

## **“How to Change the World”**

**Ezra 7**

**June 28, 2020**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

As we come today to this seventh chapter, we finally encounter the man after whom the entire book is named. Ezra’s arrival on the scene is dated at the “seventh year of Artaxerxes” (v. 7), which would make it the year 458 BC, 57 years after the completion of the temple described in the previous chapter. He had lived his entire life in exile in Babylon, where by God’s blessing he had made it into the upper levels of the king’s court. We know that because of the fact that he had access to ask the king for his permission and funding for this expedition to Jerusalem. The royal court of the most powerful nation in the world at that time, Persia, was not unlike the West Wing of the White House. You can’t just walk in there and expect to be granted a meeting with the President. So when we compare Ezra to other biblical characters, we should put him in the category of people such as Joseph and Daniel, both of whom also served at the highest levels. We should also include in that number Queen Esther, who served as Queen of Persia under King Ahasuerus, predecessor to Artaxerxes. Ezra would have certainly known of her.

Like Joseph, Daniel and Esther, Ezra used his high position for the benefit of his people, the Jews. When he made his request of the king, it was granted, and Ezra was given the assignment of “making inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem” (v. 14). It becomes evident that Ezra was also given authority to set straight whatever he found amiss after such inquiries. If you had such authority for our nation, where would you start? What role does the Church have in setting straight what is crooked and restoring what is broken? Due to recent events, there is a high level of motivation in our nation to make needed changes. But what should be done? Let me sharpen that question further. What should the Church do? It is tempting to consider only what others should do. Everyone seems to have an idea of what the politicians should do, with the possible exception of the politicians themselves. Is it possible that at least some of the anger we see all around us is due to the fact that everyone is looking at what others should do, and not enough people are asking, “What can I do?” So I want to ask that question today. What could and should the Church do to address the problems our nation is facing? Wisdom from God is found in this chapter to answer that question.

### **I. Back to the Bible – v. 1-10**

Ezra is identified first by his genealogy, which reveals him to be a descendant of Aaron, Israel’s first high priest. Then he is said to be **“a scribe**

**skilled in the Law of Moses”** (v. 6). Jewish tradition credits Ezra with collecting and organizing the Old Testament in much the form we have today. In the wake of the destruction of Solomon’s temple and the ensuing exile to Babylon, it’s not hard to imagine how the Old Testament scrolls would have gotten scattered. Perhaps different priestly families possessed certain portions, which would have been carefully guarded. Ezra did the hard work of collecting these, studying them and putting them into an organized form to be preserved and accessible to succeeding generations. Remember that Ezra lived toward the end of the Old Testament period, so almost all the books of the Old Testament had been written by the time he lived.

It wasn’t enough to have accurate written copies of the books of the Old Testament. The word of God is meant to be lived. So Ezra made God’s word a priority, described so well 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.”** There were other writings that could have captured his attention. Babylon was famous for its literature, particularly its literature about the study of the stars. Much like today’s astrology, it was believed that these stars, rightly interpreted, could give insight into things on the earth. Such a prospect would make it tempting to give oneself to the reading and studying of these texts on astrology. But Ezra set his heart to study something far more valuable, the Law of the Lord.

Notice that he didn’t study it as an intellectual exercise. Rather, he purposed to do it and teach it. Have you noticed how you pay attention to something differently when you have to do it or teach it? I read recently of a man named Jim O’Neill, a sixty-five-year old pilot who was forty minutes into a four-hour solo flight from Glasgow, Scotland, to Colchester, England, when his vision failed. As it turned out, he’d suffered a stroke and was quite literally flying blind. He groped around until he found his radio and issued a Mayday alert. A Royal Air Force pilot was sent to assist and was able to find the plane and make radio contact. The Air Force pilot located the nearest runway and gave verbal direction to O’Neill about the direction he needed to fly in to reach it. “A gentle turn right, please. No, too much, correct slightly. That’s it. You’re on course now.” And then they arrived at the runway and O’Neill was asked if he could see it. “No sir, negative,” came the reply. He would have to land the plane blind, listening only to the commands of the Air Force pilot. They began their descent. On the first try, the plane hit the runway too hard and bounced up again. They had to go around for a second attempt. It wasn’t until the eighth attempt that the plane was landed safely.

