

The Guiding Word

Scripture: Ezra 7

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Morning Service

People of God: The Book of Ezra describes the restoration of the covenant community. After seventy years in exile, God's people come back to the Promised Land to rebuild a community where they could serve the Lord their God. What does it take rebuild a community of faith? What does it take for us to be a faithful church of God?

Well, the first half of this book focuses on one key component: worship. The main reason why God's people come back to Jerusalem was to rebuild the temple so that the worship of God could be re-started, according to the rules and regulations of the OT. Worship was the central activity of God's people.

It continues to be for God's people today. The form of worship may be different, because of the coming of Christ. But worship remains the central activity of God's people. Worship shapes our life—as individual believers, but also a body of believers.

Now in chapter seven, in this second half of the Book of Ezra, a second component is added: the importance of the Word of God. The Word of God needs to shape and guide the community of faith. That emphasis comes through in this chapter by the many references to the Law of God. This law, as we shall see, serves to represent the entire Word of God. The Bible needs to shape the life of the church.

Why? Because every organization needs a guide or rulebook to give direction and structure to its operation. Canada, for example, has a constitution that spells out the duties and responsibility of each level of government. Some things are the responsibility of the federal government, while other items are under the authority of the provinces. Disputes between these levels of government have to appeal to the constitution for support.

Even sports have their rules and regulations. It's hockey season again. The NHL has its manual that describes how the game ought to be played. It has referees to enforce those rules. The league has a schedule to provide a

structure to the season. That way, everyone knows what is going on.

In a similar way, the community of faith also has needs its guidebook, its manual to explain what it means to be the people of God. The Word of God serves as that manual, describing not just how we ought to live but why. But the Bible is far more than a rulebook. It is the story of God restoring his broken creation back to its original goodness. It's the story of God rescuing his rebellious image bearers back into a faithful community. Without the Bible, we would be completely left in the dark as to what God is up in this world and how we ought to live as his people. As a result, the Word of God needs to have a central place within the believing community.

That's what Ezra brings as he enters the picture. His focus is on the Law of God. He brings that Word to bear to the life of the people. This is the first time that Ezra appears in this book named after him. Over half the book is finished and finally Ezra appears on the scene. This is a reminder that the restoration of the community is the work of God. It is not dependent upon one person.

The church today needs to be reminded of this as well. It's easy to make the church dependent upon one person, so that it rises or falls with the pastor. But that should not be the case. All of us need to fulfill our tasks within the church so that the work of the church can be carried out, faithfully and effectively.

The entrance of Ezra upon the scene, however, is a reminder of the central place the Word of God is in the rebuilding of the covenant community. There are different ways Ezra is described in this chapter, but the most important is his connection to the Law of God. He is a scribe, an expert in the law of God.

Did you notice how that gets repeated over and over again in this chapter? Look at:

-verse 6: He was a teacher well versed in the law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given.

-verse 10: 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.

-and then in verse 11: a man learned in the matters concerning the commands and decrees of the Lord for Israel.

These and other descriptions are unmistakable in pointing out the expertise of Ezra. He was an expert in the law of God.

This law of God provided the central focus for Ezra's task in the midst of God's people. Now in the letter of Artaxerxes, there are a variety of concerns including the temple and its treasures. But the overall mandate given to Ezra is to teach the Law of God. The letter begins in verse 14:

You are sent by the king and his seven advisors to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the law of your God, which is in your hand. (The letter concludes in verse 25): you are to teach any who do not know the laws of your God.

Teaching and explaining the Law of God--that's what Ezra was to do among the covenant community. Along with worship, this was an important part of the rebuilding of the covenant community.

Now when we hear these references to the Law of God, we must not think only of the Ten Commandments. The Law included much more than that. It included more than all the detailed rules and regulations we find in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. For the people of Israel, the Law of God refers to the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses, which the Jews call the Torah.

In other words, when Ezra taught the Law of God, it also includes God's acts of creation and redemption. It includes the stories of Genesis—the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The story of Exodus—with God's great acts of deliverance. That's far more than just the Ten Commandments or the extended rules and regulations given under Moses. Yes, it included those things, but they were taught in the context of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and God's saving acts of salvation.

