

## **A Man Prepared to Lead God's People (#1)**

Ezra 7:1-10

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The Lord Jesus clearly informed His own disciples that the urgent need of the hour was not a harvest of people to reap for the kingdom of God, but was rather faithful laborers to be raised up by the Lord and sent out to reap the harvest ("The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest" Matthew 9:37-38). It is no different today than it was at the time that Christ uttered those words of exhortation to His disciples. There is a huge harvest of people to be brought to Jesus Christ for salvation and for reformation of the family, church, and state. The need is not a harvest; the need is for faithful ministers, elders, and deacons to be mightily used of the Lord to reap that harvest. Now it is not the duty of every Christian man to be called and sent out to be a minister, elder, or deacon necessarily, but it is the duty of every Christian (man and woman) to fervently PRAY and to earnestly BESEECH the Lord of the harvest that He would raise up and send out faithful church officers to reap the harvest of souls with the goal that the nations of this world might all be converted and disciplined (Matthew 28:19).

Certainly the Lord is absolutely sovereign and could bring His salvation and reformation to the nations of this world without frail, weak ministers (like the one who stands before you), if He chose to do so. The Lord could send His mighty, elect angels to be His ministers in visibly and directly proclaiming the gospel to the nations, and in visibly and directly leading the nations to a glorious covenanted reformation. But the Lord has chosen in His most wise, most holy, and most good plan to use ministers who have been justified by faith alone in Christ's righteousness alone to proclaim that same gospel to other sinners like themselves. Why? In order that the power of God and the preciousness of the gospel (and not the power or preciousness of the messenger) might be wondrously and gloriously displayed for everyone to see; and in order that all the world might see and understand, "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2:9).

This Lord's Day, we shall be considering the messenger that God chose to use in continuing His reformation of religion in Israel, even after the temple proper was built. The main points for the sermon are the following: (1) The Qualifications of Ezra To Lead God's People (Ezra 7:1-6,10); (2) The Second Return Of God's People To Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6-9).

### **I. The Qualifications of Ezra To Lead God's People (Ezra 7:1-6,10).**

A. As we come to Ezra 7, we pass from the first major section of the Book of Ezra (chapters 1-6), which details significant events that surrounded the First Return of God's people to Israel under Zerubbabel (the governor) and Joshua (the high priest). Beginning with Ezra 7, we now begin to consider the second major section of the Book of Ezra (chapters 7-10), which details significant events that surrounded the Second Return of Israelites under Ezra (the priest and scribe).

1. The first major section of the Book of Ezra (chapters 1-6) covers a period of approximately 23 years (from the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1:1 to the completion of the temple in Ezra 6:15-22). Now between the end of Ezra chapter 6 and the beginning of Ezra chapter 7, there is period of silence in which nothing is recorded in the Book of Ezra for approximately 57 years (from 515 b.c. to 458 b.c.). Then we come to the second major section of the Book of Ezra (chapters 7-10), which only covers a period of a little more than 1 year (ending in 458 b.c.).

2. Let me also note one more historical piece of information. The temple was completed during the reign of King Darius (as was observed in the previous sermon in Ezra 6:15), and the Second Return of the Jews under Ezra occurred in the reign of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:1). That means that nothing is covered in the Book of Ezra that occurred during the reign of Xerxes (or Ahasuerus, as he is called in the Book of Esther), who married Esther and whose reign fell between Darius and Artaxerxes. So if we want to fill in some historical redemptive events that befell God's people during those silent years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, we must turn to the Book of Esther.

a. Though much could be said about those silent years (between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7), perhaps the most significant event (or series of events) was that the Lord preserved His people throughout the provinces of the Persian Empire from total extinction (by means of Mordecai and Queen Esther), for wicked Haman sought to destroy all of God's people in one fell swoop, and set in motion a sinister plan to accomplish this destruction of the Jews (Esther 9:2-5). This wicked plan of Haman to destroy all Jews in the Persian provinces would have also applied to those Jews living in the land of Israel (which was within the Persian province of Syria).

