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Ezra: An Example of Leadership

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Paul admonishes, “these things were our examples” (I Cor 10:6), urging believers to learn from OT saints. Many OT accounts present examples for today’s believers. For almost every vocation and situation God has recorded an illustration in His OT canon. A great number relate to one occupation, God’s prophets and preachers. One OT saint close to the NT office of pastor-teacher is Ezra. In studying his mission and method, one can find many lessons for today’s preachers. Like Ezra, today’s preacher must instruct in the Word so as to effect needed revival and reform in the lives of God’s children. The present day manner of Biblical exposition is the same as that employed by Ezra (cf Neh 8:7-8; Acts 20:27; I Tim 4:13-16; II Tim 4:1-2). As a matter of fact, Ezra is referred to as the “father of expository preaching.”

There is much that a preacher can learn from the preaching of Ezra. His expository ministry (Neh 8-10) of God’s Word occurred at the close of his life after years of service. The majority of scriptural references deal with his earlier days spent in preparation for his ministry. There is much that God wants believers to learn from the pre-pulpit days of Ezra. What was there in his life that prompted God to use him in this fashion? What was there about his life, character, and personal make-up that helped mold him into such an effective preacher and spiritual leader? What traits and qualities did he possess and practice that enabled him to be such an outstanding OT revivalist?

This study is not to examine Ezra’s preaching tools but rather his personal life. Herein is a brief examination into the life of Ezra as recorded only in chapters seven through ten of his book with the intent to uncover his leadership. Also included are some practical applications and admonitions relevant to a preacher of the twentieth century.

Background to the Life of Ezra

It is important to recall the historical context in which Ezra ministered. This involves obtaining a clear understanding of the time period, historical events, cultural influences, contemporary political events, and other relevant data, all of which may shed light upon the influences, characteristics, and patterns of living common to Ezra's days. This background had a very important influence upon Ezra, his ministry and those to whom he ministered.

International circumstances affecting the Jews. Many years after God's call of Abraham, the nation of Israel reached its zenith under kings David and Solomon. During their reigns the Jewish nation was recognized as a world power. However, because of poor leadership as well as spiritual laxity, the nation split into two kingdoms following Solomon's reign (931 BC). The ten northern tribes under Jeroboam established a new capital in Samaria. The remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, continued their religious practices in their capital at Jerusalem.

The people of the northern kingdom, Israel, rejected the ordinances of Scripture. This resulted in great wickedness and compromise. Prophets were sent to call them back to God but they refused. Finally in 722 BC God's judgment fell upon Israel in the form of foreign oppression. God sent the Assyrians into their domain which resulted in the cessation of the northern kingdom. The southern kingdom, Judah, continued for many more years. Although they had several good kings and prophets, and experienced periodic revivals, these people persisted in a downward spiritual spiral. Their religious practices became mechanical, mere form without regard for God's person. As a result, they too suffered God's retribution in the form of foreign domination.

Located strategically between the empires of Egypt and those in the Tigris-Euphrates region, Judah had experienced continuous threats from the armies marching through their lands. Judah was also surrounded by antagonistic smaller opponents who periodically disrupted Jewish life.

The Assyrian empire began to wane and finally collapsed in the early 600's BC. In 612 BC Ninevah was captured by the Babylonians. Haran fell to Nebopolassar, the Babylonian regent, in 609 BC and finally Carchemish in 605 BC. Along with the demise of the Assyrian empire came the defeat of their ally, Egypt, in the latter two battles. Thus Babylon temporarily became the undisputed ruling empire. Palestine lay open for their taking.

In 605 BC Jerusalem was invaded by Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's new field commander. The people were taxed and hostages were taken at this time. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among the youth taken. Jerusalem was attacked again in 597 BC by the Babylonians. This invasion prompted by King Jehoiakim's new alliance with Egypt resulted in the deportation of many more Jews. Carried to Babylon in the second deportation were King Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, and some 10,000 artisans and

leading citizens. Another puppet king, Zedekiah, was enthroned by the Babylonians.

The final deportation was in 586 BC. Zedekiah's rebellion against Babylonian domination resulted in a lengthy siege of Jerusalem. The city fell. This resulted in the destruction of the Temple, walls and the entire city. The survivors were taken to Babylon in chains leaving behind a handful of leaderless, poverty-stricken, non-spiritual Jews. A small remnant in Palestine eventually fled to Egypt.

But God did not forget His people. In 539 BC another foreign power, Persia, overthrew Babylon under the leadership of Cyrus the Great. Unlike his predecessors, Cyrus's policies were intended to win favor with his conquered people.

Cyrus, the first king, identified himself with his new subjects even to the extent of professing allegiance to Marduk and other gods of Babylon, at the same time restoring the images of non-Babylonian deities to their former cities, repatriating their worshippers, rebuilding their sanctuaries, and soliciting their patronage.¹

Consistent with such a policy he returned many of the deported peoples to their homeland including the uprooted Jews.

In 536 BC the Jews were allowed to return to their promised land almost 70 years after their captivity began. Along with permission to return, the people who chose to go back were allowed to rebuild the Temple. This return initiated by Cyrus included over 50,000 people under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest. The book of Ezra, chapters 1-6, deals with this return and the reconstruction of the Temple.

