

From the Pulpit of



Sovereign and Sustaining

No. 6

Ezra 7:1-28

June 26, 2016

Series: Ezra

Pastor Jason Lancaster

2 Chronicles 16:9a: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...” The Bible has a pattern in which God is seeking to bless and use those whose hearts are fully committed to him. It doesn’t mean that someone has to be perfect (the Apostle Paul was not perfect and yet God used him), and it doesn’t mean that God doesn’t sometimes use those who have issues (Sampson had issues but God used him). The general thrust, however, is that God is seeking to bless and use those whose hearts are fully committed to Him. That is what most of us want; we want to be fully committed to the Lord and have Him use us.

However, most of us have gaps between who we want to be and who we currently are. Klaus Issler tells the story of former University of New Mexico soccer player Elizabeth Lambert responding to a video of one of her games. In the game she was being pushed and pulled so much that she lost her cool and yanked another girl’s ponytail so violently that it forced her to the ground. In her statement of apology she said, “This is in no way indicative of my character or the soccer player that I am.” She had an obvious gap that she saw herself as one of great character and yet flung another girl to the ground.¹

We all have these gaps in which we see ourselves in one way and yet under pressure we blow it. But if we want to be those who are blessed and used by God, we want to see these gaps close more and more as we grow like Jesus. I’m bringing this up because in our story today we are going to see a man named Ezra whom God uses and blesses. In fact, his life is a pattern to be imitated of who God uses and blesses. But I want to say more than “Be like Ezra” because your intentions will be good, but unless you start to deal with your sanctification gaps, you will be spinning your wheels. It’s better to say something like, “God in His sovereignty blessed and used His committed servant Ezra. God in His sovereignty continues to bless and use His servants today who deal with the gaps and are growing more like Jesus Christ.” May we be those who are open and willing to let God change us and use us for His glory.

Turn to the book of Ezra. Let’s get our Biblical and historical bearings as we place the book of Ezra in an appropriate timeline. God Created the world, Noah, Abraham, Israel goes to Egypt, first exodus out of Egypt, David, kingdom splits (Northern and Judah). Northern Kingdom

¹ *Living into the Life of Jesus*, Klaus Issler, page 38.

destroyed, Judah exiled to Babylon due to sin, second exodus out of Babylon back to Jerusalem to rebuild, 400 years of Biblical silence, Jesus Christ (third exodus).

The first six chapters in Ezra are about the original exiles (first wave) who returned to rebuild the Temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. This effort was led by Zerubbabel. Once we hit chapter 7, about 80 years have passed since the exiles returned, then Ezra comes on the scene to establish the people in the ways of the Lord and His law. Ezra is part of the latter returning exiles (second wave) to Jerusalem. He was about 13 years before Nehemiah, but their missions had some overlap. Nehemiah's mission was to build up the walls for security and Ezra's mission was to build the people up in the Law of the Lord. Ezra was focused on renewal, to see the people of God spiritually renewed in their commitment to the Lord. We finally get to witness the work of Ezra as we dive into chapter 7 and see God orchestrating events and using and blessing Ezra and His people.

Ezra 7:1: "Now after this..." There is basically a 53-58 year gap between chapters 6 and 7. Previously we saw God in His sovereignty rebuild and dedicate the Temple as worship has been restored. Now the rest of the book will focus on God restoring and renewing His people in His Word. After years of exile, the Israelites needed to be rooted and reestablished in the Word. Chapters 1-6: Focus = Temple. Chapters 7-10: Focus = Torah.² A good connector of these chapters is God's sovereignty termed the 'hand of God' (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Just as God's hand moved to see the Temple rebuilt, so God's hand will move to see His people renewed in His Word.

Let's see the hand of God grant Ezra success in verses 7:1-6: "Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him." God is going to revive His people in the "Law of Moses" by using a scribe and teacher named Ezra. And Ezra has the right lineage and credentials, as he is a descendent from the line of 'Aaron the chief priest' who was the brother of Moses. Historically the Jews have revered Ezra and he has even been called the second Moses. Moses first instructed the people in the Law of the Lord and Ezra instructed God's people and renewed their commitment to His Word. King Artaxerxes granted Ezra permission and made provision for Ezra to carry out this crucial task. And through it all, 'the hand of the Lord his God was on him.'

Ezra set out with a crew as we see in verses 7-9: "And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him." There is God's sovereign indicator again, 'for the good hand of his God was on him.' God gave Ezra and his caravan 'traveling mercies' as they took the four month trip from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Now to my favorite verse in the book of Ezra and the one we will land on today in verse 10: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." We will come back to this verse in a moment, but God clearly used him because he was committed to God and His Word.

² Dale Ralph Davis, page 2. *Ezra-Nehemiah*

What follows are all the details of God's sovereign hand of blessing on Ezra and His people through a pagan king. I will rush these sections because I want us to come back to the character of Ezra.

