

# How Ezra and the Word of God Restored a Broken Nation

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You don't hear too much about Ezra these days. Nobody's hankering to make a feature film of his life story. And preachers tend to focus more on his practically minded colleague, Nehemiah, than on the intellectual Ezra.

But I believe this relatively obscure Jewish scholar has much to teach us. His story, though embedded in a world vastly different from our own, speaks to one of our heart's deepest questions: *How can I make a difference in my world?*

## Rebuilding the Ruins

After Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., the southern kingdom of Judah survived for over a century. But eventually the Babylonians conquered Judah, taking her citizens' elite into exile. For almost 70 years, displaced Jews held onto the hope of returning home. Finally, that hope materialized when Media and Persia overthrew Babylon—the Persian kings began allowing Jews to return to their homeland and resume worshipping God in Jerusalem.

But once back in Judah, the people faced almost insurmountable challenges. Jerusalem, along with its temple, had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Worse, those who never left had largely forgotten the Lord. National restoration would require both concrete and spiritual renewal. Though initial efforts to rebuild the temple were successful and sacrifices were again offered, the spiritual condition of Judah remained dismal. Only an outstanding spiritual leader could turn the people of Judah back to the Lord. This leader was Ezra.

## Scholar turned Revolutionary

On the surface, Ezra wouldn't have seemed a likely candidate for this daunting task. True, he was a **“teacher well versed in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6)**. But he probably preferred poring over Scripture in solitude to the messy realities of leading a spiritual revolution. Yet Ezra was “chosen to guide his people back into a restored covenant with the Lord—and through his example, they began to read and obey God's law again. What enabled the scholar to become a shepherd who led his people's hearts back to the Lord? His story is riddled with this telltale refrain: **“The hand of the LORD his God was on him” (7:6; 7:9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31)**. Ezra achieved great things, not because of his own competence, but because he lived under divine blessing—the gracious empowerment God gives for whatever task He calls His people to accomplish. If we contemplate this story, though, we'll see that being “blessed” is more than what we often use the term to mean. God blesses us and gives us good gifts, not only because He loves us, but also to enable us to make a difference for Him in this world.

## A Reason for God's Blessing

Why did the Lord bless Ezra? God gives His blessing out of His grace. Yet in Ezra's story, it's clear that God's blessing on him was not just a random act of kindness: **"...The gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (7:9-10)**. The original Hebrew says God favored Ezra because he "fixed his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do it and to teach [it]." If we imitate Ezra by resolving to study, obey, and teach scriptural truth, we open ourselves up to experience God's blessing in our lives—so that He might use us as His blessing to others.

## Studying His Truth

Most Christians believe that spending time in God's Word should be a top priority. However, most of us (myself included) also struggle to follow through with this discipline! Ezra sought to know the Lord's will and character through Scripture, and that moved him and the people he led to renew their commitment to Him. When we learn to think as God thinks, value what He values, feel with His heart, and see people and situations from His perspective, we position ourselves to experience His grace and power in our lives. But there's more—studying God's truth, as important as it is, shouldn't be where we end.

## Doing His Truth

As a pastor, I'm constantly challenged to practice what I preach—literally. Not long ago, I was preparing a message on **Matthew 18:15-17**, where Jesus tells us how to confront someone who has sinned against us. Sure enough, that week, someone at church lied about me. Though I realized I needed to go to the person directly, I didn't want to. Not at *all*. It seemed God was testing me—was I willing to do what I was about to tell others to do? Ezra fixed his heart not only to seek God's truth, but also to act on it. He avoided the trap that snares many Bible students who devote their life to knowing its principles without being equally committed to obeying them. Ezra put his knowledge of God into action. When he was worried about the safety of those he was leading home from Babylon, Ezra didn't rely on military might, but instead gathered the people together for corporate prayer and fasting. **(8:21-23)** His trust in God's promises went further than memorizing, reciting, and talking about them; He fully staked his life on the One whom he believed. And God demonstrated His love and power, bringing the exiles home safely. But more than that, the people's faith increased as a result of following Ezra's example in seeking God before all else.

## Teaching His Truth

Ezra didn't just set his heart on knowing the truth himself—he was passionate about teaching his people. He read God's Word to all who gathered in Jerusalem **"from daybreak till noon"**—*six hours straight*—making sure that the people understood along

the way. **(Nehemiah 8:3)** “Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground” **(v. 6)**. The teaching of truth led to worship and glory for God.

If you’re not a pastor or Sunday School teacher, you might think you’re off the hook when it comes to this aspect of Ezra’s commitment. But whether or not you serve as an “official” teacher, you’re called to share God’s words— His heart and His truth—with others. **Colossians 3:16** says, “**Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other**” **(NLT)**. Where can you teach God’s truth? Right where He’s placed you: with your family and friends; in your spiritual community. Opportunities to share come as you’re chewing on God’s Word in a small group, or even in casual conversation when something you’ve learned in personal devotions applies to the moment. How can you experience God’s blessing— His power and love—so that you might make a difference for Him in your world? By committing to learn, act upon, and share His truth, we show that we’re ready and willing for the Lord’s hand to rest on us, so that in His time, He might use us for His purposes. Like Ezra, living under the mantle of that blessing, we’ll be able to do more than we could ever imagine as our hands are strengthened by His hand, our words are seasoned with His own Word, and our hearts are conformed to His.