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Ezra's Three-Fold Desire

“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

The preceding Scripture informs us of what we are herein referring to as “Ezra’s three-fold desire.” Later, in this article, we shall consider the three things mentioned in this verse concerning which “*Ezra had prepared his heart*” to do. But first we shall note a few things about Ezra the person.

We begin by stating that Ezra was a “*priest,*” he was a “*scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes in Israel*” (Ez. 7:11). As a “*priest,*” he was able to trace his lineage all the way back to “*Aaron the chief priest*” (Ez. 7:15), the brother of Moses, and of the tribe of Levi (Ex. 4:14), the tribe from which the priests under the law of Moses were taken (Heb. 7:5).

Ezra was “*from Babylon*” (Ez. 7:6), the nation which led the Jews into captivity, a captivity which lasted for 70 long years (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). Interestingly, before Judah fell to the Babylonians, God informed the prophet Isaiah that Jerusalem would ultimately be rebuilt and the foundation of the temple would be laid, and that it would occur during the time of Cyrus (Isa.44:28; Ez.1:1), “*the king of Persia*” (Ez.1:1). Cyrus was a part of the Empire that overthrew the Babylonians. That prophecy was given **before** the fall of Jerusalem, before the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, **before** the fall of Babylon, before the Persian Empire gained such strength, and long **before** Cyrus was even born!

With regards to the return of the Jews from captivity, we state that around 538 B.C. Zerubbabel led about 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, Ez. 1,2. The work on the temple was stopped because of opposition from the enemies of the Jews (Ez. 4:24), a work which was later resumed around 520 B.C. because of the influence of the prophets Haggai and Zachariah (Ez. 5:1; Haggai 1-1-4). Then around 458 B.C., roughly 80 years after the first group returned, Ezra led a group of around 1,500 refugees, bringing financial support and spiritual instruction to continue the work of rebuilding the city and restoring acceptable worship under the law of Moses (Ezra 7,8). Later, around 445 B.C., Nehemiah led a third group back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls around that city (Nehemiah 1:1-6:15).

Any way one might want to look at the overall picture, it is evident that Ezra, a priest and a “*skilled scribe in the Law of Moses,*” had a tremendous influence for good. Imagine, a Jew, a part of a captive people, going to the powerful King of Persia, requesting and receiving, permission to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem (a journey of around 500 miles — if they took the straightest route) in order “*to beautify the house of the Lord...in Jerusalem*” (Ez. 7:27), and to encourage proper worship in Jerusalem in keeping with the dictates of the law of Moses! Imagine further the ready response on the part of the Persian king, plus his offer to provide “*from the king’s treasury*” (Ez. 7:20)

the “bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings” and whatever else they may have “needed” for the house of God (Ez. 7:17-20)!

Not only did Ezra have a great influence upon the King of Persia, he also greatly influenced the Jews! Regarding this point, we could mention the around 1500 people who traveled with him from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ez. 8:1-14), and later of Ezra addressing the people in Jerusalem from the law of Moses, rebuking them for having taken “pagan wives,” and insisting that they “separate” themselves “from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives,” Ez. 10:1), and of the people giving up their pagan wives, even though “some of them had wives by whom they had children” (Ez. 10:44)! Imagine also Ezra addressing that “very large assembly of men, women, and children” (Ez. 10:1), and of his addressing them while they “sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of heavy rain” (Ez. 10:9)! How did Ezra manage to have such tremendous influence? Doubtlessly, the answer lies in the fact that “the hand of the Lord his God” was “upon him” (Ez. 7:6). At least three times we read of “the hand of the Lord” being “upon” Ezra (Ez. 7:6,9,28).

But **why** was “*the good hand of the Lord*” upon Ezra? With this in mind, note the connection between verse nine and verse 10 in chapter seven. Verse nine says: “*On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.*” Now note verse 10: “**For** Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.” “**For**” in this verse helps explain the reason for their successful four-month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, as well as the reason for his other successes. You see “*Ezra had prepared his heart...*”

He had not merely prepared for the journey; he “*prepared his heart!*” “*His heart*” in this verse was not the organ that pumped blood throughout his body. The “*heart*” of the “*inward man*” (cf. 2 Cor.4:16) is that part of man that **believes** (Rom. 10:10), that **thinks** (Matt. 9:4), that **reasons** (Mark 2:6), that **purposes** (2 Cor. 9:7), that “**desires**” (Ps. 10:3), that **sorrows** (Ps. 13:2), and from which genuine obedience originates (Rom. 6:17,18) But for what had Ezra “*prepared his heart?*”

1. Ezra “*prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord...*” (Ez. 7:10). For Ezra, being a Jew, of the tribe of Levi, and being able to trace his ancestry all the way back to Aaron the brother of Moses, was not enough! The reason he was a “*skilled scribe in the Law of Moses*” (Ez. 7:6) is because he “*prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord!*” He had that “*hunger and thirst for righteousness*” of which Jesus later spoke (Matt. 5:6). Like the Psalmist, he could say “*I love your commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold*” (Ps.119:127). Like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, he evidently “*searched the Scriptures daily...*” Like Jeremiah, he could say “*Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart*” (Jer. 15:16)

2. Ezra “*prepared his heart*” to “**do**” the “*Law of the Lord.*” He was not merely interested in learning God’s will; he “*prepared his heart*” to “**do**” His will. It is not enough to simply learn the will of God; it must be obeyed! James put it this way: “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your souls,*” Jas. 1:21. Jesus is “*the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him*” (Heb. 5:9), not simply to all who believe in Him!

3. Ezra “*prepared his heart...to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel*” (Ez. 7:10). For Ezra, learning and obeying “*the Law of the Lord*” was not sufficient; he also “*prepared his heart*” to **teach** God’s word. Ezra was a priest and a Levite; under the Law of Moses priests and Levites were commanded to be teachers in Israel (Lev. 10:8-11; Deut. 33:10), and Ezra diligently sought “*to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel*” (Ez. 7:10). An example of his method of teaching is

set forth in Nehemiah 8:1-8. The people had gathered in the open square before the Watergate (v. 1); Ezra read from the book of the law “*from morning until midday before the men and women and those who could understand*” (v. 3). Other Levites also were involved in the reading of the law (7), and “*they read distinctly from the book of the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading*” (v. 8). Ezra obviously was an able teacher of the word, but it was because he had first “*prepared his heart*” for this work.

Application: Inasmuch as Jesus Christ is the “*Mediator of the New Covenant*” (Heb. 9:15), we are not under the Law of Moses. However, “*whatever things were written before were written for our learning*” (Rom. 15:4), so we need to learn from the example of Ezra. What should we learn? We should learn to prepare our hearts to: (1) “*seek the law of the Lord,*” (2) To **obey** the law of the Lord, and (3) to **teach** God’s word to others. Friend, are **you** a modern day Ezra?

*** —B. Witherington