

## EZRA'S LIFE DECISION

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.“

Through the last lesson, we learned Ezekiel's faith in the almighty God. In a vast field full of dry bones representing the nation of Israel, God gave Ezekiel the vision that these dry bones would be changed into a vast army (Ezekiel 37:10). With Ezekiel's faith and vision, let us prophesy God's Word to the students and experience the power of our prayers.

In today's text we learn about a man, Ezra, whom God used for the spiritual revival of Israel. He grew up in Babel, Persia. But he had the identity as a priest for the people of Israel. With the vision for his people, Ezra came to Jerusalem. He made a decision of life to set his heart on exploring, doing and teaching the Word of God. This decision of one person, Ezra, had a great impact on the people of Israel. Let us make a life decision like the one from Ezra and experience the gracious hand of God upon us that Germany and Europe will be spiritually revived.

### 1. Ezra's identity and vision (1-9)

Let's look at verse 1: "After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia,..." The words "After these things" refer to chapters 1-6, in which Ezra reports on the first return of the Jews under Zerubbabel (538 B.C.) and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. God had awakened the spirit of the Persian king, Cyrus the Great. Under his command, about 50,000 Israelites went up from Babylon to Jerusalem (1:1-2:70) and began building the temple (3:8-13). Because of Samaritan obstruction, temple work had to rest for almost 18 years

(4:1-23). However, through the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the people resumed temple construction in 520 BC (4:24). The new Persian king, Darius the Great, created the environment for the completion of the temple construction (6:1-12). Thus, the temple was completed in 515 B.C., about 70 years after the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.) (6:15).

There are almost 60 years between chapters 6 and 7. The Israelites had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the Gentiles (6:20, 21). But then they committed the same sin as their ancestors by marrying the daughters of foreign women (9:1, 2; Judges 3:1-6). It was a shame that the people who had experienced God's grace through the building of the temple had again fallen into idolatry. They broke faith with God. In this spiritually dark time, God prepared a man, Ezra, for the spiritual revival of His people.

This Ezra went up from Babylon to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. (7:7) with the second wave of returnees. At the time, the Persian Great King Artaxerxes (465-425 B.C.) ruled. He oversaw Ezra's and 13 years later Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (445 B.C.). The return of the Jews was the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, "This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place." (Jeremiah 29:10) It was God's sovereign act that he fulfilled his promise to his people through worldly rulers like King Artaxerxes.

Let us look at verses 1-5. Ezra came from a priestly family and belonged to the 16th generation of Aaron the chief priest. Seraiah, the ancestor of Ezra, was the last chief priest before Jerusalem was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Seraiah was deported with King Zedekiah to Riblah in the land of Hamath and executed there (2 Kings 25:18-21). The Jews were now scattered, a people without a land or a homeland. And Ezra was a descendant of a people without land and without a homeland. But he held fast to the priestly inheritance. As Ezra researched his own family tree, he came to know the God of his ancestors. He was encouraged by the example of faith of his ancestors, who did not worship idols but served the God of Israel as priests. Through his family tree, he recognized God's sovereign guidance for his life. He perceived that the God of his ancestors in faith was also his God, who had prepared him in His counsel already in the time of Aaron and wanted to continue writing his history after the destruction of Israel by him. Through this heritage of faith, Ezra found his identity as God's chosen people.

Let us read 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." Here we learn two points about Ezra how he lived with his identity as God's chosen people.

#### 1) Ezra came up from Babylon

Ezra belonged to the next generation of Jews who had grown up not in Israel but in Babylon. He had integrated himself into the society of the Persian Empire and had mastered its language and culture. In this environment, however, Ezra did not abandon his spiritual heritage. He preserved his identity as God's people. He was then able to follow God's guidance to come up with God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem (1:3; 2 Chronicles 36:23).

#### 2) Ezra was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses

Ezra was a teacher who studied God's word with his teacher, Baruch, who himself was a disciple of the prophet Jeremiah. The word "well versed" means to be an expert in a field. The expression "well versed in the Law of Moses" says that the five books of Moses were the firm foundation of Ezra's Bible study. He studied the five books of Moses so deeply that he was able to communicate them clearly and understandably to the people according to his identity as a priest. On the basis of the five books of Moses, Ezra studied the entire Bible known at that time. He is considered the author of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, and Psalm 119. According to rabbinic tradition, it was Ezra who collected the various writings of the Jews and compiled them into the Old Testament as a firm foundation for the identity and spiritual formation of the people of Israel.

