

## EZRA'S DECISION OF LIFE

Ezra 7:1-28  
Key verse 7:10

„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.“

We thank God for the upcoming Global Leadership Empowerment Forum, now in its third year. God has blessed the faithful obedience of his servant M. Dr. Peter Chang and the cooperation of M. John Park, M. Peter Kim and all world mission workers to mobilize the next generation leaders of UBF.

In 2018, we came to know God's salvation history through the factual study of all books of the Bible, inductive Bible study and the development of questionnaires from the Gospel of Mark. In addition we got to know the faith and spirit of our ancestors through the lectures on UBF and on church history. 11 participants were certified as self-motivated Bible teachers, and many more were mobilized.

At the 2019 forum, the focus was on the hope of God according to Genesis 19:5.6 and the study of the five books of Moses. We learned to obey the commandments of God as God's people, and as messenger trainers and discipleship makers to help fellow students and friends to live as royal priests. Many of them repented of their selfishness and decided to work together in the work of spiritual renewal.

This year we study the history of God's people during and after the Babylonian captivity. We want to learn the hope and vision with which God prepared the restoration of His people and how he used global leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah to do so.

In particular, Ezra's life decision was essential for the spiritual revival of God's people. Ezra's decision to explore, do and teach God's Word in Israel has influenced Israel's history to this day. Let us make a life deci-

sion like Ezra and be leaders whose lives influence the history of Germany, Europe and the whole world.

### 1. Ezra's identity (1-5)

Let us read 7,1: "After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah." "After these things" refers to the first wave of returnees and the reconstruction of the temple, which is reported in chapters 1 - 6.

Let us look back briefly. God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt with great hope and brought them to the Promised Land to use them as a kingdom of priests for all the peoples of the earth. He had given them all blessings, the sacrifices, the feasts, the priesthood, the temple and above all his commands, through which man lives when he keeps them. Moreover, according to the promise God had made to Abraham, they possessed the land in which milk and honey flowed. But they did not act according to his word. They were obstinate and hardened their hearts and did what was displeasing to the Lord. Their superiors and priests also copied the gruesome customs of the Gentiles and defiled God's house, which he had sanctified. God had compassion on them and hoped for their repentance and spoke to them again and again through his messengers. But they despised his words and mocked and killed his prophets until the wrath of the Lord grew over his people and there was no more forgiveness. Then he led them into captivity, as he had announced it in his word (cf. 2 Chronicles 36).

And yet he did not destroy them. Through the prophets he promised them restoration. Isaiah had already foretold that after the devastation a stump would remain as holy seed for the people of God (Isaiah 6:13). Jeremiah announced that the captivity would end after seventy years (Jeremiah 25:12). Daniel himself lived according to God's commandments in captivity, prayed three times a day towards Jerusalem and received God's visions of God's sovereignty in the history of salvation (Daniel 2; 7-12). Ezekiel finally promised that God would lead all Israel, who resembled dry bones, out of their graves and bring them back to their land (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

God revealed his hope. It is not always easy to have hope. The world is full of hopeless and therefore desperate people. But Ezra, who wrote these reports in the books of Chronicles 1 and 2, Ezra and Nehemiah, was a man of God's hope. Indeed, Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return, and 42,360 leaders moved to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. under Serubbabel and Yeshua. At first, they were full of fear. Each one cared for his own house. But God sent prophets to them, namely Haggai and Zechariah, who admonished them to build the house of the Lord. They began and ended 20 years later after much resistance and long interruption (6:14,15). They still lived in the promised land in shame and disgrace. But God was already preparing other leaders for the further renewal who were willing to risk their lives, namely Ezra and Nehemiah. While Nehemiah was to rebuild the walls and the fighting spirit, Ezra was to rebuild the hearts - with the weapon of the Word of God. Ezra made a decision of a lifetime to study the Bible. Through the Word of God, the people recognized God's hope, and could subsequently be used as a blessing for all nations on earth.