b. Dear ones, the wicked conspiracies of Christ's enemies that would seek to destroy Christ and Christ's people will all ultimately fail. There may seem to be progress made in destroying those who stand for the pure gospel and sound doctrine of Jesus Christ and who testify against a state-sponsored toleration of heresy, idolatry, blasphemy, and every false religion imaginable (even that of the papal antichrist), who also testify against a state-sponsored re-definition of the Divine institution of marriage, and who also testify against a state-sponsored war on biblical Christianity, but all such plots and conspiracies against Christ, against the people of Christ, and against the doctrine and worship of Christ are as doomed to fail as the conspiracy raised up by that arch-enemy of old, Haman; for no plans will succeed against the triumphant reign of Jesus Christ, who will crush all His and our enemies when He asserts His almighty power (Psalm 2:1-5; Isaiah 54:17). Dear ones, whatever the weapon that the enemy may use to suppress and crush you as you seek to stand for the Cause of Christ (and to suppress and crush this covenanted reformation), it will surely fail and not prosper. Dear ones, who or what is your greatest adversary and foe that is relentless in coming against you day after day to deny Christ, to cast away your faithful testimony for Christ, to give up and quit this righteous battle in which you find yourselves in for the honor and glory of Jesus Christ and for the purity of Christ's gospel, doctrine, worship, government, holy commandments, and precious promises? Dear ones, I would have you never forget that the Lord Jesus has already legally conquered all your enemies: whether Satan and all godless governments that hate the pure gospel and doctrine of Christ, whether sin in your life and mine that leads us away from Christ, whether the evil of trials and afflictions that plague us, whether death and the fear of death, or whether eternal condemnation in hell through His death and resurrection. Christ did not legally overcome a few of our enemies, or even most of our enemies in standing for the Cause of Christ. Not one enemy of Christ and of His righteousness and truth was left standing with any legal basis to overwhelm you when He died and bodily was raised from the dead. What do you face? Beloved, the gospel of Jesus Christ will prevail (even when you fail). For Jesus Christ will use even our sins and failures, our trials and afflictions, and the persecution and threats that are brought against us to cast ourselves upon Christ and His promise of deliverance (in this life and ultimately in heaven to come).

B. We come now to consider the man that the Lord raised up to lead His people to even greater degrees of reformation of the one true biblical religion: Ezra. Now I will only have time to cover a couple of those qualifications in today's sermon. But we will continue our study of the qualifications of Ezra in the following sermon, as we seek to understand what it was in the doctrine and life of this man of God (Ezra) that the Lord so mightily used to continue to promote reformation in Israel (even when Israel had so grossly fallen away from practicing in their lives and in their families the purity of God's Word). What do we learn about Ezra and his qualifications to lead God's people from our text?

1. **The first qualification** we find is that Ezra was a priest, whose genealogy is traced directly back to Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). This is a religious genealogy (as we discussed in a couple sermons that were preached on the subject of genealogies that occurred earlier in this series on the Book of Ezra). Now these verses in Ezra 7 may seem to many a portion of Scripture that we can either avoid or just quickly skim over as having no relative importance. But such a view overlooks the fact that one qualification of being a priest, whom God would receive as His minister, was that he must be able to trace his genealogy back to the tribe of Levi through the family of Aaron.

a. For not to do so was to pervert and corrupt the one true religion of Jehovah and to introduce a man-appointed priesthood (rather than a Divinely-appointed priesthood) into the worship and service of God (as did the Northern Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:30-31). In fact, we have a specific instance in which certain ones who claimed to be priests could not serve as priests because they could not prove their genealogical relationship to the tribe of Levi through the family of Aaron (Ezra 2:61-62).

b. Now although New Covenant ministers of Jesus Christ do not have a family genealogy (like that of the Aaronic priesthood) to which they must be able to trace their ancestry, I submit to you, dear ones, that there must be a doctrinal and ecclesiastical genealogy that faithful ministers are able to trace back to the gospel and teachings of Jesus Christ and His apostles.

(1) Contrary to the harlot Church of Rome (which is described in Revelation 17 and with whom we are to have nothing to do according to Revelation 18:4), there is no unbroken line of bishops and popes succeeding from Peter that have the power to supernaturally convey an infallibility or faithfulness in decreeing only that which is faithful to the truth of God. Infallibility and faithfulness to the truth was not some special possession of the priesthood that flowed from Aaron to all his descendant priests throughout Israel (Malachi 2:7-8).

(2) Dear ones, if infallibility in making statements of faith was the possession of those ministers who were ordained by Peter and the apostles in the early church, then why wasn't that the test applied in the New Testament to false teachers and false ministers? In other words, why didn't the apostles simply tell the churches of the New Testament to determine whether ministers were to be heard and followed based upon whether the ministers were in some genealogical line of apostolic succession in conveying some alleged grace of infallibility and faithfulness through the laying on of hands of the apostles and their successors?