Verses 11-20: "This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: 'Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God which is in your hand (This is absolutely astonishing; the king sends Ezra back to check on the Jews and make sure they are following the law of the Lord. It would be like Obama or Rauner commissioning me to make sure EBF knows and follows the Word of God. Wow! Not only that, but the king also gave them money), and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury.'" The king not only gives permission to root the people in the Word, but makes provision for sacrifices of worship. Wow!

Verses 21-24: "And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God." The King decrees that his treasurers along the way make provision for Ezra and his crew. Part of that meant that no tax would be imposed, so they would be tax exempt. The king's motives are to keep the God of Israel happy 'lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons.' Regardless of the King's motives, the hand of God is moving.

Verses 25-26: "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment." The king commissions Ezra to appoint legal 'magistrates and judges' to make sure the people obey the king and the Word of God or punishment would follow disobedience.

Ezra feels so pumped that God would bless him and use him in this way. Verses 27-28: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with

me.” Ezra had the ‘hand of the LORD’ on him as God in His sovereignty moved the heart of the king to ‘beautify the house of the Lord’ through all the provision. In addition, God had extended his ‘steadfast love’ to Ezra by giving him success before the King and the ability to return to Jerusalem to build up the people in the law of the Lord. I like that Ezra says, “I took courage...” It reminds me of the verse I put up earlier, 2 Chronicles 16:9a: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...” God had strengthened Ezra and given him courage as the Lord used and blessed him.

I’m not trying to create a formula here, but I would say that Ezra put himself in a place to be used by God. That brings me back to verse 10: “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” Ezra’s heart is set on seeking the Word, doing the Word and teaching the Word. He doesn’t just want to study and teach it; he also wants to obey it himself. Ezra was a priest and as a preacher I could say this is my goal in life to study the Word, obey and teach it. But I believe it a model for all Christians who follow Jesus and disciple others. You are in the Word, you obey it and you want to teach it to those you are discipling, your kids or those in church. At this point, I want to say, “Just be like Ezra.” But I realize that there are a variety of gaps in what we say we believe and in what we actually end up doing. I just want to address some of these gaps and see them closed so we can be a people more of the Word of God in seeking, obeying and teaching and available to be used and blessed by God.

I’ve been reading a book by Klaus Issler entitled *Living into the Life of Jesus*. In it, he points out some of these ‘sanctification gaps.’ I think we see some of these sanctification gaps in Ezra. The first one is called the “study gap.” Whereas Ezra’s heart was set on seeking and studying God’s Word, too many times our hearts can dismiss many of the Scriptural teachings. It’s like you quickly dismiss the teaching of the Word of God. The Word talks about purity, but you dismiss that as prudish. The Word talks about being wise with your money, but you dismiss that as restrictive. The Word talks about disciplining and raising your children, but you dismiss that as outdated. The Word talks about casting your anxieties on God, but you dismiss that as irresponsible. The Word talks about forgiving as you have been forgiven in Christ, but you dismiss that as a God-thing, but not humanly possible. Ezra is aggressively searching and studying the Scriptures, but many of you have four Bibles and barely open one up on Sunday. It’s often because you have a ‘dismissive gap.’ You act as if you know what’s best for your life, rather than having God tell you what’s best for your life. By God’s grace we want to get in His Word and see that gap start to close. Part of this happens by repenting of ways we try to play God and run our lives apart from the Word. Move back into His Word and allow Him to shape you.

The second gap is the ‘do gap.’ Whereas Ezra sought to obey what he believed, many of us have a discrepancy gap between our profession and our practice. We all have this in many forms. It’s like I say I value evangelism, but I rarely share my faith. I want to be gentle with my kids, but I yell too much. You may say you value community, but you’re a workaholic. Maybe you have issues with being in control, purity, anger, greed and on and on. There is a discrepancy between what you profess and what you do. By God’s grace you want that gap to start to close. Part of that comes by being open to the correction of others and being open to the correction of God. When others call you out or the Holy Spirit convicts you, be quick to confess and open to change.

The last gap is the “teach gap.” Whereas Ezra sought to teach and disciple others, many of us get so distracted that we fail to invest in others. Most of us would agree that one of the main priorities as a Christian is to fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples and investing in others. Yet if I ask you who you are investing in, there may be a long pause of silence. Why is that? It could be you are just distracted with busyness and the things of this world and are drifting away from Jesus’ priority to invest in others. By God’s grace you want that gap to start to close. Part of

that comes by moving away from selfish pursuits (hobbies, toys, work) and moving toward the care and concerns of others. When you move toward others, you see the gap close.

Conclusion: You want to be blessed and used by God, but you have to put yourself in the right place by seeking God's Word, obeying it and teaching it to others. Of course, you want 'to be like Ezra' and be used by God, but that only comes as you look to Jesus to close the gaps in your life. Jesus closed the main gap of separation from you and a Holy God by dying on the cross in your place to reconcile you to God through faith. Now He is working on closing these gaps in your growth in being more like Jesus. May you be one who seeks to study His Word, do it and teach others. Close the gap and walk with God and put yourself in a place to be used by our sovereign and good God.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, June 26, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.