Who was this Ezra that God so preciously used for the revival of His people? Let us read verses 1-5: „After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Shallum, the son of

Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest.“ Ezra descended in the 16th generation in direct line from the high priest Aaron. He himself grew up in Persia. At that time, the destruction of Jerusalem was already more than 100 years in the past. In Persia he had material security. He could have rooted in the pagan Babylonian culture. But he had an identity as a priest. Verse 6 says that he was also a scribe, knowledgeable in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. Ezra identified himself as a royal priest and as a teacher of the people of God. With this he clearly separated himself from the pagan culture. How could he isolate himself as a royal priest in the foreign land within the pagan culture? First of all, this was the identity of his ancestors and thus also of his parents. They helped him to study the Bible from childhood on. Without their help he would have been swallowed up by the Babylonian culture. But at some point in his life, it was no longer enough that it was the spiritual heritage of his ancestors and parents. He wondered what significance the spiritual heritage had for himself. Then God began to work in him through his Word. Ezra recognized in history why Israel had been led into captivity, namely because of their disobedience, and at the same time that God had not given up his hope. He also recognized what his people needed first and foremost, namely a return to the Bible. Thus, step by step, Ezra found that the spiritual heritage had absolute importance for his own life. It was an expression of God's love and hope that God had chosen and called him, Ezra, as a royal priest in the midst of the pagan environment and spiritual need, in order to give his people the promised blessing and to use them for his work of salvation. Ezra now lived with the identity of a priest who sought how to obey God's calling and lead the people of God back to the Bible.

A young man grew up in Europe as a child of missionaries from a different culture. For a long time he sought his identity by fighting for professional success in the world. He studied hard and became a medical doctor. But Bible study and the faith of his loving parents worked in his heart. He realized through Genesis 6:5 and Ezra 7:10 that Europe does not need more medical doctors, no matter where they come from, but Bible teachers. Since then he has lived with clear priority and is growing as a spiritual leader and is a role model for many members of the next generation.

We serve the God of our fathers and spiritual forefathers and parents according to His grace of calling. Many descendants of believers have no awareness of history and grace and follow the respective spirit of the times. In this way they relativize everything in which their ancestors believed and for which they gave their lives. Finally, they relativize the grace of God, who gave his only begotten Son, so that all who believe in him will not be lost, but will have eternal life. They are identity-less people, and as powerless and useless as salt, which lost its taste. We need a clear spiritual identity. In the end, our identity comes not from our parents or our ethnic background, but from the Word of God. In the Word of God we find who we are and what our place is in the history of God. We are God's chosen generation in this time and in this environment. We are His royal priesthood and holy people, that we should proclaim the praises of God, who has called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.

## 2 Ezra's decision of life (6-28)

Verse 10 summarizes Esra's life decision in one sentence. Let us read verse 10 together: „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.“

First: Ezra devoted himself to study the law of the Lord

Look at verse 6: „this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.“ Ezra was already knowledgeable in the Bible. But his knowledge of the Bible did not make him proud or self-satisfied. He certainly did not lose his desire to study the Bible. Rather, the more he studied the Bible, the more he realized how great God's grace, God's sovereignty and God's hope in history is. He wanted to explore the Word of God further and even deeper in order to understand it even better and to be able to fight even more clearly against the false teachings and statements. Verse 10 says that he devoted himself to study the law of the Lord. This means that he put a lot of heart, effort, time and strength into Bible study. What do you understand by Bible study? Sitting down one hour a week, talking about the weather and the virus, and going home again? From Ezra we learn that Bible study is a research discipline. It begins with reading and thinking about the text several times. This is followed by Factual Study to find the most important statements of the text. Then comes Bible study, where we answer specific questions and go through the answers in pairs or in a small group. Then we listen to the message and the summary, then write a personal testimony and share it with each other. We don't mind exploring the same text over and over again, because the Word of God alone satisfies all those who believe in it. A researcher is never satisfied and never stops researching until the end of his life. Psalm 1:1-3 describes such a Bible scholar as a blessed and fruitful man: „Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.“

When Ezra studied the Bible, the hand of God was upon him. Ezra's biblical charisma moved the Persian king to promise him all material support (6) and to write a long letter (11-28), so that all who wanted to could go with Ezra, and all others should help them. Let us also read verse 7: „Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.“ Each of these men had his own plans. But they decided to leave all earthly security behind and go with Ezra to Jerusalem. These men became outstanding coworkers in the work of spiritual renewal.

