

Read Ezra 1

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, Ezra 1:1

In college I was going through an interview process with an insurance company to get a really good job that would help me through school. I went all through the process and one day I got a call from the supervisor. He said that they would be willing to hire me, but they wanted to know if I would be willing to work on Sundays. I hesitated because it was a really good job. After a moment, I decided to be obedient and I told him I could not work on Sundays. The supervisor said, "Ok. We just wanted to see what you'd say. You're hired." It turns out that he wanted to see if I would stick to that conviction. He wasn't a Christian, but he was curious and God used it to confirm a lot of valuable lessons to me.

Cyrus wasn't a follower of God. Yet God had made a declaration that His people would return to Israel one day, and God moved in the life of a lost person to make it happen. God is sovereign over all people and creatures on earth. While God gives free will, He only moved Cyrus to let the people go. He didn't force Cyrus to continually serve Him unless he wanted to. **Maybe you are dealing with a lost person on a job or other life decision. Remember that God opens doors and God closes them. If God has a desire for you, a lost person will not stand in the way. Many Christians have advanced at work, school, or in the community despite the loud opposition of those who are lost. If God is for you, who can be against you?**

Read Ezra 2

Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan and Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households and their descendants, whether they were of Israel: Ezra 2:59

I really like to watch "Antiques Roadshow" on PBS. They go around the country and people bring in their antiques for experts to evaluate and appraise. One lady brought in a gun made by her great-great-great-great grandfather. Few people can accurately trace their history like that, but she had his diary and wanted to know more about him. The gun expert was blown away (pardon the pun). The lady's ancestor was the premier gun maker in colonial New England, and only two of his guns were known to exist. Since this one was his, it was worth about \$150,000. The lady clearly was excited, but purely for family reasons. There are a lot more people that you see bring in family heirlooms and their main concern is turning a profit, and not to know more about their family heritage.

As Israel begins to make their way back home there were several people who claimed to have a Jewish heritage, but they could not prove it. As they lived in this new culture, they fully embraced it, probably including the false worship of the Persians. They had corrupted themselves so much, possibly even separating from fellow Jews, that when the time came to return home, no one knew these people. **What about your Christian family? Have you been away from church so long that few people would know you?**

Are you so quick to embrace the world that you often fit in more with lost people than believers? If so, then you need to evaluate your life. You are giving a testimony among unbelievers that the Christian life is just a religion and not very important to their lives.

Read Ezra 3

From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. Ezra 3:6 During my time in ministry, I often befriend people from other churches. One Sunday there had been a lot of snow, but we still had church that morning because the roads were good. I saw a gentleman from another church I knew and asked him about their church being cancelled when ours was open. They had a small congregation of maybe 30 on Sunday mornings. He said they decided that there probably wouldn't be enough people there to cover the electricity cost through the morning tithe. This church had plenty of other money sitting around, but they were trying to operate like a business instead of a sanctuary.

As the people of God had come back to Jerusalem, they began worshipping the Lord through their offerings even though the temple was still in ruins. The repair of the temple would be an important task, but they placed their personal relationships with God above the building itself. **Do you consider it more important to be in church this week, or to cultivate your relationship with God outside of the building? There have been weeks I have missed church because of random reasons. However, I don't miss God because I spend time with Him on a daily basis. Are you waiting for the church to develop your relationship with God? Are you waiting on the church to bring you closer to God? The church is a motivator, but you are the one who must take action when you know that you are lacking in your walk with Jesus Christ.**

Read Ezra 4

Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms. Ezra 4:23 Our young daughters share a room, and we have been trying to break our youngest, Lauren, from sucking her thumb. I told her one night as I walked out after prayers, "Don't suck your thumb Lauren, or I will come back in here and give you a spanking." My wife and I were in our room talking and about five minutes later our older daughter Kaitlyn walked in. "Lauren's sucking her thumb", she said. I asked Kaitlyn why she was telling us this. Kaitlyn said she heard me say Lauren would be in trouble if she sucked her thumb. I told Kaitlyn she was being a tattletale. I want Lauren to stop sucking because it's beginning to misshape her front teeth. Kaitlyn came to tell me about Lauren because she wanted Lauren to get in trouble. Our concern was the same, but our motives were different.

