

Ezra 7 • How to Restore a Ministry

Introduction

Consider yourself quite lucky if you've never found yourself earnestly striving to know what to do to get a church or ministry back on track. There is no shortage of discussion these days as to why certain denominations appear to have lost their former impact and glory for God's kingdom, and a particularly large and nervous wringing of the hands regarding the diminished effectiveness of the local church. This isn't a new thing. In fact, it's also the story of the seven churches in Revelation, many of which lost their former effectiveness and were struggling to recapture it. In the resumption of temple operations after a 70 year hiatus, Ezra provides some insight into what it takes to restore a ministry and provides encouragement to us today that it's not impossible.

¹Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia,

there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah,

²son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub,

³son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth,

⁴son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki,

⁵son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.

⁶This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him. ⁷Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

⁸He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. ¹⁰For 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.

[Read v.1-10]

Q: To what does "after these things" in v.1 refer?

A: The completion of the second temple, its dedication, and the first remnant's keeping of the Passover.

Point: Whereas the story of Ezra 1-4, Haggai, and Zechariah focuses on the first remnant's return under Zerubbabel to restore the physical temple, Ezra 5-10 is the story of the second remnant's return under Ezra to restore the ministry of the temple.

Q: What is significant about Ezra's heritage as provided in his genealogy?

A: The most obvious is that he's a direct descendant of Aaron, so he is not only a priest, but under certain conditions could actually hold the office of high priest. The less obvious revelation is in the fact that he is the grandson or great-grandson of Seraiah, the last high priest of the first temple who was captured and killed by Hezekiah. (2 Ki. 25:18; Jer. 52:24)

Point: Ezra is a contrast to the spiritual failures preceding him who had all the things being restored in Ezra's time but lost them through sin and disobedience. Through the book of Ezra unfolds the story of how the 70 years of separation and failure is restored to the right place according to God's standard of measure, which is the same standard by which they were originally judged and lost.

Q: What is Ezra's defining characteristic? Why might that be surprising considering his pedigree provided by his genealogy?

A: He wasn't merely a priest, but "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses". Although his genealogy indicates he was in the line of succession to possibly become High Priest, Ezra's greater calling is his personal commitment to God's Word. He is not just a casual reader, but an expert in preserving God's Word, interpreting God's Word, and teaching God's Word.

Q: How is the statement in v.6 that "the hand of the LORD his God was upon him" a powerful confirmation of God's Word at work within Ezra?

A: Consider the fact that not only is the king of the Medo-Persian Empire receptive to Ezra, but all the priests, Levites, and people as well. Ezra never performed a sign or wonder for any of them, but God's authority showed through his commitment to God's Word.

Point: Every sign and wonder is accompanied by a greater teaching from God's Word, but they are not required to prove or confirm God's Word. A commitment to God's Word alone is enough to accomplish His will and provide a visible witness of His authority and working.

Q: What is the different between how WE might define someone as being an expert on something, and how Scripture in v.10 defines Ezra as an expert?

A: We tend to rely more on earthly qualifications, such as the fact that Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron and a member of the priesthood. God's higher standard of qualification is that Ezra didn't just have intellectual knowledge, but put that knowledge into practice.

1. "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD..." It's the Old Testament picture of the work of salvation, to first address all residual issues of sin and to be devoted to God from the heart.
2. "...and to practice it..." It's the application of the Law to one's heart and behavior that counts the most.
3. "...and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." It's the Old Testament application of the work of discipleship.

Application: To restore a ministry, it takes a commitment to God's Word that begins from the top and is maintained through every level of the organization or group.

[Read v.11-20]

¹¹Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:

¹²"Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace.

And now ¹³I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. ¹⁴Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand, ¹⁵and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, ¹⁶with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem; ¹⁷with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. ¹⁸Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. ¹⁹Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver

Q: What is implied in the way Artaxerxes addresses Ezra?

A: Ezra's not just acknowledged as being a priest, but "the scribe of the law of the God of heaven". Artaxerxes is not just acknowledging God – many kings have acknowledged Him – but is acknowledging the authority of God's Word. It means that what the king commands is in accordance with and subject to God's Word and not merely a man's own desire or whim.

Furthermore, where priests of that time were concerned, it's a personal acknowledgment of the king's elevated regard for Ezra based on Ezra's relationship to God's Word. Most priests of the various religions of the time were not acknowledged for this kind or role or authority.

Q: How would you contrast the northern kingdom of Israel's deportation under the king of Assyria to the restoration of Israel now underway at the direction of Artaxerxes?

A: Because the northern kingdom of Israel completely replaced God's Word and ways with false temples, a false priesthood, and false worship, they were taken away by Assyria; their situation was the direct result of their complete disregard for God's Word. Now they are being restored to the land under the authority of Ezra, not just an expert in the knowledge of God Word but in its practice. Destruction came about because of their treatment of God's Word, and likewise their restoration.

