

THE GOOD HAND OF THE LORD UPON EZRA.

"For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances." Ezra 7:10.

Who knows anything about Ezra, and why hark back to him today? Yet one Bible scholar has appraised his life and work in these words: "There is no character in the Old Testament more perfect and complete than that of Ezra. We see him as a servant and as a master, as a student of the law, and its administrator, as supreme in authority and as a subordinate, in public and in private, uniformly and always the same devout, interested, patriotic, of his people, and friend of God." *lover*

In the book of Ezra chapter 7 verse 10 is found the key to his life, which words have been called "a perfect description of a Bible teacher."

This verse tells us of the set of Ezra's heart, which gave direction to his whole life. Back of the set of his heart was the hand of God. — the good hand of the Lord upon him, God is his home, God in the history of his times, God in his heart.

Ezra was of priestly descent. His ancestry is traced back to Aaron, the chief priest. He also was a descendant of Hilkiah, the high priest, who in the reign of king Josiah found the book of the law in the house of God. Ezra's immediate ancestor was Seraiah, whose very name means "Jehovah is prince". Does not this meager information suggest that God must have been in the ancestry, yes, the very home of Ezra, the priest?

"This Ezra went up from Babylon". He had been with his brethren in captivity. Yet the hand of the Lord was at work in the history of his people to fulfill His promise that a remnant should return. For this accomplishment God had stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia to sponsor their return. Perhaps Daniel in Babylon had directed Cyrus to the prediction in Isaiah to the effect that he, Cyrus, was to be God's agent for the political deliverance of His people from captivity. And God also stirred up the spirits of the children of the captivity, causing them to want to return, and Ezra was one of them. Ezra continually recognized the hand of the Lord in the history of Israel, in his personal history, in his own heart. Six times in the short book of Ezra is found this expression about the hand of the Lord—7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31.

This Ezra who went from Babylon was not only a priest, but also a scribe. This meant that he was not merely one who copied the law, but who also expounded the law, that "his preeminent function was that of guarding and interpreting the law. Note the use Jesus makes of this word scribe in Matthew 13:52 when He said, "Therefore every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Campbell Morgan says that "the scribe was the interpreter, the teacher, the unfold of the meaning of the will of God." Ezra "was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all his requests, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him." God had a hand in the life purpose of Ezra. The set of Ezra's heart was for a three-fold purpose: a direction each one of us needs to take today, namely, to seek the law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach it. Ezra was a seeker of the word of God, a doer of the word, and a teacher of the word, the first two being so essential to the third.

1. Seeking the Word.

When Ezra really set his heart to seek the law of the Lord under the good hand of the Lord, just think what he must have found. He probably had access to all of the Old Testament, for many scholars think it was he who was instrumental in the formation of the whole canon of the O.T. In the law of

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Moses, and the prophets, and in the Psalms, ^{he} He must have sought and found the Messianic heart of the O.T. For Jesus said, "These are they that testify of me." Imagine Ezra reading Isaiah 53 which presents so vividly the need of salvation and the ample provision through Christ. "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Ezra found in the O.T. the revelation of the God of all grace, and had received the assurance of the redemption of the remnant according to the election of grace. Listen to his prayer in chapter 9:8-9 as he says, "And now for a little moment grace hath been showed from Jehovah our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in His holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and to give us a little reviving in our bondage. For we are bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended lovingkindness unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the ruins thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem."

What rich treasures are to be found in one who sets his heart to seek the word of the Lord, and what happiness and fruitfulness he experiences! "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season. His leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

Vast as was the scriptural treasury available to Ezra, yet think of the far greater treasures that are ours in the fuller, clearer revelation of God in Christ as found in the New Testament, riches for which we may seek under the guidance of the Spirit of truth which have been poured out in far greater measure to teach us all things, to bring to our remembrance all that Jesus said, to guide us into all the truth, to take the things of Christ and show them unto us. If the good hand of the Lord was upon Ezra more than 500 B.C. how much more is the good hand upon us at the present time. Is your heart, is my heart set accordingly to seek the word of God?

How seek the law of the Lord as did Ezra? Much has been said as to method of Bible study, and much more to be said and learned. Yet back of the how is the element of truth in the old saying, "Where there is a will there is a way." Ezra set his heart to seek the law of the Lord. He had a will to win a knowledge of God's word, and that is fundamental.

2. Doing the Word.

Ezra not only set his heart to seek the law of the Lord—that in itself is not sufficient. He might "know all mysteries and all knowledge". He might be able to recite from memory an entire book in the Bible, and still not be a good Bible teacher. He needs not only to know the word of God, but also to do it—ability plus action. That Ezra was a doer of the word as well as a seeker of the word is shown by his personal devotion to God, and his public duty to his fellowmen.