To be honest, I just got mad reading this today. You have a bunch of people outside of Jerusalem who say they want to help rebuild the temple with the Jews. The Jews rightly

say that these people have no business being a part of it. So these outsiders run to the King and say that the Jews are rebuilding their entire city (not true). So once they tattle and lie, they get a reply from the King that the Jews have to stop. Then these troublemakers run into Jerusalem with weapons and the letter and force the Jews to stop. **There are a lot of people that just hate Christians. They hate that you attempt to live up to a standard that they find unnecessary. They hate that you claim that Jesus is the only way to God. They hated Jesus, they hate you. Honestly, my anger in reading this is my issue. I cannot allow the actions of unbelievers to prevent me from living in the joy of the Lord. Are you allowing lost people to spoil your days? Remember they are separate from God and they don't share your joy. But, you can share your joy with them by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Read Ezra 5

then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them. Ezra 5:2 My friend Tim was associate pastor in a church. The pastor had preached on outreach and sharing the gospel, and as a result many in the church were excited about reaching the lost. So the church decided they would go out on a Saturday morning and canvass the neighborhood. The pastor was there and gave a rousing talk after breakfast to the people ready to go. Then as people went to the cars, the pastor went out of the fellowship hall, back to his office and closed the door. A couple of people came up to Tim and asked where the pastor went. He told them the pastor must have had something come up, but that they had everything they needed to be successful. Later when Tim asked the pastor about it, he simply said that he needed to work on his sermon more. Tim said that if he was going to emphasize something so strongly, that next time he should probably be there to participate himself.

Here you have the Jewish people restarting the work on the temple. The previous king had allowed unspiritual people to stop the work of God's people. The prophets of God moved the people to action once again, now that there was a new king who would ultimately support their work. But it says that the prophets didn't just tell them what to do, but verse 2 says that the prophets were with them supporting them. Maybe they were supporting them through leadership, or construction, but the point is that the people didn't feel abandoned. **Do you call on others to do the things that you won't do? If you are a minister or involved in a ministry of the church, the greatest motivator is not words, but actions. When I talked about outreach, my youth groups never got it. When I took them out on the streets to share Christ, they became excited and willing to do the work. So are you talking or walking?**

Read Ezra 6

Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent. Ezra 6:13 Sunday afternoons are for relaxing. Even if I have something to do, I do it at a leisurely pace. When I was a teenager I rotated with my siblings to wash dishes,

and Sunday lunches were the worst. Mom cooked enough to feed an army, and there was dirty stuff everywhere. So I turned on the radio and went to work. It usually took me about two hours, while my sister finished in less than one. I just wasn't in any hurry. My wife finds it somewhat annoying that it takes me so long to clean the kitchen. Honestly, if I were more diligent in the process, I would finish quicker and could do other things.

Here as Darius locates the decree to repair the temple in Jerusalem, we see he takes it very seriously. It seems that a promise was made, and it was important to King Darius that promises from the throne be kept. Since there had been such a delay, he has it carried out with diligence so that the request would be fulfilled ASAP. Diligence is an important characteristic. It allows us to charge through menial or unpleasant tasks. It allows us to accomplish long-term goals that once seemed so far off. It also brings us into a closer relationship with Jesus. A daily time of communication with God requires diligence. **Many distractions rise up to take our attention away from our Savior, and it is our responsibility to put Him as the priority of our life. Diligence should show up in the life of a believer. Does it show up in yours? Are you a diligent worker? Are you a diligent parent? Are you a diligent child? Are you a diligent Christian? Remember, diligence means that we are willing to work hard to accomplish a task as you answer these questions.**

Read Ezra 7

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. Ezra 7:10 I really like sports, and I'm kind of a nerd for stats. So when my friends invited me to join a fantasy baseball league, I thought it would be fun. You pick real players for your "team" and then their statistics during the year determine whose team wins. The problem was, it turns out I don't like pouring over statistics for hours. Some people spend most of their spare time analyzing their players, and trying to get better players for certain categories. I soon fell into last place because I just didn't spend the same time as others in our league.

As Ezra comes to Jerusalem, it takes him five months to journey there. I'm sure during that trip he had lots of time to think. He knew there were so many Israelites that really hadn't been worshipping the Lord while they had been away in Babylon. Some would have grown up in a world where the God of Israel was rarely mentioned. So Israel needed someone to teach from the Scriptures who knew what he was talking about. Ezra had made three important choices in his life: study the law, practice it, and teach it to others. This should be the attitude of all believers. We study the Word of God, then we adjust our lives to fit with the standards of the Bible, and then we teach others how to do the same. **How do you approach the Bible? With excitement or with annoyance? You're not expected to know or even understand everything. But, it is our responsibility to read God's letter to us, and then to bend our will to the Bible.**