We are all flying through life blind, needing the guidance of one who can see. We have such guidance in God’s word. It helps me to think of life as one of those mazes that you walk through, like a corn maze cut into a field. The walls are too high to see over. Every path except one leads to a dead end, but you can’t see where the path goes until you walk down it for a while. The difference

is that in life every path except one leads to more than a dead end. It leads to real danger. But the path is often labelled with something attractive like, “All your friends are doing this,” or “This will really make you happy.” But God sees where every path leads, and in his love directs us to the proper path. Ultimately, that proper path is to follow and obey Jesus.

How does this help us to change the world? We are not called to force others to believe like we do or to teach the Bible to those with no interest in it. Rather, this helps us change the world by changing us. It makes us to be people of faith and people of prayer. And then, in whatever calling God gives to us, we will be ready to bring good to people. We will have God’s wisdom for knowing how to love people well. Christians who go into politics will have the character to resist the allure of power and selfishness.

Ethelfrith was a seventh century pagan Saxon king of Northumbria. He invaded Wales and was about to give battle against the Welsh, who were Christians. As Ethelfrith was surveying the battlefield in front of him, he observed a large number of unarmed men. When he asked who they were, he was told that they were the Christian monks of Bangor, praying for the success of their army. Ethelfrith immediately realized the seriousness of the situation. “Attack them first,” he ordered. It is as we become people of the book that we represent just such a danger to the kingdom of Satan.

## **II. Build the Church – v. 11-26**

We know from the book Nehemiah that occasional reports would come to the Jews in Babylon and Persia concerning the state of things in Jerusalem. It seems that things were not going well. God had used the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah to bring something of a revival in times past, but they have long ago faded from the scene. The Spirit of God is always raising up a new generation, however, and Ezra is the one he raises up at this time. He had undoubtedly heard of Jerusalem’s problems, and he purposes to do something about it. So he courageously approaches King Artaxerxes with a bold request. He wants the king to send him, at the king’s expense, back to Jerusalem to inquire about life there, to correct whatever he might find amiss and to strengthen temple worship.

Amazingly, the king agrees to everything Ezra asked him and then some. The majority of this chapter consists of the letter he wrote authorizing Ezra’s expedition back to Jerusalem. Specifically, his letter decreed five things. First, he said that anyone living in his kingdom who wanted to return to accompany Ezra on this expedition was allowed to do so. Second, he authorized Ezra to collect silver and gold from any Jews living in his kingdom and transport it back to Jerusalem. Third, he contributed money out of his own treasury for worship in the temple. This money would allow for the purchase of the animals

to be sacrificed there, as well as all other appropriate offerings. And then, in a show of trust in Ezra, he said that any money left over could be used to do whatever Ezra thought best. Fourth, King Artaxerxes granted a tax exemption for all the priests. Finally, he authorized Ezra to appoint magistrates who were given power to enforce God's law among the Jews. Essentially, then, King Artaxerxes worked to build and strengthen the Jewish nation, especially its worship, which was central to everything else.

Why did King Artaxerxes do this? One answer to that question is found in verse 27, where we read that God put it into the heart of the king to do this. The book of Proverbs says it well: **"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will"** (21:1). We know from the history of this era that Artaxerxes endured a rebellion that arose in Egypt just before this time when Ezra approached him. It is likely, then, that Artaxerxes' motives were purely political. He wanted to stem any rebellious impulses by stabilizing Israel, making it something of a firebreak. That may have been his motivation, or it may have been something else. What we do know for sure is that God directed this king to take actions to benefit and build up Israel.