The remnant faced many obstacles including severe opposition from those peoples who lived near the former site of Jerusalem. Having succumbed to the opposition, discouragement, and spiritual lethargy, these people returned to the work of rebuilding the Temple after the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah. In 516 BC the project was completed.

A second group of Jews returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC. The returning party consisted of some 2,000 Jews who made the journey under the leadership of Ezra. Concerned about a decline in Temple worship, this group came back to revive true worship as outlined by the Mosaic Law. This second phase of the restoration is recorded in Ezra 7-10.

The final return came in 445 BC when Nehemiah led only a handful of Jews back to Jerusalem. At this time, the rebuilt city and Temple had no finished walls to provide protection. Nehemiah's ministry was to rebuild the walls. The people's faith also needed rebuilding which was accomplished through the ministries of both Ezra and Malachi during this period.

National crisis affecting the Jews. Although the Jews had begun to return to the land of their forefathers, they did not return to the faith of their fathers.

They had come back to the land and had started the rebuilding of the Temple and they had been discouraged, but finally they had completed it. Another 60 years went by, and by that time a cold indifference had settled down over the people. There was even rebellion against the Lord. Some were completely fed up with the whole thing. They had been taken out of their land...then they had been brought back into the land and they had gone through all sorts of opposition and persecution and they frankly did not see any sense in the whole performance.²

Even though there were glimmers of spiritual revival under Haggai and Zechariah, the remnant remained lax in their spiritual worship of the Lord Jehovah. Temple worship tapered off along with the maintenance of their Jewish distinction. Intermarriage with the pagan of the land became common practice.

Along with their spiritual decline, the remnant in Jerusalem suffered economic and political setbacks. The neighboring Samaritans caused continuous conflict and opposition. Although the Jews overcame the initial confrontation with their opponents during Zerubbabel's days, the following years saw compromise, indebtedness, crop failures and other adverse conditions. Without any native governor to assist them the Jew's condition worsened. It was to this depressed people that Ezra came to minister with the intent to renew their spiritual power. His goal was to revive their faith in God. This task of rebuilding the spiritual fibre of the remnant in Jerusalem lay before Ezra the priest. But prior to such a difficult ministry Ezra himself was prepared by God.

Incidents in the Life of Ezra

His commission. Ezra begins his autobiography in chapter seven of his book. Common to the Hebrew format for historical records, Ezra records a brief synopsis of the commission and subsequent journey, then he elaborates in depth upon the same events. In his chronicle, Ezra records not only the historical data but his personal reactions, all of which give insight into his leadership traits.

Ezra opens his personal tale with the commission he received from King Artaxerxes, the Persian monarch (7:1-28). The provisions of this decree allowed for a remnant to return to Jerusalem in the year 458 BC. Not only was this an open invitation for any Jew who wished to go to accompany Ezra (7:23), but permission was also given to obtain provisions for the Temple. Precious metals were contributed by the king, his counselors, and Jewish contributors (7:14-17) to be used in purchasing sacrificial animals for the restoration of Temple worship. Along with these contributions the king granted Ezra permission to make use of the royal funds (7:22). He was also given civil authority over the Jews to take whatever steps were needful to secure the Jewish colony (7:18,25-26). This pagan king made the OT law equal to the secular law of the Persian Empire (7:23).

Several factors induced Artaxerxes to make such a decree. In 4:23 one reason is specifically stated. Like Cyrus and Darius, Artaxerxes sought to win the good will of the local deities throughout the empire. Consistent with popular conceptions, Artaxerxes thought that by restoring the Jews to their land, the local god of Jerusalem would be favorably inclined towards the monarch and his sons.

Another way to obtain religious favors with the local deity was to ensure that the native religions were correctly practiced. This is illustrated in the Elephantine Texts which contain

a letter dated 419 BC from a Jewish provincial official named Hananiah to a group of Jews in garrison of this Egyptian frontier town of Elephantine, reporting an order from Darius (II) that the local governor should authorize them to hold a festival of unleavened bread.³

Not only was it common to ensure local religious practices but special favors were granted to the religious leaders. This too was consistent with Persian practice:

King Darius made specific mention of a long-standing policy in the course of a rebuke to one of his officials...Gadatas, had failed to exempt certain cult-servants from paying tributes.⁴

In like fashion, Artaxerxes gave special favors to the Levites to gain favor with Jehovah. As a result Ezra and the Jews had favorable support from Artaxerxes in their return to Palestine.

This commission portrayed a favorable attitude towards the Jews religiously and also politically. Artaxerxes may have given Ezra civil authority (7:25,26) because of political factors. In 459 BC there arose a successful revolt in Egypt which threw off the Persian yoke of bondage. As a result, Palestine again became a strategic buffer zone between Egypt and Persia. To secure his holdings, Artaxerxes may have given this commission to prevent the Jews from forming an allegiance with Egypt. With such favors bestowed on the Jews, he would hope that they would less likely be tempted to join in a revolt against his rule.

All these factors may have encouraged the commission, but Ezra, a spiritual man, attributed it to only one possible source, God. Ezra knew that it was in the Lord's power to turn the heart of the king (Prov 21:1) to accomplish His purposes. To Ezra there was no other possible explanation for such a decree especially after the remnant Jews had previously met such opposition from civil rulers (Ezra 1-6).