(3) To the contrary, it is not to some genealogical line of apostolic succession by which the apostles direct the New Testament churches to test the faithfulness of ministers in their statements of faith, but is rather to the genealogical line of apostolic doctrine, worship, and church government. If a minister's doctrine, worship, and church government were agreeable to that of Christ, the prophets, and the apostles, then they were ministers who were to be heard and followed as good shepherds. But if a minister's doctrine, worship, and church government did not conform to that of Christ, the prophets, and the apostles, then they were false and unfaithful shepherds who were not to be heard and followed (Deuteronomy 13:1-4; Matthew 7:21-23; Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 6:3-5).

(4) Beloved, to hear and follow a minister for any other reason than his doctrinal genealogy that is according to godliness and conforms to the gospel teaching and godliness of Christ, the prophets, and the apostles is not to follow the Good Shepherd, Christ, but is rather to be misled in following the voice of a false shepherd who is a hireling. The doctrine of the harlot Church of Rome sounds so appealing (the pope, bishops, and priests are directly descended from Peter and the apostles), but not only can such a direct line of succession not be proved from history with absolute certainty, but also it makes one to look to man, rather than to whether he follows Christ and the apostles in what is taught. The harlot Church of Rome requires an implicit and absolute faith in this alleged apostolic succession, however, the Scripture requires an implicit and absolute faith in the teachings of Christ and His apostles as they are revealed in Holy Scripture. I know it is difficult work to test ministers according to that supreme and only infallible rule of faith

(Scripture), and I know it is so much easier to simply put our confidence in what man says, or a church says (even a church that proclaims its own antiquity), but dear ones, the salvation and well-being of your soul and that of your family depends upon this biblical view of gospel and doctrinal genealogy that can (by God's grace) be traced back to Christ and His apostles. How we pray for all those whose eyes are blinded by the deceptions of Rome (and her daughter churches). How we pray that God's people will heed the voice of the Holy Spirit who proclaims, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4).

2. **A second qualification** for Ezra's leadership in advancing the reformation of true religion within Israel is that Ezra is also designated as a "ready scribe" (i.e. a skilled scribe) in the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:6). A scribe in Israel was one trained to copy, but especially trained to interpret and apply God's law to various situations and circumstances that might arise in the society of Israel (both civil and ecclesiastical). A faithful scribe was a lover of God's written Law and viewed it as inspired and as the supreme standard in matters of faith and life. The faithful scribe was specifically trained to interpret and apply "the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6; see also Ezra 3:2,4; Ezra 6:18). As a priest, Ezra was the leader in the worship of God within the temple; and as a scribe, he was the leader in interpreting and applying the Law of God to the many circumstances that related to the lives of God's people (Ezra 7:10). Ezra was consulted by magistrates concerning civil affairs, by priests concerning ecclesiastical affairs, and by the people at large concerning familial, relational, and economic affairs. Faithful scribes were godly experts in answering various cases of conscience that would arise in Israel in accordance with the written Law of God ("as it is written").

a. There is an interesting history related to the scribes which as we shall see very much concerns us as well today. For we find in non-biblical rabbinic sources (not from the Scripture) that there was not only a written law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but also an oral law (that was not written) that was allegedly given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai (of course, this is not taught in Scripture, but was taught by the tradition of the rabbis that departed from Scripture). According to this non-biblical rabbinic tradition, this oral law that was allegedly given by God to Moses (which was not preserved in writing), was passed along through Moses to Joshua, to the elders, and to one prophet after another, until the time of the so-called "Great Synagogue" and of the famous rabbi, Simon the Just (who was a contemporary of Alexander the Great at about 325 b.c.). Simon the Just allegedly then transmitted this oral tradition to Antigonus Soco, and then this oral tradition (this unwritten Law of Moses) allegedly became the possession of the rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai who had their disciples at the time of Christ. When we read in the New Testament of the scribes of the Pharisees and the scribes of the Sadducees, we are brought face to face with those who not only claimed a belief in the written Law of Moses, but who also embraced the oral tradition (i.e. the alleged unwritten Law of Moses). And I would have you note that some of Christ's most severe criticism is directed against these scribes who embraced this view that the oral tradition of the scribes (i.e. the unwritten Law of Moses) was as authoritative as the written Law of Moses. For the Lord hammers the scribes of the Pharisees who held this view of the Divine authority of oral tradition in Matthew 15:1-9, Matthew 23:13-33, and Colossians 2:8.

