



WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART?

LESSONS FROM A BIBLICAL CHARACTER

Paying close attention to biblical characters can provide useful insights for preaching and teaching the Bible. This essay illustrates this claim by looking at the prophet Ezra. Israel had been in Babylonian exile—according to Jeremiah, it would last 70 years—and the Jews were allowed to return to their land under the Persian king Cyrus. But this happened gradually, with different groups returning. Ezra 7–8 reports on the journey of one group that returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. They left on the first day of the first month in the seventh year of Artaxerxes and arrived on the first day of the fifth month. Quite a journey! Today, by plane, the trip takes one or two hours.

But the return of the Jews from exile is mentioned here as a backdrop; the focus is on Ezra as a person. We appreciate people who have influenced us in a positive way. We appreciate those who have set an example in loyalty, courageous behavior, and commitment to a good cause. Biblical characters are among them and often are the first to be listed. Good lessons can be learned from biblical characters. One of them is Ezra. In Ezra 7:1-6, he is described as a priest and as “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given.” In verse 11, this description is repeated in other terms: Ezra is a priest and “a scribe, a scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord.” The term

“scribe” is repeated twice in verse 11. Some translations render the second occurrence as “skilled in” the words of the commandments of the Lord. With verse 12, the decree of Artaxerxes begins. Again Ezra is called “the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven.” Most remarkable, in my opinion, is verse 10: “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.”

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

This text provides us with at least four insights.

1. *The heart counts.* Many people today do their jobs because they have to. Jobs may be difficult to find, so people are forced to take what they can get. They have to make a living and earn money. Some have the luxury of choice and find a career that allows them to make a name for themselves and/or to earn plenty of money. Apart from the lucrative financial benefits, however, their hearts may not be in their jobs.

Ezra 7 tells us that Ezra was a scribe by profession, but he didn't just do his job because it was his task to do it. Ezra was personally involved. It must have been his heart's desire to be familiar with the word of God. Ezra set his heart to seek the word of God, do it, and teach it. This phrase is primarily talking about commitment, devotion, and dedication. The heart

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was not only the seat of emotions but also of the intellect. Thus, the heart stood for the mind, will, and determination. Ezra “had ‘devoted himself’” to the three things mentioned¹—studying, observing, and teaching.

The term “for” connects verse 10 with verse 9: “the good hand of his God was upon him.” Why? Because he had devoted his life to his ministry! His heart was in it! A job performed for a secular company may be done without much personal involvement, though it is better even then to have a personal interest in what one is doing.

This is even more true when what we do has to do with the

kingdom of God. Halfhearted service and divided interest are not enough when it comes to God. In the Bible, Jesus said, “You cannot serve two masters,” “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and “Seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness, and all the things important to life will be added to you” (Matt. 6:21, 24, 33). Ezra’s commitment was paired with God’s blessing.

2. Study Scripture. Ezra felt it important to commit himself to literally “seeking” (that is, exploring and investigating) the law (Torah) of Yahweh, which is the Word and also the law of God. The Word of God is like a mine which we can dig to find treasure. While some treasure is found at the surface, much is not. One has to dig and search, read and try to understand, compare one with another, and establish a biblical teaching.

Even a child can grasp the simple concept of how we can be saved. But the Bible also contains complex concepts and statements that challenge our minds and our lives, and no wonder—we are dealing with issues that relate to God and surpass humanity. We are talking about human paradoxes and limitations of our understanding because we can reach out beyond our own dimension and get in touch with the transcendent Lord, the Infinite One. And yet, reading and studying the Bible regularly comforts us, moves us, helps us to new insights, and brings us in contact with our Maker.

Study of the Word of God is a prerequisite for knowing God, His plan of salvation, and His will. It is the foundation of the Christian’s life and our spiritual journey.