The commissioning of Ezra merits attention. Artaxerxes obviously considered this commission to be of great importance, evident in the circumstances prompting it as well as the purposes of the commission. This decree was important both to the Persian monarch and to God's plan for the Jewish people. Ezra must have been of exceptional character to be entrusted with such an important mission by God and by Artaxerxes. Ezra was considered a remarkable leader and qualified to do the job. These

same qualities ought to be displayed by anyone who would desire similar responsibilities.

(A) Character. Ezra portrayed what may be referred to as personal character, which is seen in his conduct and activities. He was a captive Jew in a foreign land, 900 miles from his homeland. This captivity adversely affected many of Ezra's fellow Jews, who surrendered their Jewish heritage and adopted the culture of Babylon. Some lost track of their Jewish genealogies and distinctiveness (Neh 7:63-65) while others sought total acceptance among the heathen cultures (Esther). Ezra was surrounded by both a pagan culture and compromising brethren.

For Ezra these pressures were intensified by the fact that he was in the priestly lineage. According to his genealogical chart (7:1-5) Ezra was also of Jewish nobility. His great-grand father (or great-great-grandfather) Seraiah was the last active high priest prior to the final deportation by Nebuchadnezzar. Seraiah was killed at the time of the deportation in 586 BC. The successor to this office, Jehozadak, was taken as a captive to Babylon (II Kings 25:18-21; I Chron 16:15). Therefore, Ezra is found in the line of those priests who actively functioned in the Temple service, but he was unable to serve in this capacity. Here was a godly individual who was genuinely desirous to be used of God but apparently never ministered in God's Temple services, surely a cause for discouragement. The fact that some of his ancestors had been executed could have added to Ezra's discouragement over his circumstances.

(1) Resolute. Although confronted by pressures to conform, having no support from his contemporaries, as well as having limited opportunity to serve, Ezra remained resolute. He kept his desire to serve the Lord and prepared for an opportunity even when there was no apparent possibility to serve. Ezra's character is seen in his spiritual vision and firmness in maintaining his Jewish distinctiveness. In contrast to those other Jews who forgot their background, Ezra not only kept the Jewish law but retained his genealogical records. Ezra's character was unshakeable, a quality needed today.

(2) Responsibility. Ezra was a determined individual who portrayed responsibility. In the commission by Artaxerxes, Ezra was given a great deal of civil and religious authority. The king must have seen in Ezra admirable traits which prompted a commission containing such great responsibility. Although

We do not know who Ezra was except that he was sometimes called a priest and sometimes a scribe...his life shows that he occupied a position of trust at the court of the emperor himself.⁵

King Artaxerxes knew of Ezra's commendable personal discipline (7:6,11,12) and administrative skills (7:25). Ezra must have carried out his duties in such a fashion as to impress the king to grant his request (7:6). Ezra's reputation preceded him. As a result he was rewarded by God with

even more responsibility. Such character is needed in this age. Those in leadership position ought to take great care to develop and maintain a reputation of being responsible.

(3) Respect. A third character trait noticeable in Ezra's life was his respectfulness towards his superiors. Ezra recognized and gave due honor to the civil authorities. Even though he may have been anxious to carry out God's program and leave a foreign heathen land, he wisely and respectfully sought permission from his earthly sovereign (7:6). A possible indictment of insurrection was squelched. Ezra's respectful conduct towards his superiors provides a commendable example for any who desire to be in leadership roles.

(4) Readiness. Ezra's character was further revealed in his readiness to serve. This commission came as a result of Ezra's request (7:6) and everything Ezra asked for was granted (7:6) including permission to gather contributions for the Temple worship (7:16-17). This obviously came because his heart was in tune with God's program. Knowing God's promises and plans for the Jews, Ezra sought to accomplish God's will and revitalize the nation of Israel.

(5) Compassionate. Ezra had a heart tender to God's people. He had such a compassionate concern for his nation that he was ready to go to their assistance even when it cost time, energy, and much labor on his part. He did more than dream for the day he could serve God and his people; Ezra actively sought the opportunity. Because of his readiness to serve, his compassionate zeal became contagious and others were immediately recruited to carry out the plan (7:28). Such anxiousness to serve should characterize any spiritual leader.

(B) Devotion. Ezra portrayed real devotion. Ezra was known as a ready or skilled scribe (7:6). This term implies a quickness to grasp, ease of accomplishment, or referred to one who is of the highest skill, that is a professional.

The scribal office developed over the years. It originally referred to those who were the town recorders and registrars of the census.⁶ At times it was used to mean a high-ranking political official (II Sam 8:17; 20:25).⁷ During Israel's monarchy the scribe referred to those who were the custodians and writers of state documents.⁸ In subsequent years, the term began to receive a special meaning as applied to those who were occupied in studying and copying the documents containing the sacred laws of the nations.⁹

After the captivity the increased importance of the written law and the necessity of explaining its obligation upon the people brought the scribes into great prominence. The scribe took the place of the prophet and in his influence upon his countrymen, eclipsed the priest.¹⁰

Thus the term came to refer to those who were the students of the law. Ezra stood out not only as a student but one who was proficient in this study, a professional scribe.

