

People of the Word

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part IX

Ezra 7:10

Introduction

Let us take a personal survey this morning. You do not need to turn to any scripture. In fact, I would recommend that you do not write anything down, but formulate, in your mind, the answers to these questions:

- How many hours, this past week, did you spend reading the newspaper? Was it fifteen minutes, an hour, or two?
- How many hours, this past week, did you spend watching television, videos, watching NBA playoffs, or going to the movies. Was it three hours, four, or five?
- Now calculate how many hours you spent in some form of additional entertainment, perhaps even time spent on a hobby.
- Now think of how many hours you spent reading and studying the Bible.

Now we could argue about the value of hobbies, movies, playoff games, and the newspaper – and never really get anywhere. In fact, I am not even suggesting that any of those things are wrong. I would be tempted to put the NBA playoffs up there with spiritual enrichment!

My argument is not along the lines of inherent value in any one of those things; my concern has to do with the time they demand and the influence they exert. Is it any wonder that the average Christian, today, knows a lot about the world, but much less about the Word?

We can discuss the events of Kosovo and the Middle East, yet know nothing of Colossians and the

Minor Prophets. We can identify clothing fashion, but not define Christian faith. We dabble in the philosophy of the world, but ignore the theology of the Word. We can defend our political preferences, but we cannot defend the gospel. We can quote stock prices, but cannot quote scripture. We know the hottest actors and actresses by name, but not the books of the Bible by heart. Is it any surprise that we can find our way through the *Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune Magazine*, but not be able to locate the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount?

Are we people of the world? Or, are we people of the Word?

What the people of God need, today, is a return to the Word of God. We desperately need another reformation – a reformation cry from our hearts and lives that demands, that hungers after, the scriptures alone.

John Armstrong wrote,

Christians seem to be looking for a missing dimension. They long for something which they feel comes directly from God. All along what is really needed is close at hand – the Word opened with power by the Spirit will do what is needed in anyone open to God and His revelation.

In the scriptures, we discover a man, by the name of Ezra, who had discovered that missing dimension. In the book bearing his name, chapter 7, verse 6, we are told that,

... he was a scribe, skilled in the law of Moses ...

Today, the average Christian would say, “So what? What good is the Law, the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament.”

Well, consider what King David wrote about the Law in Psalm, chapter 19, verses 7 through 10,

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgements of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the dripping of the honeycomb.

In other words, if you want restoring, and wisdom, and joy; if you want endurance and the understanding of what is really right and what is really wrong; if you want something better than money in the bank and sweet things to eat, try the Law. Ezra had found all that he wanted in the Law of God.

Then we read of his life-changing decision. In the middle of verse 6 through verse 7, you read,

. . . and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. And some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

In other words, Ezra turned in his career as the “Administrator of Jewish Affairs”, a position implied in his title as a skilled scribe. The term for scribe, or “sopher” (pronounced “saw-far” in Hebrew), carried political implications. Ezra was connected politically. In fact, he was able to directly request things from the King of Babylon.

Ezra walked away from his palace connections and headed for a broken down city surrounded by broken down people. Their excitement for the things of God had grown cold over the past fifty years since they had first returned to Jerusalem.

How would Ezra make a difference? He would make a difference in the same way that any person in this audience will make a difference in his world.

He was a man with a three-fold passion. He wanted to:

1. learn the Word,
2. live the Word, and
3. teach the Word.

If you notice, in verse 10, his passion is clearly articulated,

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Statutes, here, are general principles, and ordinances are specific practices.

Ezra set his heart, he made up his mind, he focused his attention on, he purposed in his heart to learn it, to live it, to teach it.

Now let us take a closer look. When you read, in the text, that Ezra “set his heart to study the Law”, you could render that, “he determined in his heart to study, or to search out, the Law”.

The New Testament counterpart of this verse is II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 15,

Be diligent [study] to present show yourself approved to God as a workman [in the Word] who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately [rightly interpreting] the word of truth.

Solomon wrote, in Proverbs, chapter 15, verse 28,

The heart of the righteous ponders [studies] how to answer . . .

Ezra’s Passionate Pattern:

Ezra’s passion was to study the Word of God.

Learn it!

Let me encourage you, in your study of the Word to learn it, by giving you five “C’s” that will help you as you dig for spiritual gems.