We can be empowered, useful leaders for God and win co-workers and even mobilize kings if we, like Ezra, devote ourselves to explore the law of the Lord. The core of any spiritual revival is Bible study. When Ezra turned his heart to Bible study, God prepared the restoration of his people as a kingdom of priests for all nations.

Missionary Dr. Peter Chang has devoted himself wholeheartedly to Bible study over the past 40 years. Although many were well versed in the Bible, not many devoted themselves to researching the Word of God. Some devote themselves more and more towards work, house, family and turn from coworkers into critics and slanderers. Missionary Peter, however, invested heart, time, money and strength in Bible research, together with his house church and coworkers. For example, last year he had to work day and night to study all five books of Moses and prepare questionnaires, factual studies and messages. God's hand was upon him and this work. God worked among the co-workers and the leaders of the next generation as a fruit of his Bible research, that they repented of their selfishness and accepted God's hope and began to obey God's calling as shepherds and Bible teachers. Through his Bible research, Bonn UBF became a ministry that the world could not bear and that was used by God as a spiritual headquarters. Many wonder how a spiritual renewal can continue even in the next generation. The answer to this ques-

tion is given by Ezra's example: The work of God needs a leader who devotes himself to study the law of the Lord. This is something we must do consciously, it is our responsibility, God cannot take it from us. Some next generation leaders give their vacation time for Bible research at GLEF. They are candidates for global spiritual leadership like that of Ezra. Wherever a leader devotes himself to explore the law of the Lord, the hand of the Lord will be upon this work and raise up dry bones to become an exceedingly great army for world mission.

Second: Ezra devoted himself to do according to the law of the Lord

Let us read verse 10 again: „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.“ Ezra's Bible research did not remain a theory. His Bible study meant obedience. Ezra studied the Bible to obey it. He knew that obedience requires self-denial and can be painful. But he also knew that obedience leads to life, while disobedience brings death. Abraham obeyed God and became a blessing for all the generations on earth. The kings of Israel and Judah did not obey God and brought much misery upon their people. Ezra devoted himself to do according to the law of the Lord. He let himself be corrected in practical life by the Word of God and acted according to His direction at the decisive moment.

Obedience is never easy. In the movie „Saving Private Ryan“, Captain John Miller has to decide whether he will continue to risk his life and the lives of his subordinates to save a single soldier. He chooses to obey. Miller and almost all of his men die, but one soldier, James Ryan, is saved. The film honors obedience and teaches how precious the life of a human being is. How much more important than obedience in a war for political, economic and moral goals is obedience in the war against sin and the rule of Satan. If we, as responsible officers in this spiritual battle, do not obey the word of our Commander-in-Chief Jesus, we can-

not win and no one will be saved. We even will experience many defeats or perish. We must make a life decision to obey the Word of God.

I myself obeyed my cravings and not the Word of God for years despite the Bible study. My double life made me very miserable and spiritually dry and a destructive influence. God's servant helped me by encouraging me to obey by faith. Finally, Romans 13:14 allowed me to let the Lord rule my life and set my heart to obey His Word. Many trials followed, in a time of unemployment, fruitlessness in shepherd life and fear of slander. But each time God helped me by His Word to repent and obey. When I obeyed 2 Timothy 2:15, I experienced the hand of the Lord upon me and my house church and to accept God's hope that Germany would be restored as a shepherd nation and Europe as a continent sending out missionaries. We are constantly tried to obey our ego, but the Word of God gives us the victory. Those who obey to the end will be saved.