(1) Dedication. The aim of Ezra's intense professional study was three-fold. The motivating purposes behind his research in the law of Moses was clearly portrayed in verse ten. First he desired to seek the law of the Lord. This may have involved the pursuit of the literary sources, arranging fragmented portions, literary research, or comparing all available data surrounding the manuscripts. But more probable and important was his effort to find the real meaning and purpose of the law. It was in regard to this that he would have to exercise his mind more earnestly.¹¹ His spiritual study was limited to that which was already given (7:10,11). Ezra's desire was not to add to, alter, edit, nor find something novel in the law. He wanted to know the revelation already given. This involved a great deal of work. But Ezra went beyond the normal study of a scribe; he was a highly-skilled scribe. His dedication to learning God's Word ought to be found in every modern scribe's life.

Secondly, his aim was to do it. His study was not therefore to increase his knowledge, to add to his reputation as a teacher, but it was that his heart, life, and ways might be formed by it.¹² To Ezra, God's law was the guiding factor of his life. He did not approach God's Word with the idea of finding preaching material for his colleagues but rather to live out the doctrinal truth found therein. Ezra provided an example by living what he found revealed. "He is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in Scriptures."¹³ How different would be those to whom preachers minister if God's men would intensely study and live God's Word prior to entering the pulpit! Men of God ought to mimic Ezra's dedication to the Word so as to portray both the meanings and practical outworking of living a life consistent with the Word.

Ezra's final goal prompting his professionalism with God's Holy Writ was to teach in Israel statutes and judgments (7:10). After meditation and experience came the instruction of Israel. Being the faithful servant that he was, he carried this goal out with exemplary skill. His instruction did not exceed the realms of God's Word nor was it limited by personal conflicts and prejudices. Ezra spoke clearly the whole counsel of God whether it meant personal loss, heartache, or opposition (9; 10:1,4,15). Ezra's ministry provides illustrations for today's preachers. By following these, one may increase his effectiveness as a spiritual leader and scriptural teacher.

(2) Praise. Ezra also portrayed an attitude of praise (7:27-28). Being an avid student of God's Word, he was well aware that the Lord was the reason for the king's favorable commission. Although he had made the original request, there was no personal pride. Rather, he directed all praise to the Lord to whom he attributed the entire success.

Not only did this preacher praise God for what had been done but there was also a sense of excitement and praise for what lay ahead. His attitude and actions were not filled with complaints or hints of hesitan-

cy. Instead one can see a sense of anticipation for the upcoming journey, for he wasted no time in carrying out the commission (7:28). Like Ezra, those in leadership positions ought to possess an attitude of praise, rejoicing over God's accomplishments and for future opportunities. Preachers should be enthusiastic over serving God, even if there may be upcoming difficulties and sacrifices. What greater privilege than to be able to carry out one's desire (ie, to teach). God's men ought not let complaints proceed out of their mouths but rather praises to the Lord for counting them worthy to serve.

The caravan to Jerusalem. Chapter eight of Ezra continues the biographical sketch of Ezra's life by recording the subsequent journey to Jerusalem. Following King Artaxerxes' commission, Ezra organizes the caravan of Jews who return to their homeland. He seems to have wasted no time in gathering people together for such a trip. This speedy implementation of the commission does not mean there was a lack of planning. Ezra's life was characterized by planned activity.

The first section in this passage deals with Ezra's companions in the journey. Verses one through fourteen list all those family heads involved with the caravan. In this list are similarities with those who accompanied Zerubbabel years earlier (Ezra 2). Apparently the previous return was not met with total unity and enthusiasm among the Jewish captives. Portions of some families did not go until years later under Ezra's influence. Whatever may have been the reason for many in these families not to have returned years before, the fact remains that these people were interested in returning to Jerusalem with Ezra. Like their leader, they probably knew of the adverse circumstances facing them in Jerusalem yet they determined voluntarily to return. It is interesting to remember that "when it (revival) came, the revival of zeal did not originate in the Holy City. It sprang up among the Jews of Babylon."¹⁴ God's work is often promoted by those who sacrifice.

This list of family heads does not represent as many family units as does Zerubbabel's entourage in chapter two. Ezra's companions numbered only about 6,000 people compared to the 50,000 plus who returned in 536 BC. This number is based upon the total number of men listed in this passage; they numbered 1,514. But despite the smaller number who returned with Ezra, they were important to God, so important that He recorded the names of the clan heads so that they are forever immortalized in Scripture.

(1) Acquaintance. Not only were these people special to God but also to God's man. Their shepherd, Ezra, considered these people to be important. He spent time getting to know who his colleagues were, even to the point that he knew their family ties (8:1-14) and character (8:16). Ezra was a leader who maintained proper priorities. Although busy, he took time to learn about his fellow journeyers. Here was a leader who

did not allow programs to dominate his life so that he had no time for people. Like his God, Ezra was people oriented.

(2) Compliments. Not only did he take the time to get to know his flock, but Ezra publicly mentions those who sacrificed for the Lord. Although praise is not the motivating factor for one's labors, it is true that those who work hard for the Lord would be greatly encouraged by periodic words of appreciation and commendations from their superiors. Today's leaders would find their effectiveness increased by following Ezra's example.