Five “C’s”:

“C” . . .

1. The first “C” is for the word “content”; that is, what do the words say?

Learn to ask, in relation to content, the journalistic five: who, what, where, when, and why? Sometimes wonderful clues to spiritual truth can be uncovered when we simply ask those content oriented questions.

Asking the question “when” can shed significant light on the events of the text.

Peter denied Christ three times in the courtyard, even after promising the Lord that he would never deny his relationship to the Him.

When did he deny the Lord? He denied him three times after having refused an invitation from the Lord, the night before, to pray with him. In fact, three times the Lord came and wanted Peter to pray with Him. And, three times, Peter, in effect, said, “I’d really rather sleep.”

It was the very next morning that Peter denied the Lord three times.

My friend, you are more prone to deny the Lord after you have ignored Him. And, the more often you ignore the Lord, the more prone you are to deny the Lord.

“C” . . .

2. The second “C” is for the word “context”; that is, what did the words mean then?

One of our problems is that we want to know what the words of scripture mean to us now, so much so, that we fail to first answer what the words meant back then. To whom were the words originally applied? Do not run so quickly to a twentieth century meaning before you have first discovered the first century meaning.

“C” . . .

3. The third “C” is for the word “comparison”; that is, what do other passages say about that same principle or doctrine?

No verse of scripture is an island unto itself, it is connected with the whole of scripture. Someone once said that every cult has a verse of scripture to back it up.

The principle of the analogy of scripture is very important. Compare scripture with scripture and, by so doing, you discover that the best commentary on scripture is, scripture.

“C” . . .

4. The fourth “C” is for the word “culture”; that is, what was life like then?

When Paul encouraged the believer to take up the shield of faith, by which he will extinguish the

flaming missiles of the evil one, in Ephesians chapter 6, he gave us a picture in our minds.

You may picture in your mind rushing toward enemy lines with a shield of faith knocking the fiery arrows to the ground. I must admit that sounds exciting. However, the shield Paul refers to, if you took the time to study the culture of warfare in your local Bible encyclopedia, was a shield that was four feet tall and two and one-half feet wide. You did not run anywhere with this shield. You did one of two things with it: you either planted it in the ground and hid behind it, as the enemy fired at you, or you linked its beveled edge with the soldier next to you, and he to the one next to him, and slowly advanced on the enemy with unity of purpose.

This shield of faith does not make you a hero. It makes the object of your faith, that you hid behind, the hero. Then, it makes the entire company of believers a unified power, advancing as the church was intended to do.

“C” . . .

5. The fifth, and last, “C” is for the word “consultation”; that is, what light do others shed on the text?

The concordance in your Bible that links passages by thematic words, the atlas that shows you where things took place, commentaries, and Greek and Hebrew helps for the English reader are all available to the believer.

I have, numerous times, encouraged struggling Christians to stop reading devotional books with titles like, “Three Minutes to a Spiritual Blessing,” and “One Verse a Day Keeps the Devil Away.” Instead, I have encouraged believers to begin reading, as a companion to their Bibles, a Bible Encyclopedia, Dictionary, or Word Study Bible for devotions.

The truth of the matter is, this will explode your understanding of the Word. There is no way you could ever understand the fullest significance of scripture, unless you are willing to study deeply and read widely.

When Jesus Christ delivered the message to the church in Sardis, in Revelation, chapter 3, he told them, in verse 2, to, “Wake up . . .”! These were significant words to Sardis, as they had been conquered and plundered by enemy armies twice, due to the fact that the soldiers were asleep at their posts when the armies came upon them. It was significant when Jesus said to them, in the last half of verse 3,

If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.

Wake up!

Jesus Christ also told the church in Laodicea several things, in Revelation, chapter 3, things that could go unnoticed unless you read that the eye powder of Laodicea was world famous. The “tephra Phrygia” was exported in tablet form and then, ground down and applied to the eyes. The Phrygian powder was held to be a wonderful remedy for weak and ailing eyes. It was in the face of this that Christ tells the compromising, weak, lukewarm church at Laodicea, in verse 18, to,

. . . buy from Me . . . eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

He said to the Laodicean believers, in verse 17,

. . . you say, “I . . . have need of nothing,” . . . and you do not know that you are . . . blind . . .

