

EZRA'S GREAT WORK

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The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra do not mention the man for whom the book is named. Those subject of those chapters is the return of the captives from Babylon to Israel and the rebuilding of the temple. The work of Ezra is contained in the final four chapters of the book (and also in parts of Nehemiah). This righteous servant of God is introduced to us in Ezra 7:1-5, where his lineage is traced from his father Seraiah back to Aaron the first High Priest of Israel. Ezra's genealogy is crucial, because it is central to the work he did in Israel after the captives had returned there. Any priest who could not prove his descent from Aaron was regarded as polluted, and consequently "put from the priesthood" (Ezra 2:62). The main job of the priests was to "keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Mal 4:6). This is precisely what God sent Ezra to Israel to do. His primary job was to "teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10), to teach the laws of God to those who did not know them (Ezra 7:25). He received the legal permission from the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes to do his great work (Ezra 7:11-28).

The need for Ezra's work

When God made Aaron the first High Priest of Israel, He commanded him and the rest of the priests to "*put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean; and that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses*" (Lev 10:10-11). God repeated the same basic instructions in Ezekiel 44:23. God commanded all the people of Israel to "*do according to all that the priests the Levites shall teach you: as I commanded them, so ye shall observe to do*" (Deut 24:8). When the first captives returned to Israel with Zerubbabel in 539 B.C., they were diligent to do everything according to the word of God. They made sure that the priests were legitimate (Ezra 2:61-62). They built the altar and offered all the sacrifices and observed all the holy days and feast days (Ezra 3:1-6). They also followed the ordinances for conducting the celebration at the laying of the foundation of the temple (Ezra 6:10-11). Zerubbabel and the other returned captives continued to diligently and faithfully serve God and keep His commandments for the next 23 years until the temple was completed in 516 B.C. At that time, they dedicated the temple according to the law and also observed the Passover and feast of unleavened bread (Ezra 6:15-22). But Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in approximately 469 B.C., 47 years after the temple was finished and a full 70 years after the first captives returned to Jerusalem and Judah. Over these years, there was a serious erosion of the knowledge of God's word, and the diligence and faithfulness in obeying it that had been present in the parents and grandparents of the ones who were living in the land when Ezra arrived. Much can change in a few years and it definitely had in this case. In 516 B.C., the people had "separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land to seek the Lord God of Israel" (Ezra 6:21). Now, in 469 B.C., the people had "not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations" (Ezra 9:1). They had even married the people of the lands whom God had forbidden them to marry. In light of this spiritual decay, Ezra's work of teaching the word of God to the people in Israel was sorely needed.

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(continued)

The steps of Ezra's work

Ezra 7:8-10 says that Ezra "came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. *For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.*" Before we try to teach others God's word, we must first study and understand the word. Before Ezra did anything else, he had "*prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord.*" Hebrews 5:11-14 rebukes those who "ought to be teachers," but they are not able to teach because they are spiritual babies, "unskillful in the word of righteousness." There are some who try to teach in spite of their ignorance of the word of God, but it is these unlearned and unstable ones who wrest the scriptures to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:16). Paul warned Timothy about those who were "desiring to be teachers of the law" but, unlike Ezra, these would-be teachers were "understanding neither what they say nor whereof they affirm" (1 Tim 1:7). We cannot possibly teach God's word properly without first knowing and understanding it. "We know that the law is good if a man use it lawfully" (1 Tim 1:8). There are many who corrupt God's word (2 Cor 2:17) or handle it deceitfully (2 Cor 4:2). But we must use knowledge aright (Prov 15:2), rightly dividing the word of truth, or we will be ashamed before God (2 Tim 2:15). Next, before we begin teaching others, we must *do* what God's word says. Ezra had prepared his heart to seek God's law "*and to do it.*" This point is also emphasized in Romans 2:19-23. "*Thou therefore which teaches another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preaches a man should not steal, dost thou steal?*" (Rom 2:21) God will not spare hypocrites (Matt 24:51). God warns us about those who have "swerved" and "turned aside" from obeying the word, yet these same ones "desire to be teachers of the law" (1 Tim 1:6-7). Jesus warned us not to do after the works of the Pharisees, "for they say, and do not" (Matt 23:3). Their leaven was hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). Jesus pronounced woe on these hypocrites (Matt 23:13-15, 23, 25, 27-29). Finally, Ezra "taught in Israel statutes and judgments." He taught the pure word of God. Timothy was also charged to teach the commandments of God (1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1-2) and the law of God (1 Tim 1:8ff). When we are teaching God's word, we must teach sound doctrine. We must teach only God's word (Jer 23:14-31; 1 Cor 2:4-13; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 1 Pet 4:11), and all of God's word (Matt 28:20; Acts 20:20, 26-27; John 16:13). Teaching God's statutes and judgments also includes opposing false doctrine. Like Jeremiah, we must build and plant, but also tear down and root out (Jer 1:10; Eccl 3:3). While we teach the whole counsel of God, which is sound doctrine, we cannot allow any other doctrine to corrupt it. Paul did not allow grievous wolves to enter in and lead the flock astray while he was in Ephesus (Acts 20:29-31). Later, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to "charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies" (1 Tim 1:3). Every individual Christian is part of the "holy" and "royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2:5,9). We would all do well to follow the excellent example of Ezra!