(3) Plans. Ezra gathered the people at Ahava for three days (8:15). This enabled him to plan for the upcoming 900 mile journey. Ezra did not proceed rashly. He planned before acting. He took the time needed to review his goals and to determine if he had all the resources available to accomplish his goal. Without this Ezra could have gone many miles fruitlessly. His ultimate goal, the revival of Temple worship, would have suffered because of the absence of Levites (8:15). Enthusiasm is no substitute for careful planning.

In reviewing his followers, Ezra realized there were no Levites within the company (8:15). In order to carry out his mission of restoring true OT worship Ezra had to fulfill the OT regulations which required Levites for Temple service. Among the 6,000 returnees not one Temple servant was found. To counter this serious threat to revitalizing Jehovah worship, Ezra chose several men to go to Casiphia where they were to recruit men capable of filling the gap (8:16-20). As a result of their mission, a group of 40 Levites and 220 Nethinims were recruited.

In this whole episode Ezra displays more practical lessons for leaders. The most important lesson is shown by Ezra's determination to follow God's Word fully. He knew God's law (7:10) and understood the need for Levites in the Temple service. This man of God made no attempt to substitute for, nor modify God's explicit commands. Rather he took the time and effort necessary to meet God's requirements. As a result of his faithfulness, "the hand of our God" provided the Levites (8:18).

(4) Prayer. The commencement of the journey is described in verses 20-30. When ready to journey, Ezra took time to fast and pray. This fast was not in connection with sin but

Ezra appoints the fast (a) as a symbol of submission before God's will, (b) a means of intensifying religious fervor in prayer, (c) as a testimony that man lives not by bread alone.¹⁵

Fasting, as a means of humbling themselves before God, for the purpose of obtaining an answer to their petitions, was ancient custom with the Israelites: Judges 20:26; I Sam 7:6; Joel 1:14; II Chron 20:3,11.¹⁶

When viewing his unarmed civilian company, Ezra considered the possibility of encountering marauders along the journey. Because of his belief in God's protection, he did not ask King Artaxerxes for an escort. Therefore, God's people spent time in beseeching the Lord to act as their

refuge and strength. Ezra assured them that God would favorably respond to the prayers of his people if they would fast (8:23).

Ezra's personal faith is evident in this brief episode. Here was a man whose faith was not mere lip service but faith in action. This man of God fully realized the gravity of his situation. Ezra did not enter into this next phase of his life without first seeking God's face.

The work of God is never lightly to be entered upon; and it was with true discernment both of the character of the work and what was due to His glory who had called him to it, that Ezra proclaimed this fast; that he and the people might afflict themselves before their God.¹⁷

Such faith not only moved God but also God's people. As a result, they matured spiritually; this is further illustrated in chapter 10.

(5) Stewardship. Ezra's faith was characterized by a common sense approach rather than a fool-hardy trust. A phrase from the Revolutionary War period provides a sample of balance between faith and wisdom: "Trust in God and keep your powder dry." A demonstration of such practical wisdom was displayed in Ezra's handling of the treasures taken on the journey. Prior to commencing the journey, Ezra committed all the monies and gifts given for Temple service to the Levitical priests (8:24-30). Recognizing the great value of these possessions he challenged the priests to proper handling of the funds. Ezra followed OT regulations by entrusting monies to Temple priests as required in Numbers 4.

The extent of his practical wisdom was further displayed by Ezra's protection of the treasure's stewards. Not only was the money weighed prior to starting the journey (8:26) but also at the conclusion (8:34). This was not done because of the dishonest character of the Levites, but for their own protection. Ezra, in a well organized manner, took actions to protect his and other's integrity. These men wrote a record and had neutral parties verify the honest safe-keeping of the treasures (8:33-34).

Today precautions ought to be taken when dealing with the highly volatile issue of finances. Those in leadership should use proper discretion to protect themselves and fellow-laborers from possible accusations. One very practical way of handling finances is for those in leadership positions to follow Ezra's example. They should remove themselves from any direct contact with the finances and entrust such into the hands of qualified stewards.

(6) Priorities. The conclusion to the journey is recorded in 8:31-36. After four months of travel (7:8-9) the caravan reached their destination. The journey's log was brief, stating simply, "and He (God) delivered us from the hand of the enemy...and we came to Jerusalem" (8:31-32). Despite the fact that they were in threat of attack (8:31), God graciously protected His saints. "God's hand was long enough to reach and protect His servants all the journey long."¹⁸

After three days rest the travelers approached the Lord with sacrificial offerings (8:35). Following this they established their credibility with the

king's officials located in the region. The sequence of events offers a reminder to all believers. First worship God then take care of the mundane responsibilities of life. It also illustrates the truth that God's children are expected to carry out their civil, social, and business responsibilities rather than neglect them or procrastinate in these matters. As a result of proper priorities and responsible activity they furthered the people and the house of God (8:36).