Let's look at 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." As Ezra lived with his identity as God's people, priest and teacher, God gave him a great vision. Ezra was aware of the serious spiritual need of the people. In spite of this, he had the vision according to Exodus 19:5, 6: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."" Driven by God's vision, he left Babylon and set out on the perilous road to Jerusalem. In doing so, he did not go up alone, but with the Israelites, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants. In four months he made all the preparations for the departure. (8-9) He mobilized the Levites and temple servants with God's vision to leave their established lives in Babylon and come with him to Jerusalem for the spiritual restoration of the people (8:15-20). As Ezra

held on to his identity and vision of God, he was able to work with many important people, especially with the spiritual leader Nehemiah.

It is certainly important to fulfill our role as students, employees and parents very well. But it is crucial that we live with spiritual identity. Spiritual identity that God gives us makes us strong to be steadfast in our ungodly environment and even to have God's vision. Praise be to the Lord who gave us the spiritual identity as the chosen people of God. This identity helped us not only to endure the trial, but also to have God's vision for the next 40 years, to raise up the global spiritual leaders of the next generation. God helped S. Johannes to live in the trial with spiritual identity as a royal priest and to write a history of faith through his high school graduation. The Lord gave Noah spiritual identity as S. Noah of the 21st century who brings the young people of this generation into the ark of salvation. Our God gave 5 fresh baptized people of the next generation spiritual identity as royal priests who may joyfully suffer with Christ and be used for His eternal work of salvation. May God give us clear spiritual identity and awaken His vision in us that 100,000 Bible teachers and 5 million prayer coworkers will be raised through us.

From Ezra, who went up from Babylon, we learn not to adjust our spiritual identity according to the situation, but to hold on to it in all circumstances. We, the next generation, have studied the Word of God from our childhood until today. We have learned from the best and most well versed Bible teachers, namely our parents and shepherds. We have received such a great and precious spiritual inheritance that we are now maturing as inductive Bible teachers and shepherds for our classmates and fellow students. God is very pleased with our faith in taking over the faith heritage of our parents and faith ancestors with our spiritual identity. May the Lord give us His vision to use us as global spiritual leaders for the revival of our country.

## **2. Ezras' decision of life and its impact (10-28)**

Let's read 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." If anyone could be proud of his extensive Bible knowledge, it was certainly Ezra. But he did not remain complacent. After his arrival in Jerusalem, Ezra did not set his heart on improving his conditions and those of the people. Ezra's life decision was to set his heart on exploring, doing and teaching the Word of God. Why? It was because he had a burning heart for his people. He was aware that the people lacked spiritual leaders and Bible teachers. Therefore, he was determined to lead his people to the Word of God. He firmly believed that through his life decision, God's vision for his people would be fulfilled. Let us consider the content of his life decision.

### 1) Ezra studied the Law of the Lord

Ezra did not stop researching the Bible and knowing God more and more deeply through His Word. The fact that Ezra set his heart on biblical research shows that this was not his sideline. He gave his whole heart and his whole life to biblical research. By researching the Law, Ezra was filled with God's hope not only for himself but for all the people of Israel, even in the adverse situation. In the books of Kings, we learn how Israel perished and disappeared in God's history. When we read the books of Chronicles, we see how Ezra rewrote the history of Israel as the history of God's hope. Through his deep biblical research, Ezra was able to plant the hope of God in the hearts of the Israelites.

### 2) Ezra observed the Law of the Lord

Ezra not only observed and interpreted the law, but applied it practically in his life. He had insight that the cause of the Israelites' misfortune and downfall was their disobedience to God's commandments (9:12). He knew that God was a God of mercy who

had left those who had been saved over and returned them to Jerusalem (9:8, 13). But Ezra also knew the serious consequences if his saved people misused God's mercy for their idolatry and thus transgressed God's commandments again (9:14). Therefore, Ezra set a good example by being obedient even to the first of the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3) Daily he struggled to deny himself and obey the Word of God. Not only in Persia, but also in Jerusalem, Ezra's environment was full of idols. But he fought with the word of God. Psalm 119:9-11 say, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." When Ezra kept God's word, he received strength to live a holy, victorious and influential life.

Ezra's obedience to the law of the LORD gave him spiritual authority to lead his people to repentance, that they might be deceived by the fellowship with the Gentiles. (Deut. 7:3; 23:3) When he himself obeyed the Word of God with an absolute attitude, many Israelites were also able to learn obedience and repent of their idolatry (10:1). God blessed the obedience of one person, Ezra, so that through those who consistently repented, God's blessings continued to flow. The obedience of one person, Ezra, caused God's mighty work of a whole people receiving God's grace.