Two applications occur to me about this. First, we are to pray for our political leaders as Paul instructed Timothy. **"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way"** (1 Timothy 2:1-2). This passage from Ezra teaches us that these kings and those in high positions don't even have to be Christians to accomplish this. God can turn the heart of even the most wicked ruler to do what ends up building up the Church. That is what we are to pray for. Let us not neglect this work.

The second application is to labor for the same thing ourselves. We as Christians are to labor to strengthen the Church and build her up. What can we do to change the world? We can build the church. This is not the only thing needed, but I do think it's the most important. Our world needs servant-leaders now more than ever, and it is the Church who can supply such leaders. There is a place for good policy, but good policy will be of limited value without an army of men and women who move out to love and serve others. What is the biggest need within our poor urban communities? I believe it is strong churches. The same is needed in our suburban and rural communities.

What are some specific things we might do to help build the Church? We can continue to be involved in strengthening the Church beyond the walls of AVPC. I notice in our passage that Ezra collected money for the temple from Jews who elected to stay in Babylon (7:16). Our call to build and strengthen the Church goes beyond a concern for strengthening our own congregation. But it also includes the strengthening of our congregation. We labor to disciple

our children and send them out to be a blessing to the world. We labor to disciple and train our adults to go forth and make a difference in this world.

We live in an individualistic world that looks down on institutions. People are stirred up today to do something about racial injustice, and that's a good thing. But individual concern will not be enough. If there is to be lasting change, institutions must rise up to carry through on needed changes. And the most important of these institutions is the Church. So let me ask you, how strong would the Church be if every member did only what you did? If your answer is that the Church would be weaker, then I want to encourage you to step up your game.

### **III. Be Grateful – v. 27-28**

The response to all this on the part of Ezra is to bless the Lord. **“Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king”** (v. 27). He was grateful to God, recognizing that all that had happened was pure gift from God. God was not abandoning his people, but was being faithful to them, showing his “steadfast love.”

Take note of the effect all this had on Ezra. **“I took courage”** (v. 28). A grateful heart is a courageous heart. What's the connection between gratitude and courage? Gratitude sees everything I have as a gift from God. It is the proper view of any good thing I have. The improper view is to make ultimate the things I'm good at, and then they become part of my identity. Are you good at music? It's not who you are, but a gift from God. Are you a good athlete? It's not who you are—it's a gift. And if these abilities and talents we have are not part of our identity, then we are not terrified to lose them. Instead, we hear God's call to use that gift to serve others and to build up the Church. That gives us courage. It releases us from the paralyzing fear of loss.

What is the alternative to gratitude? I think it is anger and bitterness. It's the person who's always griping about how bad things are. But grateful people are humble and courageous. How our nation needs humble, courageous, thankful people today!

### **CONCLUSION:**

So what has God given you? You may not have a position of influence in a royal court like Ezra, but you have profound gifts. You have forgiveness of sins from Jesus. You have the presence of the Holy Spirit. You have the promise of God that your bad things will turn out for good. And your good things can never be taken from you, and the best things are yet to come. So be grateful and courageous and serve God.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Ezra 7**

1. Very few people would disagree with the idea that our nation is in need of some changes. And a large percentage of people seem to be more motivated presently to advocate for change. But when we talk about the changes that are necessary, the agreement comes to an end. Do you think the Church has become too focused on the political side of change?
2. What changes would you like to see *in the Church* that would be of greatest help to our nation today?
3. Ezra labored to help his people know and obey God's word (see verse 10). That's what his whole life was about. What would a Christian have to believe to have the same priority? Do you believe that?
4. Have you seen ways the Bible has saved you from danger? For example, maybe God's commands about faithfulness in marriage have saved you from the temptation to allow your affections to wander from your spouse.
5. Ezra labored to build up the people of God. We are called to help build up the Church. What do you believe are some of the ways God calls you to do that?
6. King Artaxerxes was not a believer in Israel's God; yet he authorized and enabled Ezra to work for the building up of Israel and its temple. We are called to pray for those in high positions that they would rule in such a way **"that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way"** (1 Timothy 2:2). Pray for that now.