The corruption in Jerusalem (9-10). The following account in Ezra's chronicle allows for a period of approximately 4 months between chapters 8 and 9. Although there appeared to be a religious fervor upon his entrance into the Holy City (8:36), Ezra encountered serious trials which tested his spiritual fibre as a leader. Ezra learned that whoever seeks the welfare of God's people must expect a path of trial and sorrow.¹⁹ The heartache confronting Ezra was the violation of God's law forbidding the Jews from marrying the heathen. Ezra's mission of teaching true worship according to the OT Scriptures (Ezra 7:10) soon brought a response to what he had taught during the four months. Several of the established chief men in the land (this seems to exclude the newcomers) came to Ezra with the sad news that many of the people including the religious leaders were involved in mixed marriages (9:1-2). In response to this Ezra vividly portrayed personal grief and sorrow over the sin.

(1) Unmoveable. Although the people involved could have presented an argument to justify their conduct, Ezra's grief clearly shows he was not tolerant of any violation of God's code. Ezra obviously viewed the marriages as a grave offense against God. Of all people, these remnant Jews should have done all they could to avoid compromising God's Word. They knew all too well that Israel had been repeatedly warned against mingling with the heathen (Deut 7; 23:3-6; Ex 34:12-16) and had even suffered destruction and deportation as a result of this sin.²⁰ Circumstances can be viewed to justify actions contrary to Scripture. The Temple had been ruined; the city still fearfully reminded them of its vulnerability because of the surrounding ruins, poverty, oppression, hardships; and discouragement was plentiful. Unable to resist the many attacks and threats of their enemies it would seem to be advisable on social as well as on political grounds that a new and more liberal course should be pursued.²¹ Based upon pragmatism, economic and social arguments, these people had aligned themselves with their traditional enemies (9:1).

(2) Prayer Warrior. Godly Ezra was repulsed. His immediate reaction was one of rending his mantle, plucking off his hair, and sitting in remorse for a period of time.

Ezra's grief was indeed great, issuing in the tearing of his clothing and pulling out of his hair. The rending of the clothes was a rather common Oriental way of manifesting deep sorrow and is mentioned fre-

quently in the Bible. The plucking out of a portion of hair by the roots is by no means so common. Some hold it to be an evidence of unusual grief, others of great moral indignation.²²

At the time of evening sacrifice with the godly people gathered about (9:4) Ezra poured out one of the greatest prayers of confession recorded in Scripture (9:6-15). In this passage Ezra shows that true prayer is laying bare the heart and soul in the presence of God.²³ This prayer is an example of true spiritual praying on the part of God's leader.

Although he was not personally involved with the sin, he identified himself with those for whom he spoke. Acting in a priestly fashion he repeatedly stated "our" and "we" in connection with Israel's disobedience. In reality he was more deeply ashamed of the national guilt than his subordinates. Ezra was extremely sensitive of sinning against God. He was not like certain ones who could recklessly sin and then show not the slightest shame. He was consumed with shame to think of the iniquity of his people.²⁵ It is evident that Ezra was a godly servant of Jehovah.

Not only does his priestly prayer portray a desire for national purity but he jealously guarded God's holy name. Ezra repeatedly justifies God's holiness and righteous judgment.

He could not forget the havoc they suffered—and deserved (9:7) especially in their loss of freedom (captivity, 9:7), bondage (9:8,9), bondman (9:9) and the decimation of their numbers (9:8,13-15). In other words, he had a high sense of the glory they had betrayed.²⁵

He also had reconciled in his own mind the holiness of God with the mercy of God. By the very mention of a remnant (9:8) and the mercifully light punishment (9:13), Ezra stressed God's grace and loving-kindness. Recognition of this grace gave Ezra hope, hope in the possibility of future blessings, such as a little reviving (9:8) or some reviving (9:9). But he also knew this was all jeopardized by the immoral marriages.

Ezra offers no excuse for the sin of the people. His main concern seems to be to "justify God and lay bare the injustices of his people."²⁶ Ezra stands out as one who sought God's holiness. Not only was he holy in conduct but holy and honest in his prayer. This example of God-fearing conduct is a challenge to leaders of our day.

(3) Example. One writer aptly wrote, "If you would move me with your preaching or with your praying or with your singing, first be moved yourself."²⁷ Having seen his personal response to the ungodly activity of his colleagues, those who gathered around Ezra are moved to genuine repentance. Ezra's confession and remorse of sin was contagious. It led to the invitation by one of the people, Shechaniah, for national purification (10:2-4). His suggestion involved making a covenant with God concerning the putting away of all heathen wives and children. Ezra was asked to supervise the matter. In response Ezra wasted no time in acting. The priests, Levites, and the rest of Israel were to swear to a covenant denouncing the mixed marriages (10:5). At a gathering of the people at Jerusalem

Ezra challenged them to repent and return to the law (10:10-12). He pointedly revealed their sin and offered a remedy to it—separation from heathen. The people positively responded to this challenge by repenting and determining to break their heathen marriages. Because of inclement weather there was a general consensus to appoint a committee to carry out the reform which it did over a period of time (10:16-17).

(4) Convictions. In reviewing this episode, there are several principles about leadership portrayed by Ezra that are worthy of attention. The spiritual character of Ezra is seen by his contrite heart. When addressing his prayer of confession Ezra was sensitive to God. This is again seen in 10:6 when Ezra withdrew himself to solitary fasting and mourning.

This privacy confirms, incidentally the evidence from his public prayers in Ezra 9 and Neh 9 that his dramatic gestures of dismay were utterly sincere. They had powerful impact but were not contrivances; they came from the heart.²⁸

Ezra's life echoed David's prayer in Psalm 51 where the desire of the supplicant has been used of God to move others from sin unto the Lord.