Point: The only cure for disobedience is obedience; the only cure for faithlessness is faithfulness.

Q: What does v.13 reveal to be the similarity between this remnant returning to Israel under Ezra and the original that previously went with Zerubbabel?

A: They were both "willing to go" at the time.

Point: The first group was willing to go and restore the temple, the second group to go and restore God's Word to the ministry and operation associated with the temple.

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in full before the God of Jerusalem.²⁰ The rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.

Q: What is Ezra's primary duty as revealed in v.14?

A: It's the higher calling to evaluate the first remnant "according to the law of your God which is in your hand". Ezra was not just literally bearing a copy of God's Word, but applying it to the people and the temple.

Q: How are the literal things described here possibly alluding to Christ? How are the things happening to Ezra a type or foreshadowing of things to be fulfilled in the course of Jesus' First Coming?

A: Take note of the three primary parties involved – the king, the seven counselors, and Ezra – and how they represent the working of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Son. Just as the king sends Ezra to measure and report on Israel according to God's Word, so Jesus is sent by God. (This is also illustrated in the example of Joseph sent by his father Jacob to report on his brothers as well.) As the gospels make abundantly clear, Christ's ministry was one of not just properly interpreting and teaching God's Word, but applying it. Both Ezra and the Messiah have the role of re-establishing God's Word.

Q: How might the difference be characterized between the things sent with the first remnant versus what is here being sent with the second remnant?

A: The things accompanying the first remnant were mostly the things originally OF the temple, or replacements for same, and needed in order to begin operation of the temple according to the Mosaic Law. These things are all completely voluntary and devoted to ongoing worship. It's the application of one's heart to the things of God, of worship from the heart and not necessarily just according to traditions.

Q: In the language of that day, what does it mean to "deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem"?

A: It means that these things should be dedicated and devoted to God's service. It's not merely contributing to the temple treasury, but to the ministry.

Application: To restore a ministry, the greater commitment must be to make everything conform to the standard of God's Word, especially both personal and corporate worship.

²¹"I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently,²² even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.²³ Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.

²⁴"We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God.

[Read v.21-24]

Q: How might the king's approach of restoration for the second temple be contrasted to the factors that led to the destruction of the first temple?

A: The king here demands, "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done...so that there will not be wrath..." He is demanding adherence to God's Word, whereas wrath because of judgment was previously experienced due to the neglect of God's Word where His temple and the things associated with it were concerned.

Application: To restore a ministry, it is not a one-time commitment to God's Word, but a continual, consistent adherence to His will and ways going forward.

²⁵“You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them. ²⁶Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment.”

[Read v.25-26]

Q: What is the nature of Ezra’s calling, so to speak, from the king?

A: To build an organization which holds its members at every level accountable to God’s Word.

Q: What are the two groups the king specifically identifies?

1. “...all those who know the laws of your God...” That is, those who are supposed to already be members of the church, so to speak, and following God’s Word.
2. “...anyone who is ignorant of them.” That is, to teach all those who are not in alignment with His Word.

Point: *This is a picture of discipleship, which continues for all people regardless of the length of time they’ve been committed to God.*

Q: What is the result of disobedience to God’s Word?

A: The consequences of punishment.

Application: *To restore a ministry, everyone must be continually held accountable to the standard of the degree to which they are applying God’s Word to their life.*

²⁷Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, ²⁸and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king’s mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

[Read v.27-28]

Q: Since the construction of the temple at this time was already complete, what do you suppose Ezra means by characterizing the king’s actions as something “to adorn the house of the LORD”?

A: Certainly the materials provided could be used to make the physical building more beautiful, but it’s more likely that this is a statement characterizing the result of the king’s commandments to re-establish things at every level according to God’s Word. Greater spiritual beauty as the result of the temple’s commitment to God’s Word will outshine the earthly beauty of even gold or silver.

Q: How did Ezra personally characterize the actions of the king?

A: As the extension of God’s “lovingkindness to me”. The working of God’s Word is the visible working of God’s grace.

Application: *The greater beauty of God’s grace through commitment to God’s Word will be the visible evidence that a ministry has been restored according to God’s measure.*

Overall Application

- *In the discussions of what to do about your local church’s or even your own personal ministry, how are the proposed solutions rooted (or not) in a commitment to God’s Word?*
- *What might be wrong with proposed approaches to “sanitize” sermons to make them more “seeker sensitive”? What are the dangers of going too far in that direction?*
- *Refute or substantiate the following statement: Spiritual recovery is impossible with any action or plan that is not specifically intended to re-establish a personal commitment to God’s Word.*