b. And, dear ones, which church conspicuously embraces the same position in regard to the Divine authority of oral tradition (unwritten law and doctrine) from Christ and the apostles, which has allegedly been passed down from generation to generation by way of an apostolic succession until it is finally codified and written into church law? Of course, it is the harlot Church of Rome (Revelation 17) that teaches the same view as that of the scribes of the Pharisees, which was so condemned and cursed by Christ. And it is the harlot Church of Rome, in which the papal antichrist sits (according to 2 Thessalonians 2), that has recorded the following in her official catechism entitled, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, p. 31): "Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence." And so by way of oral tradition, the harlot Church of Rome teaches such doctrines as the following and others

as well:

(1) The doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary (whereby Mary was allegedly preserved from original sin in her conception and remained free of every personal sin throughout her whole life), even though Scripture states even in the words of Mary herself that she needed a Savior from sin (Luke 1:47: "my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior");

(2) The doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven after her death (whereby Mary was allegedly resurrected from the dead and taken by Christ into heaven made the Queen of heaven), even though this contradicts the express teaching of Scripture in 1 Corinthians 15:22-23;

(3) The doctrine of purgatory (whereby it is alleged that those who dies in God's grace, but who dies not fully purified from all sin must undergo a fiery purification of pain to purge away all sin before entering heaven), contrary to the word of Christ to the thief on the cross ("To day, shalt thou be with me in paradise" Luke 23:43) and contrary to the words of Paul (2 Corinthians 5:8, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord"), not to mention that a place called purgatory is never mentioned in Scripture.

c. Carefully note that we are commanded in Scripture by precept and example to turn to what is written in the Scriptures as that supreme standard by which we are to judge all doctrine and practice: Luke 1:1-4; Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21.

d. But what about 2 Thessalonians 2:15?

(1) We do not deny that what is taught in Scripture was to a large extent first taught by word of mouth from Christ and the apostles. The gospels and the epistles were written a number of years after the preaching and teaching ministry of Christ and after the preaching and teaching ministry of the apostles subsequent to the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

(2) The Scripture itself, however, teaches that all that is necessary to salvation and to make a man complete, fitted for every good work is found in Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

(3) Even the preaching and teaching of the apostles is to be judged by the supreme authority of what is revealed in Scripture (Acts 17:11).

(4) Christ condemned the tradition of the scribes because they did not adhere to the written Word of God.

(5) We can prove that Scripture is divinely authoritative, but the harlot Church of Rome cannot prove that her tradition is divinely authoritative. The early Church Fathers, far from passing down a unanimous oral tradition, contradict one another and contradict at various points the harlot Church of Rome.

e. This faithful scribal aspect of the ministry (in interpreting and applying God's written Word) was a qualification possessed by Ezra in leading God's people in reformation of the one true religion revealed in Holy Scripture. Ezra was a faithful scribe "in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6). And this qualification is absolutely essential to all who would be faithful ministers of Jesus Christ ("apt to teach" 1 Timothy 3:2; to teach according to what? 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

f. Dear ones, as we close today, those ministers for whom you are to pray to the Lord to raise up in order to go forth in gathering the harvest (Matthew 9:38) and in discipling the nations by baptizing the nations and by teaching the nations to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20) are ministers of Christ who can trace their doctrine, their worship, their church government, and their practice of godliness back to Christ and the apostles and who teach faithfully "what is written" in the Scriptures (rather than what has merely been passed by tradition in the church, or what the majority in the church profess to be true, or what will fill the pews and keep the people coming back, or what will promote having the greatest number of friends and least number of enemies).

g. But how will you recognize such qualified men if you have not learned and filled your minds with the doctrine and practice of Christ and the apostles? Dear husbands and fathers, you must be those who teach, train, and apply God's written Word in your families, if you earnestly desire that your

families have the discernment to distinguish hireling shepherds from good shepherds. The duty, not to be deceived, but to discern good shepherds from hirelings, certainly falls on my shoulders as a minister, but dear ones, you cannot escape this duty for yourselves. For it is your duty to test and to try the spirits (those who claim to be speaking to you by the Spirit) to see if they be of Christ (1 John 4:1).

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