Those desirous to be effective leaders among God's people must be men of true convictions. These convictions must not be just verbal accolades but life directing influences. In Ezra's life his personal convictions were based upon God's Word. In response to the news of Israel's association with heathen nations, Ezra's opposition, confession, and reaction to such wrong doings were based upon the law and prophets (9:10,11,14), a result of his professional dedication to the study of the Word (7:10) from whence convictions are formed.

The convictions by which Ezra lived were not altered by circumstances. When confronted with the sin of the people, Ezra could have looked the other way because of the grief and hurt which would result from dividing the homes. Like the commentators who accuse Ezra of lacking compassion in this matter, Ezra himself could have capitulated to personal feelings, but he did not do so. Because of his convictions he had to act upon what he knew was right without being swayed by emotions. He knew "there cannot, therefore, be steps taken in that path of repentance without its costing much to the heart of every side; and so it was at this time."²⁹ Despite the hurt he had to act biblically.

Here was a man whose convictions meant that as the leader of these people it was his lot to face the wrong head-on. This he did, severely condemning the wrong. His convictions remained firm in spite of the heartaches and opposition. In dealing with the problem of personal sins, Ezra had to face the ire of his colleagues and fellow priests. In Ezra 10:15 the phrase "were employed about this" is better rendered from the Hebrew "stood up against." Because of the unchangeable standard of God's Word Ezra's convictions were unchangeable, no matter who opposed his necessary reforms.

(5) Compassion. Another insight for those in leadership comes from Ezra's compassion. Although he was firm and unmoveable in his condemnation of wrongdoing, Ezra was conciliatory towards the offenders. He offered the violators an opportunity to rectify their errors (let us make a covenant, 10:3) placing himself next to them for support and instruction in resolving the problems. A leader must be motivated by God's approval not man's. Ezra's challenge (10:10-11) and confession (9) clearly display his desire to please God (10:11).

(6) Preparation. Another principle for today's leaders to consider was Ezra's contemplation before action. Here was one who practiced the old adage, act don't react. When hearing of the transgression Ezra was repulsed but his response was not one of uncontrollable outrage. Instead he spent time in meditation and prayer (9:4) then later in prayer of confession (9:5-15) and fasting (10:6). This thoughtful approach to the crisis provides an example which should be followed today. God's appointed leaders ought to make it a habit to spend time in prayer and reflection prior to action and so empowered find God's wisdom bountifully available.

Ezra possessed the wisdom of exposing the problems and constructively planning for solutions. Immediately upon receiving Shecanaiah's invitation to lead in reform, Ezra acted (10:5). He called for the assembly and presented a proposal (10:10-11). He directed his energies and the people's activities towards rectifying the problem.

(7) Cooperation. Ezra cooperated with those people who wanted to do what is right. He was a man of remarkable leadership qualities, and one of his outstanding traits was the way in which he led the people. As President Eisenhower said, "Leadership is the ability to get a person to do what you want him to do, when you want it done, and in a way you want it done, because he wants to do it." Ezra was such a man.

When first receiving reports of rebellion to God's law, Ezra did not force the people into external subjection to God's Word. Instead his personal consecration became contagious, even to the point that they urged him to activity (10:4). As the civil authority with the right to enforce God's law (7:23), Ezra could have demanded conformity. Although possessing religious and civil authority, he opted to stay

in the background maintaining a low profile, but the moment the decision was made by the exiles, he started to execute their plans...He gave his views then waited for them to decide. We have here the traces of a form of democracy.³⁰

Thus the revival occurs because of Ezra's wise leading; but more importantly, it was promoted by all the people (10:12).

This wisdom of cooperation was also displayed in that Ezra was willing to listen to suggestions for carrying out the reform. What was instigated by Ezra met with a ready response by the congregation. Considering the discomfoting climate, the grave task at hand, and the wide-spread nature

of the required reform, the people advised him to appoint rulers to carry out the reform in a decent and orderly fashion. Ezra knew that this was not a delay on the part of the people to continue in their sin, for their hearts were moved and they wanted God's wrath turned away (10:14). He cooperated with them and accepted their counsel so as to carry out lasting, organized reform. Ezra was truly a remarkable leader, one who was godly, wise, and practical.

It is easy to be a reformer in theory but they who have faced a great abuse in practice know how difficult it is to uproot it. This is especially true of ill attempts to affect the social order. Wild ideas are floated without any effort. But the execution of these ideas means far more toil and battle, and involves a much greater tumult in the world than the airy dreamers who start them so confidently.³¹

As a spiritual, realistic, hardworking leader, Ezra was used by God and used God's wisdom. As a result there was a revival and return to true Jehovah worship.

General Impressions

Through an examination of Ezra's life it has been profitable to see illustrated a number of practical principles of leadership in a variety of circumstances. Other principles of leadership portrayed by Ezra were traits found throughout his life. Any and all of these truths must be incorporated into the personal lives of those who find themselves in leadership positions.

