for recreation and leisure let

God's word teach you what it truly means to know God and let God's word give you his purpose for your life friends this is what it means to have a heart ready to obey God I have come to do your will oh Lord teach me that I may do it and finally Ezra pattern has not only to study his word and to do it but to teach it and you know what friends you don't need to be a Bible scholar to teach God's word there are levels of it and some of us who take this on as a role and a calling there is a high accountability for us who stand in this pulpit and who teach Sunday school and who lead small groups when we take those formal places of teaching there is accountability so we want to do it well before the Lord but friends there is a broader kind of teaching where we share the scriptures where as we're reading it and as we're meditating on it as we're obeying it then we a chance to share with one another this is what

[40 : 19] God's word said to me today this is how God changed my life today God is challenging me with his word about these things and as we interact with one another we have the opportunity to share these things with one another and so that all of us can be teaching one another and if it's even simply just reciting God's word to one another how much blessing that it is friends the Bible is meant to be not a dutiful meal of gruel and water for us to choke down every day so that we can get on with our lives the Bible is meant to be a feast with meats and vegetables and fruits and desserts and appetizers and an abundance of overflowing of the goodness and the greatness of God that we don't have to choke down but that we hungrily come to day and day and day and day and feast on in our souls it is not a document that is full of simply data for us to understand but it is a letter to establish a relationship where

God is saying this is who I am and calling us to relate to him as the God of the universe oh may the Lord make us men and women who love his word like the psalmist we read earlier in Psalm 19 that his word may be more desired than gold even much fine gold and that we would find it sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honey comb but friends as we stop here as we finish come to the conclusion of let us remember however that we do not worship a book but we worship a God and so in Hebrews 1 the writer reminds us that long ago many times in many ways God spoke to our fathers through the prophets that is the written scriptures that we have but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son that the final word of

God to us is Jesus himself and this testifies to him go back and listen to the Easter sermon from this year on how this testifies on who Jesus is this is what Jesus himself said to the scribes and Pharisees when he said you search the scriptures because you think that in you have eternal life it is they that bear witness about me and yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life friends as we read the Bible may it lead us over and over and over again to Jesus to know that he is the pinnacle that he is the fulfillment that he is the centerpiece of all that God has been doing and all of his revelation finds its fullness because he has come and lived and died for us and risen again that we may know God that he the word made flesh that the scriptures testify that we may know him and that we may love him we may serve him we may obey him we may worship him that we may have life in him may it be so in us let's pray

Lord thank you for this word Lord we confess to you how often we do neglect your word we confess to you how often we allow it to be an accessory in our lives Lord I pray this morning that by your spirit you would rouse us awaken our hunger and our appetite for your word help us Lord to do the things that we need to do so that we might be those who feed on your word day in and day out Lord that we might know you Lord that we might be your people to your glory we pray this in Jesus name amen amen