Read Ezra 8

For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him." Ezra 8:22 The evangelist at our church, Clyde, shared a story about one of his seminary professors whom he simply called Doc. Clyde was preaching in an area that had been experiencing a drought and several of the farmers asked if they could pray for rain. So Clyde invited Doc who was nearby at another revival to come out to a local field with him and other farmers to pray for rain. When Doc showed up, he was carrying an umbrella folded up in his hand. Clyde says there wasn't a cloud anywhere in the sky and no forecast for rain. The men prayed for a while and then opened their eyes. Clyde said in distance he saw a dark cloud rolling their way. Within a few minutes there was a downpour right on top of them. Clyde looked over and saw Doc standing there under his umbrella, and Clyde tried to get under it with him. Doc looked at Clyde and said, "Don't even think about getting under this umbrella. If you're going to pray for rain, bring your own."

Ezra had made a pretty bold claim. As he told the king of the Jews' journey, he told them that God would fully protect them in their journey. As they prepared to pull out, it seems that he still thought that having an armed escort would be wise. But, he had already claimed that God would protect them, so he didn't ask for it. Instead they fasted and prayed at the beginning of their journey to ask God to protect them, and He did. Not to back up Ezra's words, but in as a result of the humble manner in which the people came before Him seeking His protection. God had promised that a remnant of the people would eventually return to Jerusalem, so their humility and His desire to fulfill His word protected them. **Have you asked Him to give you a new job, or to protect a child from disease? Are you asking Him or believing Him for your request? Don't just talk, but truly pray and trust God for the results.**

Read Ezra 9

"For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." Ezra 9:2 During my time living in the South, I had a constant question brought to me, "Will you tell my daughter that the Bible says different races shouldn't date?" Instead of just saying, "No", I decided to really study the issue in Scripture so that I could completely lay it out before these parents. The Bible does not say that it is wrong for people of different races to marry. So if a black man and a white woman marry, the Scripture has not been broken. There may be some social difficulties that are faced by them, but I have known some very loving and godly couples that were of different races.

Here in this passage, Ezra finds out that the people of Israel have been intermarrying with other races around them. The reason for this problem wasn't because they were of different races, but of different faiths. God desired for Israel to be an instrument of judgment against the ungodly nations of Canaan. Those other nations worship of false gods had brought judgment from God upon them. So when Israel beings to marry these people instead of pushing them out of the region, you suddenly have God's people trying to mix their faith with the false religion of the region. The only intermarrying that is off-limits is between believers and unbelievers. God calls us His "holy nation" in 1 Peter 2:9. He is not indicating our race, but that as believers in Jesus Christ, we are a part of His nation and family. **Perhaps you are still waiting for that life-long relationship, or you have a child who is beginning to look for a relationship. Our primary concern should be whether they are entering a relationship with another devoted Christian. Have you judged on the basis of factors that God does not judge by? Then you need to ask His forgiveness and ask for His wisdom in such situations.**

Read Ezra 10

"Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

Ezra 10:11 Casting Crowns has an insightful song called "Between the Altar and the Door". The song is about the decisions we find ourselves making at the altar. We have heard a message that so clearly showed us who we are. So we go to the altar, often in tears, and confess our sin and shortcomings before the Lord. But, then as we go to the door after the service, what happened at the altar seems so long ago. Often we believe that the confession was the hard work, when in fact it's only a difficult first step. To truly accept the impact of the message, we must also plan to make changes that help us to avoid those sinful pitfalls. Too often people come to the altar, but they don't remember that their whole life is an altar on which to pray and sacrifice for Jesus.

Ezra has continued this discussion with Israel regarding the pagan wives that are in their midst. This sin was affecting the whole nation, even though there are only about 113 of them that actually have pagan wives. Children coming from these homes and marrying children of Israel could spread the paganism even further into the nation of Israel. So these men confess their sin and then choose to do God's will. In this case, it means that they separate themselves from their wives, some even with children. I don't think I can fully explain this. God hates divorce, but in this case we see that it was God's will that these marriages be dissolved. Perhaps it's because He never recognized or blessed these marriages. What cannot be lost on us is that God had made a rule, Israel broke it, and now they are facing painful consequences as a result. **Have you ever paid the consequences for sin? Have you ever wished that God would remove those consequences? In some situations, I have seen Him do it when people have been quickly and fully repentant early on in the transgression. However, we have to remember that the problems we face as a result of our sin are usually well documented in Scripture so that they come as no real shock to us. What sin are you contemplating? Have you also contemplated the consequences of that action?**