Consecration to God. A spiritual leader must be one who continuously seeks God's person and truth both theologically and practically. Ezra was such a man. His life's goals were the study and living of God's word. In every situation he was an individual given to prayer. "Having no Temple precincts made with hands in which to dwell with God, Ezra dwelt all the more with God in the New Testament Temple of his own heart."³² Such a walk with God resulted in Ezra's hatred for sin. God's men must be godly men, to love fellowship with God and hate anything that may hinder such closeness. Those who would desire to serve the Lord must not become so involved with the work of the Lord that they forgot the Lord of the work.

Ezra also illustrates the truth that a spiritual leader must acknowledge that all success in one's ministry is attributed to God. This is seen from an oft repeated phrase employed by Ezra, "the hand of our God" (7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31) which he used to acknowledge God's blessings. He knew that all he accomplished was by the grace of God. Armed with this assurance, Ezra found comfort, patience, and courage to do God's bidding. He could also defeat the foe of pride and self-indulgence which has ravished so many of God's servants.

Character of a leader. Several other truths were displayed by Ezra in his relationship to people. One who desires to be in a position of spiritual authority must possess the ability to see beyond his own circumstances.

This servant of God was deeply concerned over bankrupted Jerusalem. His goal was not to gain personal wealth, comfort, or prestige but rather to serve the Lord (7:10) even if it cost him personally. In short, God's preacher must be willing to sacrifice for God's people.

A true spiritual leader has a concern over needs and deficiencies in other's lives and will get involved. Ezra personally sought to correct the spiritual lethargy of Jerusalem by preparing himself to do something to reverse the trend. He was not one who watched from the grandstands surrounding the arena of life, but he became an active participant. It would be hard to picture Ezra talking about prayer, soul-winning, preaching, and many other forms of service without personally doing these things.

Spiritual leaders are willing to be God's instruments in the work. For Ezra this involved assuming more responsibilities. This meant prompting, planning, and leading many others to the city of Jerusalem. To do all this as well as travel to Jerusalem and lead in the reform, Ezra had to have a willing heart.

A spiritual leader must also be one who learns from history. It is evident that Ezra gave much of his time to historical research (chapters 1-6 are all historical narratives). His investigation of God's hand in history was not in vain. Ezra sought to learn from history's lessons (chapter 9) so as to avoid repeating past sins and follies.

Most encouraging and challenging is the truth that Ezra did not quit. A true spiritual leader must continue to serve without being defeated by apparent failures or personal opposition. Ezra's book closes abruptly with no further comments concerning the longevity of his work. However, he is mentioned in Nehemiah 8 where he serves as the expositor of the reform under Nehemiah in 445 BC. This occurred twelve years after the close of Ezra's chronicle. In studying Nehemiah, it becomes apparent that this same sin of mixed marriages had again become prevalent. Ezra did not quit his ministry of teaching the law to Israel for in Nehemiah 8 he is the central figure preaching God's Word.

Today's preacher has much in common with Ezra. He may face opposition, ridicule, resistance, and apparent failures. But like Ezra, God's man can and will progress in his ministry if he follows God's Word and wisdom. He will grow, be used of God, and accomplish eternal tasks in his endeavors to minister God's Word.

He who sets himself to this noblest of all possible tasks, and perseveres to the end in it, ever improving in it, ever adding to his treasures of exposition and illustration, ever putting himself into his lectures, and ever keeping himself out of it; he will never weary out his people but he will to old age, bring forth his fruit in his season and his leaf shall not wither.³³

Ezra was such a man. He provides an example on how to accomplish this highest of all callings. Ezra is the expositor's example.

Notes

(1) Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Ezra and Nehemiah* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1979) pp 17-18

² William Sanford LaSor, *Great Personalities of the Old Testament—Their Lives and Times* (Westwood: Fleming H Revell Co, 1969) p 178

³ Kidner, p 19

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Rudolf Kittel, *Great Men and Movements in Israel* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1929) p 420

⁶ Walter Adeney, *Expositors Bible Series, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, nd) p 110

⁷ R J Coggins, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the English Bible, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (New York: Cambridge Univ Press, 1976) p 44

⁸ Adeney, p 111

⁹ Coggins, p 89

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Adeney, p 116

¹² Edward Dennett, *Exposition of the Book of Ezra* (Oak Park: Bible Truth Publ, nd) p 63

¹³ Kidner, p 62

¹⁴ Adeney, p 108

¹⁵ Coggins, p 106

¹⁶ C F Keil and F Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publ Co, 1978) p 109

¹⁷ Dennett, p 69

¹⁸ G Coleman Luck, *Everyman's Bible Commentary, Ezra and Nehemiah* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1961) p 62

¹⁹ Dennett, p 76

²⁰ Coggins, p 57

²¹ Adeney, p 133

²² Luck, p 64

²³ Adeney, p 134

²⁴ Luck, p 66

²⁵ Kidner, p 69

²⁶ Dennett, p 81

²⁷ Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters, Ahithophel to Nehemiah* (Edinburgh: Oliphants Ltd, nd) p 217

²⁸ Kidner, p 70

²⁹ William Kelly, *Two Lectures on Ezra and Nehemiah* (Great Britain: W and J Mackay and Co, 1947) p 39

³⁰ F Charles Fensham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publ Co, 1982) p 141

³¹ Adeney, p 148

³² Whyte, p 214

³³ *Ibid*, p 219