Thirdly, Ezra devoted himself to teaching the commandments of God

Let us read verse 10 again: „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.“ In Ezra chapter 9 we see that Ezra was a man of prayer. He prayed for the people of Israel, that they would be saved, live and receive the eternal inheritance. His heart was full of the hope and vision of God. At the same time it was full of pain because of the present spiritual condition of Israel. The Israelites in Jerusalem were in misery and disgrace. The walls were in ruins. Around him he saw the selfishness and malice of the people, so that there could be no hope. But he was full of God's hope and went to Jerusalem to teach God's Word, bring the people back to the Bible, and establish them as God's holy people and a kingdom of priests for the whole world.

How did he prepare the teaching of the Word of God? In Ezra chapter 8 and Nehemiah chapter 8 we see that Ezra did not act without thinking. In order to teach God's commandments, he wanted to establish Bible teachers. When he noticed on his departure for Judah that there were no Levites among those who wanted to return with him, he sent out some prudent clan leaders to fetch Levites. The hand of God was upon them, and they brought with them some wise men, who in turn invited their sons and brothers. The Levites were those who had been chosen by God as priests and teachers for the people (Numbers 3:6,9,12). Their forefathers had fought with Moses at Sinai against the spreading idolatry. They had received the office of priesthood, and the privilege of carrying the sanctuary of God and serving in the house of God. Ezra accepted the Levites as God's precious gift. He began to educate these Levites in the Word of God. For thirteen years he studied the Word of God with them and included them in his Bible research. Through the living Bible study community, these Levites grew to be outstanding Bible teachers and co-workers who responsibly participated in the spiritual renewal of God's people. When repentance arose under Nehemiah after the completion of the construction of the wall under Nehemiah and Ezra was called to read from the Law of the Lord, the Levites cooperated devotedly and instructed the people and interpreted the book of the Law of God in a clear and understandable way (Nehemiah 8:8). Ezra had educated these Levites with all his devotion. He had a clear strategy for teaching decrees and laws in Israel, namely to cooperate with Nehemiah and to raise disciples as leaders. Through the disciple making of Ezra, the spiritual revival of the people of God took place (Nehemiah 9-10).

What would have become of Israel without Ezra's life decision to study the law of the Lord, to act according to it and to teach decrees and laws? We can only assume that it would have disappeared into insignificance. But with the return to the Bible under Ezra, their history continued, and their identity

and greatness have been preserved until today.

What life decision can we make for Germany and Europe and its work of salvation even to the Muslim countries? From Ezra we learn - in summary - these three points:

First: The personal commitment to Bible study. If we devote ourselves to Bible study, then we should do it completely. For Bible study we should use everything and renounce everything else, then the hand of the Lord will be upon us.

Second: Obedience to the Word of God. Obedience requires self-denial. Are we willing to pay the price for it? The history of God is written by those who obeyed the Word of God until the end. At GLEF 2020 we will see some examples and we may follow their example.

Third, working together for disciple making. The Acts of the Apostles and the history of the Reformers, the Pietists and campus evangelism through fellowships like IFES, CCC, Navigators and UBF teach us that God uses coworking by forming living Bible study communities to teach a whole people and ultimately the whole world. The mobilization of the next generation as spiritual leaders is also the result of such cooperation. Missionary Peter Kim made a decision in 2018 to quit his job and devote himself full-time to Bible study. His colleagues asked if he had won the lottery. But he had not won the lottery, he had made a life decision to work together for discipleship making. God blessed the formation of Bible study teams and uses New Jersey UBF as one of the spiritual headquarters for world mission.

Currently, some shepherd house chapters are forming vibrant Bible study groups with the next generation leaders during daily early morning prayer and leaders meetings, as well as one-on-one Bible study teams on campus and in the schools. God blesses this cooperation at the faculties in Bonn, the Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sci-

ences, the Universities of Mainz and Koblenz, and thus teaches God's decrees and laws at all 1,700 universities in Europe. At all costs, let us continue to build Bible study communities through which God will raise outstanding co-workers and Bible teachers and lead this people and this continent back to the Bible.

Today we are learning to make a life decision to study the Word of God, to obey it and to teach it through raising disciples so that God will save His people from the lies of false teachings and the clutches of Satan and make it a kingdom of priests and holy people. God bless you and use you as global spiritual leaders like Ezra.