**EZRA’S  DECISION**

Ezra 7:1-10

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.”

I wish all of you a happy and victorious New Year 2025. This year God granted a baby boy, Ezra, to Emmanuel and Angela’s HC. Actually I was about to ask Emmanuel to prepare this message. But, I took this opportunity for my own sake because I realized “my complacent life” - living without repentances or decisive decisions, merely maintaining a religious routine while indulging in the sin of laziness and lust. I do not want this New Year Meeting to be just another gathering, but a time that inspires and empowers us to renew our faith and spirit, and mark the beginning of great change—a spiritual revival for each one of us.

In today’s passage, we will learn about a great man, Ezra, who revived Israel, who had been like the dead, bringing her back to life as God’s Holy People. He led her back to the Bible, and rescued her from a spiritual crisis during a time of darkness. So, what had he done? He made a decision to devote himself to the word of God and lived up to it. His decision brought about significant and fundamental changes in Israel to be restored as the Holy Nation.

In the beginning of every year, many people make new decisions, but hardly live up to them for more than two months. It is not easy to make a decision; but living up to a decision is even more difficult. Everyone might be in the same situation regarding this matter. In this passage, we may learn How the spiritual revival can begin in oneselves, in our ministry, in Rutgers campus, and even in America. Moreover, we may learn how we can serve fruitful campus-disciple-making missions in the year 2025. May God bless each one of you to make a decision of faith like Ezra and be used as an excellent Bible teacher for this generation, who can bring about the spiritual awakening in America.

**Part I. Identity and Vision (1-9)**

Chapter 7 begins with the phrase “After these things,” followed by the genealogy of Ezra himself. The Kingdom of Israel had been conquered and colonized, first by the Babylonian Empire and later by the Persian Empire. Many Israelites were taken to Babylon as captives, and one of them was Daniel. Unlike the first or 1.5 Generation like Daniel, Ezra was born and grew up in Babyone. Since he had been born and educated in Babylon, he did not have cultural and language barriers, but well adapted to the society and laid his life foundation there.

Ezra did not tell how he was well educated or successful in Babylon. Rather, he tells us His own Genealogy, the genealogy of the High Priests. Seriah, his father, was the last high priest before Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylonians. He was deported with King Zedekiah to Riblah in the land of Hamath and executed there. (2 King 25:18-21) Ezra was 5th generation of Zadok, god-pleasing priest in the time of David, 14th generation of Phinehas, who stopped a plague among the Israelites by acting decisively against sin (Nu 25), and 16th generation of Aaron, the first High Priest. Ezra counted himself as part of the 16th generation of the priestly genealogy of Aaron. He found his identity as God’s chosen people. In the midst of Babylonian culture, Ezra never forgot his identity as one of God’s chosen people, called to serve and worship God alone. Though he had never seen the temple or Jerusalem, he always kept in mind that he was a priest, privileged to stand before God to make sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins and to offer prayers on behalf of all Israelites. He understood that as a priest, he was called to live a holy life before God. In Babylon, it would have been easier and much better for him to look after his own future security and success and then settle down in Babylon. However, he identified himself as God's holy people, and chose to live a holy life, a kingdom priest, a bible Teacher.

 How did he come to have such an identity and mindset? It was through the word of God. Look at 6b. “He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given.” Ezra’s parents must have raised him spiritually based on the Bible and encouraged him to live with the spiritual identity as God’s Chosen People. Moreover, Ezra himself struggled to hold on to the word of God in order to live with the identity as a Chosen People, while his fellow Jews made various compromises with the gentile culture and pursued worldly success. Obviously, he was also tempted, challenged, failed, and even despaired for many reasons. But, he remembered who he was based on God’s promise to His Ancestors of faith, Aaron, Phinehas, Zodak, and he chose to live a holy life as a Priest before God. Ezra allowed his life to be shaped, guided by the word of God. Then, God was with him, and raised him up to be a Bible Teacher “well versed” in the Law of Moses. It means that he was an excellent Bible scholar with spiritual insight, who was able to teach his people the Law of Moses in every situation. Even Artaxerxes, King of the Persian Empire, acknowledged and respected him as the teacher of the Law of the God in heaven, and the priest. He became a high-ranking leader, who the king trusted, so the king gave him everything Ezra asked him.

 Our identity before God is crucial and fundamental to our lives. Most of our decisions, whether small or big, depend on that identity - for example what we choose to eat or not, the clothes we wear, and even how we spend our weekends or holidays. We live in America, the land of Freedom, which can resemble a Modern-day Babylon, filled with humanism, relativism, atheism, materialism, individualism and ideologies like genderism. People encourage one another to do whatever they want. We are free to go to NY City, or shopping malls, or just be lazy on Sunday. However, we chose to come to worship God because we have this spiritual identity as God’s holy people. Yes, we are free to do what we want. We choose to honor God and worship God on this Sabbath day for we are God’s people. We choose not to despise our bodies because we are sons and daughters of Holy God Almighty. We choose to live by the word of God because it is the privilege given to His people.