### 3) Ezra taught its decrees and laws in Israel

Ezra's life decision also included the teaching of decrees and laws in Israel. The first returnees had actually made a decision of faith to move to the holy city of Jerusalem and commit their lives to God (2:1; Nehemiah 7:6). But they had broken their allegiance to God, and even the teachers who were supposed to teach the commandments of God compromised with sin. (9:1,2) Ezra did not remain helpless, but he believed in the power of the Word of God. It was a hard struggle full of surrender to

teach God's Word from which the people had so greatly departed. We see in chapter 10 that Ezra's teaching of God's Word led them to the painful but necessary consequence of repentance. Ezra 10:10-11 say: "Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."" When Ezra, regardless of the spiritual condition of the people, taught God's word so decisively, a great repentance movement occurred (10:18-44).

Not only that, but through Ezra's teaching over the next 13 years, the firm foundation was laid for God's continued work through Nehemiah. Ezra's teaching of the Word of God in the midst of setbacks was not without fruit. Many Levites were raised up as self-motivated Bible scholars and well versed Bible teachers. Then the day of the Lord came (Nehemiah 8). Nehemiah came and rebuilt Jerusalem's wall with the Israelites in 52 days. The people gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate and called Ezra to hear from him the commandments of God. He taught the word of God from morning until noon. Together with the Levites whom Ezra had trained, he planted God's words in the hearts of the people. The Word of God gave the Israelites the hope of God and opened their spiritual eyes to the unchanging faithfulness and great love of God (Nehemiah 9). It was the starting point of spiritual revival. They kept the Feast of Tabernacles, confessed their sins, separated themselves from all foreign people and made an agreement to do all the commandments of the Lord (Nehemiah 10). When one person, Ezra, devoted himself to teach the Word of God, a whole nation experienced spiritual revival.

God gave me a life decision during my studies with Ezra 7:10 not to set my heart on worldly fun, material success and human recognition, but on maturing into a shepherd and Bible teacher. Through 2 Timothy 2:15,

God awakened in me His vision for spiritual revival in Europe through raising inductive Bible teachers. I thank my Lord who, through Jesus' victory on the cross, freed me from my cursed double life under the power of sin and lust and appointed me as a shepherd of the next generation and students. I believe that God is using my life decision for raising global spiritual leaders.

Let's 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." It is very remarkable which impact one person's life decision could have on an entire nation. Many have difficulty in making a life decision to study, observe and teach the Word of God because they have their hearts set on something other than God's Word. After tasting the mercy of God through Jesus' death on the cross for their sins, they deceive themselves by continuing to love the world and live according to their own ungodly desires. The life decision to investigate, do and teach the Word of God requires our whole heart, but it is the best decision a person can make. Through a person who sets his heart on the Word of God, God fulfills His world redemption plan. God used S. Jochen's life decision to investigate the Word of God in the morning, to obey it, and to teach it during his lunch break for the revival work of the Bonn-Rhine-Sieg University. God blessed the revival work of the next generation through the life decision of M. Petrus not to be a clinic director, but much rather to be an influential Bible teacher like Ezra. May the Lord bless our life decision for Bible research through the Inductive Bible Study and Global Leadership Empowerment Forum, for obedience to at least one Word of God, and for teaching the Bible through leadership seminars and forming 10,000 1:1 Bible study teams. May God raise young people on campus as well versed Bible teachers through our life decision like the one from Ezra, and make Germany a shepherd nation and Europe a missionary-sending continent.

Let us look at verses 11-28. These verses testify that the gracious hand of God was upon Ezra. As he held fast to his life's decision, he experienced the hand of the LORD every time. The king gave him everything he asked for. Ezra was given authority to go to Jerusalem with his group, with silver and gold for the sacrifices on the altar, with the utensils for the service in the house of God, and with all the necessary material. In this book, the expression "the hand of the LORD was on me" occurs six times (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Since Ezra had drawn clear consequence for God's choosing grace, the gracious hand of God was on him.

Some talk themselves down by not wanting to believe that their decision of life could do anything at all. Ezra 8:22 says, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." We may trust that Ezra's God is our God as well. We may trust that our God will richly reward our life choices to study, observe and teach His Word with many fruits of life.

In today's lesson, we learned about Ezra's identity and life decision. Ezra held on to his identity as the chosen people of God rather than conforming to the pagan culture of Babylon. God gave him the great vision for his people. Then he returned to Jerusalem with a life decision to devote himself to the study, observance and teaching of the Word of God. God brought about the spiritual revival of his people through his life decision. Let us also devote ourselves on studying the law of the Lord, obeying it and teaching God's commandments in Germany and Europe.