3. Practice what you have found. Searching and exploring does not achieve much if we are only intellectually enlightened. While this is good, it is not good enough. Studying Scripture must affect our daily lives. Ezra allowed this to happen. He practiced what he found. He lived the will of God, as can be seen later in the book. An uncompromising commitment to the will of God led to a change of behavior

and attitude in Judah (mixed marriages); in modern terms, we would describe it as revival and reformation. Oftentimes, Christianity appears unattractive because its adherents are no different from the secular population. They are still as greedy and angry, as selfish and proud, and as pleasure-loving and compromising as many others. Nietzsche, the atheist German philosopher, said that Christians would need to look more like redeemed people in order for him to believe in their Savior, and many agree with him. Adherents of other world religions say the same thing.

There are plenty of Christian scholars and university professors who study and teach Scripture, but it does not make a difference. Why? Because they have not allowed the Bible to be the Word of God and make a difference in their lives. They have not been changed themselves. They do not have a living communion with the Lord, a heart of compassion, peace in Christ, or assurance of salvation. One has to do the will of God to experience growth and change. Ezra had set his heart on practicing the will of God, living with Him, and obeying Him.



4. Teach what you have found and practiced. Ezra taught the Word of God. In the Old Testament, teaching the law of God was a function of the priests and Levites. Ezra was a priest, and he fulfilled the task to which he as a priest had been called. But Ezra was also a scribe. Scribes were sometimes professional secretaries and sometimes government officials. Scribes may have recorded the decisions of the elders, court rulings, and marriage contracts. They may have also been in charge of various records and copied documents, including biblical documents. But, for some, their task was not exhausted in recording decrees or passing on traditions. They also taught the Word of God.

In New Testament times, teaching had already moved to the scribes. They were professional theologians, biblical scholars. Some of the most famous scribes in Jesus’ time

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—Matthew 28:19, 20

were Gamaliel, Hillel, and Shammai. They interpreted the Torah and applied it to their situation. Later, in Judaism, a teacher of Torah was called a rabbi. Ezra was at the transition point when the teaching office began to pass from the priests and Levites to the scribes. This transition occurred after the Israelites' Babylonian exile.

Let's look again at the three aspects of ministry to which Ezra was devoted: studying Scripture, living Scripture, and teaching Scripture. "These three aspects of ministry are interdependent. One called by God to teach must also study and obey."² Ezra "was not only a student of Scripture, but explicitly a practitioner and especially a teacher of its requirements . . . what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct, and teaching

put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness."³

"The model teacher in Ezra is a doer. And the doer can be no mere demonstrator. He must *be* what he would have his disciples be."⁴ Today, we are a priesthood of believers. It is important that we practice what we find in the gospel; we also need to teach and pass it on to our children, to non-Christians, and even to Christians. In so doing, it will become even more important, meaningful, and fresh for ourselves.

The Great Commission is addressed to all disciples and calls us, among other things, to get involved in teaching: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19, 20).

Although some people in church are especially gifted with teaching, all of us in one way or another must teach. But teaching must be based on studying and practicing.

In Acts 19, a sad story is recorded in which these three dimensions were not connected. Some Jews got involved in exorcism; they attempted to expel evil spirits from people. However, they did this in a strange way. They used a kind of formula and thought it would work. The formula was: "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you

to come out." This formula is revealing. First, they thought they could use a sentence like magic, and the desired outcome would happen. It did not. Secondly, they had heard about Jesus and Paul, but they did not seem to believe in Jesus or practice discipleship. The result was devastating: "The evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?'" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding" (Acts 19:15, 16, NIV).

CONCLUSION

"Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). This was his call, and he followed it. The same call is ours today. No matter our profession or job, we must devote ourselves wholeheartedly to studying Scripture, practicing Scripture, and teaching Scripture. As we do this, the Lord will bless us as He blessed Ezra and will make our ministry fruitful and our life meaningful. His gracious hand will be on us (Ezra 7:9).

I hope to have shown in the above reflection how fruitful a close examination of Bible characters can be for biblical teaching and preaching, and for the devotional life as well. 

¹ Mervin Breneman, "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," in *New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 129.

² *Ibid.*, 130.

³ H.G.M. Williamson, "Ezra, Nehemiah," in *Word Biblical Commentary* 16 (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 93 (quoting Kidner).

⁴ McConville, "Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy," in *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 47.

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