He is telling them, “You’re going blind. You say you have need of nothing because you can’t see your need. You need spiritual eye salve that only the Lord can give.”

Needless to say, we have so many resources today for the Bible student, if you really want to learn it.

Live it!

But, may I go on to say that learning is not the end of the process. Ezra was passionate about learning it, but if you will notice, in verse 10 again, it says,

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it . . .

The mark of spiritual maturity is never determined by how much you learn it, but by how much you live it.

Jesus Christ did not say, in John, chapter 13, verse 17, “If you know these things, you are blessed if you can repeat them.”

No! He said,

If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

James picks up that same theme, in chapter 1, verses 23 to 25, when he tells us,

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his

natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.

The Word is likened to a mirror, James says, and no one but a fool will look into the mirror and just walk away.

This morning, you got up and, I guarantee, none of you look anything like that first reflection. You looked into that mirror this morning and prayed for a revival! You started a process of reformation and total transformation.

Ezra said, in his heart, “I want to learn the Law, not just so I can learn the Law, but so that I can live the Law. I want to practice it.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I am so glad he said the word “practice.” Paul used the word in a similar context when he referred to the mature believer as one who, because of practice, has his senses trained to discern good and evil; who, because of practice, is mature.

Every time I see the word practice I think of the piano. That comes from my many years of forced labor!

How many of you began, at some point, to take piano? You started out with a simple little number. Do you remember? Then, you advanced to, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Then, if you were really good, you learned, all by yourself, “Heart and Soul.” And, do you remember those piano exercises? I drove my family “nuts” over those. Then, if you hung with it, after a few years, you learned the classic, “Maple Leaf Rag.” I should not talk about that in church. I had better stop before I get into too much trouble!

No one ever says, “I’ve learned how to play the piano.”

No! They say, “I’m learning how to play.”

You will never master the Christian life. And, as passionate as Ezra was, he never mastered it either – but he practiced it! He worked hard at living what he was learning. And the evidence that you are learning, is the way you are living.

Six Questions:

One of the best ways to approach the Bible is with six questions in mind. We have already asked

several interpretive questions in studying content: who, what, where, when, why? And, we learned to study context, comparison, culture, and consultation. In addition, six questions of application are:

1. Is there an example that I should follow?
2. Is there a behavior that I should avoid?
3. Is there a sin I should confess?
4. Is there a command I should obey?
5. Is there a truth I should believe?
6. Is there a promise I should claim?

Teach it!

Finally, the passion of Ezra was not only to learn it and to live it, but to teach it.

Do you have that same passion?

There are two ways you teach what you learn:

Through virtuous . . .

1. One way is through virtuous character. Paul implied, in Titus, chapter 2, verse 10, that you make the truth of God attractive as you “adorn the doctrine of God” in holy living.

Through verbal . . .

2. The second way is through verbal communication – testifying of the grace of God to those around you.

Application: Learning . . . Living . . . Teaching

Let us wrap up our study of this first paragraph of Ezra’s biography with four steps of summary.

As you study the Bible:

Step 1 – Get ready to . . .

1. Step number one is to get ready to write. Have a form of written record, spiritual diary, or simply the margin of your Bible in which to record impressions, thoughts, and challenges that God brings to your heart and life.

Step 2 – Add a little . . .

2. Step number two is to add a little pressure. Your response to the study of the Word should never be, “I’m going to think about doing the following things God wants me to do . . .”, but, “I *will* do them . . . I *will* believe Him . . . I *will* obey Him.”

Step 3 – Turn it into . . .

3. Step number three is to turn it into prayer. Turn what you are observing and desiring to apply into immediate prayer requests and pray them back to God, “Lord, this is what I want to live like,” or “Lord, this is what I will trust You for,” or “This is what I need to have rearranged in my life, Lord, for Your glory.”

Step 4 – Do not keep it . . .

4. Step number four is do not keep it to yourself. You will discover, as you learn and live, that God will give you opportunities to teach, to share, and to contribute toward the lives of other believers. You can bank on it and plan on it. Do not be surprised by it when God gives you an opportunity, in some way, to share with others the truth of His Word.

Our passion is like Ezra’s – to learn it, to live it, to teach it – for the glory of God!

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