We see Ezra fulfilling his mandate in Nehemiah chapter eight. Turn with me there, where we find the reaction and response of the people to the reading of God's Word. In verse one, we are told that everyone, including women and children, were gathered together so that they could hear the Word of God. Ezra brought out the Law and read it from daybreak till noon. Verse three makes the comment that *all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law*.

Now remember at this time, the people did not have books. They had no copy of the Bible as we do today. For them to remember God's Word, they had to hear it, they had to internalize it, and they had to remember it. This was often a problem in the past. They had forgotten God's Word. They forgot what God had done for them. They forgot how God wanted them to be a holy people, distinct from the pagan world in which they lived.

Notice the response of the people to reading of God's Word. In verse 9 we are told they began to weep. As they heard the Word of God once again after years of neglect, the people wept with sorrow. They were reminded of how unfaithful they were in hearing and keeping the Word of God. The stories of God's redemption reminded them of God's undeserved grace in their lives. The laws reminded them of how they fell short of doing God's will in their lives. As a result, they wept.

But that's not the response Ezra and the other leaders wanted. Nehemiah told the people (in verse 10): *This day is sacred to the Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.* This was to be a joyous celebration. God's Word is freely proclaimed. It once again lives in the hearts of the people. It once again gives shape to the community. As a result, they stopped weeping and began to celebrate, because as verse 12 states: *they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

Yes, the Word of the Lord revealed their shortcomings and their sins. But more importantly, the Word revealed the grace of God. The Word revealed they were a community of love and hope, because God was in their midst. He called them out of the world to be his chosen people.

The people in response to the Word then celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles--eight days of joyous festivities, at the heart of which was the Word of God. Verse 18 says: *Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law.*

We have no excuse to be ignorant of the Word of God. We have no reason why it should be neglected in our lives. Unlike the people of the OT who did not have their own Bible, we do. We have the whole revealed Word of God. We have the whole story of salvation, from Genesis to Revelation, a story that centers upon the saving work of Jesus.

We have that Word in written form, with plenty of copies in our homes. We have that Word explained to us each Sunday, with the preaching of the Word. We have devotional books and bible studies to help dig deeply into that Word. The resources today are endless. As a result, there is no justification for ignorance when it comes to God's Word.

But I wonder at times, how well we really know this book. Is it a book that is read in our homes, in our personal lives? Have you read all of it? These are questions I raised with my Grade 12 catechism class a few weeks ago. The younger generation isn't into reading as the older generation was. Books are passé. Video and movies are dominant. People would rather watch the movie than read the book it is based upon.

Yet, as I have stressed before, Christians are people of the Book—not the Video. God has revealed himself in this Word. And so, it is this Word, we must study, observe and teach. Those are the three key words of verse 10. As Ezra, studied, observed and taught the Law of God, so we must as individuals, and as a corporate community, study, observe and teach the Word of God.

It begins by reading it. Maybe it's too early to consider a New Year's resolution—but let me put the challenge out there: If you have never read this book, cover to cover, I challenge you to do so in this coming year. And

even if you have, do it again. I'd recommend the One Year Bible, which divides the whole Bible into 365 sections, with a portion of the OT, NT, a Psalm and a Proverb each day—that way you won't get bogged down in Leviticus or Numbers. It takes less than 15 minutes a day.

Of course, reading the Bible is just the first step in letting the Word shape you and shape the life of this church. We are also called to observe it: to live it out. To give expression to what it means to be—in the words of I Peter 2:9, “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”

This Word, then, shapes what we believe and how we live. It answers the basic question of life. It offers a worldview that makes sense of life in this world. And so, we do not merely read this Word, we observe it—we live it out. At the end of the sermon on the mount, Jesus said: “Therefore who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” We are to put the words of this Book into practice.

And we are also to teach this Book to others. To our children so that that they will know the stories of the Bible. To our neighbors who may be ignorant of the Word. The majority of Canadians have grown up, without attending church, without having the Bible in school so that we cannot assume they know the basics of the Bible. Evangelism and disciple making will involve teaching the Bible.

And so, the Book of Ezra presents us with two components that are necessary for a faithful community of believers—worship and the word. May they be strong pillars upon which this church also rests. Amen.