In the record of his life it is most evident that Ezra was a man of prayer. Listen to his private devotion as recorded in 7:27-28, his ejaculatory thanksgiving to God as he counts his blessings, recognizing Him as the source of his strength and leadership. Observe him as he proclaims a fast at the river Ahava; Why this proclamation at Ahava? The wilderness was before them, and probably desert tribes, communistic guerillas lying in wait to molest and destroy. And the purpose of this proclamation of a fast here was "that we might humble ourselves before God, to seek of Him a straight way for us and for our little ones, and for all our substance." Back of such a purpose as this was the fact that Ezra had set his heart to do the word of God. The history of that journey from the river Ahava to Jerusalem he sums up in these words, "And the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and the liar in wait by the way."

After their arrival in Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon distressing news was brought to Ezra. Alas, the priest, the princes and rulers in Israel, have fallen into the abominations of the heathen in Canaan, particularly the holy seed mingled themselves in mixed marriages with the heathen, directly contrary to the commandment of God. Now, Ezra, as God's representative before the people, what are you going to do about it? It is quite interesting and profitable for us to watch Ezra now in his performance of public duty under great difficulties, and even in the face of opposition. Watch the movement of the story in three scenes. See him overwhelmed with grief at the greatness of the trespass of his people, as he sat down confounded until the evening oblation. Now see him upon his knees with his hands spread out unto Jehovah his God. Listen what a confession of sin, and what recognition of the grace and righteousness of God! See the great assembly of men, women and children who gather around him as he continued in prayer and confession and weeping, as he cast himself down before the house of God. Now he arises to fulfill his responsibility as leader of the people, and summons them to confession, and separation from the people of the land and particularly from the foreign women. Ezra, confounded, confessing, commanding, had set his heart not only to seek the word of God, but also to do it, with the courage and strength given him of God.

student

I knew a layman who is an excellent Bible teacher. He is not only an earnest, of the word, seeking the law of the Lord, but his daily life backs up his teaching. That man is being used most mightily for the advancement of God. The direction of this man's whole life is Godward. The good hand of God is upon him.

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3. Teaching the Word.

Ezra was a man of many gifts. He was a great leader, having led 1800 male Israelites from Persia to Palestine. He was also an organizer of the post-exilic community. Then as we have just seen he was a reformer, being instrumental in causing the people to abandon mixed marriages. He was perhaps greatest as a teacher and expounder of the law of the Lord, for that was the set of his heart. He had set his heart "to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances."

He was so recognized by Artaxerxes, by all the people, and by the leaders particularly. In his letter to him Artaxerxes said, "And thou Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thy hand, appoint magistrates and judges, who may judge all the people that are beyond the River, all as such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye him that knoweth them not." When there was a great gathering of the children of the captivity in Jerusalem, "they spake unto Ezra, the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which Jehovah had to Israel." As the record in Nehemiah continues there are these words, "And on the second day were gathered together the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to give attention to the words of the law." He was recognized as a teacher of the law.

commanded

What a wonderful picture is given us in the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, of Ezra with his associates, opening and expounding to the people the word of God! Look at that great congregation, doing their part to make the teaching of the word effective. I am particularly impressed with five characteristics of that congregation:

- 1) Unity. "All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the broad place." Evidently they were by families, men, women, and children who could understand, having reached the age of accountability.
- 2) That congregation was hungry for the Word. What a difference that makes when the Bible is taught, if their appetites are good.

- 3) They gave good attention. "The ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law."
- 4) Again, there was reverence on the part of the people.
- 5) Once more, there was responsiveness. "And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with the lifting up of their hands, and they bowed their heads, and worshipped Jehovah with their faces to the ground."

Not only was this congregation most impressive, but, ^{particularly} presentation of the teaching. It was prolonged, prayerful, plain, and productive. Ezra read from the book of the law. "From early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women, and of those that could understand." We do well to remember this when we get restless at twelve o'clock, after the preacher has been speaking only 23 minutes. Then this presentation of the word of God was a prayerful presentation. "And Ezra blessed Jehovah, the great God." And all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Again this great student of sacred scripture made a plain presentation of the word. "And they read in the book, in the law of God distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading."

Evidently there was no profound, ~~philosophical~~ philosophical discussion there that day which no one could understand. I like the thought expressed in one of our gospel songs which says, "Make the message clear and plain, Christ receiveth sinful men."

This presentation of the word of God to the great congregation in Jerusalem was not only prolonged, prayerful and plain, but finally, it was productive. It was used of God to lead to worship, to comfort and joy, and to obedience. Such is the effect of the presentation of the true Word of God.

"They bowed their heads and worshipped Jehovah with their faces to the ground." They were comforted by Ezra and Nehemiah, and told that the joy of the Lord was their strength. On the second day the leaders gathered to give attention to the words of the law, out of which grew the observance of the Feast of the Tabernacles, and a regular leadership Bible Conference for a week. "Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read in the book of the law of God." "And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance."

"For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of Jehovah, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances." In what direction is your heart and mine set today?