So, who do you think you are? Many people are often confused about their true identity. So, some define it based on their feelings, abilities, or other human conditions. Where can we find our true identity? This is why we should deeply study the word of God, the Bible. God tells everyone who they are in the Bible. The Bible does not tell that you are nobody or animals or something undefined between man and woman. You are God’s wonderful creations, made in his image. You are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, God’s Holy people. You are the light of the world and the salt of the world. You are the disciples of Jesus. Most importantly you are God’s beloved child, so precious that he sacrificed his only son for you. We may deeply study the word of God and discover our true identity. We may have spiritual identity as a Christian, as a Missionary, as a Bible Teacher, as a Shepherd. Whenever we make a decision, we may do so according to our identity.

Let us read verse 6a: *“this Ezra came up from Babylon.”* Ezra decided not to remain in Babylon but to return to Jerusalem. Ezra could have pursued his dreams and enjoyed a successful and comfortable life in Babylon. But he decided to return to Jerusalem. He did not go alone—he led the second return of the Jews, a group of around 5,000 people, including 1,496 adult males along with women and children. God blessed Ezra’s decision to lead his people back to Jerusalem, restoring their spiritual identity as God’s chosen people. By the help of God’s hand, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem.

**Part II. Ezra’s decision to devote himself to the Word of God.**

 60 years earlier, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, around 50,000 people returned to Jerusalem. They completed the restoration of the temple building. They dedicated the temple to God and celebrated the first passover in the new temple. However, do you know what Ezra discovered when he arrived in Jerusalem 60 years later?

 Outwardly, it seemed that Israel had been restored. But their spiritual life was fully spoiled and corrupted. In Ezra chapters 9 and 10, we can see many signs of their spiritual downfall. They began to intermarry with gentile women and as a result, idols and godless culture penetrated into the households, which led them to a total spiritual chaos. They threw away their identity; they ignored the Law of God. So, there was a lack of servants of God who could teach the word of God; who could make sacrifices or offer prayer to God, so that temple services were neglected. They were totally corrupted.

Many Spiritual leaders have predicted that millions of churches in the U.S will close within the next 10 years. In fact, this is happening. She was the missionary sending nations, a shepherd nation, for all other nations. but now Outwardly, she has become one powerful nation with abundant material blessings. Then how has this shepherd nation become a mission field, corrupted by all kinds of sins? Why were such spiritual problems occurring in Israel, and in the U.S? Ezra concluded that it was because they lacked the word of God in their life. He realized that his people needed nothing more than an excellent Bible teacher, who studies the word of God deeply and teaches it correctly. Then, what was his resolution for Israel?

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.” Here, we learn about the decision Ezra made to resolve the problems. He decided to devote himself to the word of God. “Devote” means to completely commit oneself to something. Ezra fully dedicated himself to the ministry of the Word of God - studying it, obeying it, and teaching it.

Why is the law of God, the word of God? Do you think Bible study, Bible Reading, GLEForum, Bible Conference could resolve these problems and restore Israel or America to be a holy nation and shepherd nations again? The answer is Yes. How? and Why? Ezra himself experienced and believed in the power of the Word of God. He truly believed that the word of God is the word of life that changes despair into new hope; weakness into strength, the hopeless into the spiritual leaders, and even the dead into the living. That is why even Jesus gave all his strength to teach the word of God throughout his earthly ministry. Especially Jesus taught 12 men - the word of God, bringing them wherever he went and even living together with them. By the power of the word of God, these 12 men grew to be disciples, and disciples makers, spiritual leaders, fathers of churches. In Acts 19, we see how difficult it was for Paul to serve the evangelical ministry in Ephesus. However, he did not give up, but he studied the Bible everyday in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9) for over 2 years (Acts 20:31). God’s work through the word of God was truly great: People who practiced sorcery repented and burnt their sorcery scrolls, which valued fifty thousand drachmas. Acts 19:20 summarizes the work of God in Ephesus as follows, “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

 The word of God is the only solution for the spiritual awakening and restoration of young American students. Nothing in this world can wholly heal a sin-sick person. However, the word of God is the breath of God which has power to change and renew people. Only God’s word can change a person, a society, a country, and a whole generation into a new creation. Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” Let us trust in the word of God. Let us decide to devote ourselves to the ministry of the Word of God - studying, obeying, and teaching the word of God.

Ezra did not just study the Bible theoretically to increase his Bible knowledge. No! He decided to obey the word of God and put it into practice. He had an awesome fear before the word of God and decided to obey the word of God. God says in Deuteronomy 28:2, “All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God.” Jesus also says in Mark 7:24 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” In this New Year 2025, let us struggle to subordinate ourselves to the word of God and receive great spiritual authority. Let us struggle to obey at least one word of God in this year, so that the word of God may gain power in our lives.

What is next? Teaching. Ezra did not remain in his personal spiritual struggle. Rather, he decided to teach the word of God to the Israelites. He realized that it was the only way to save his people from the sinful and corrupted idol-worshipping life. Ezra ch 9&10 describes how he taught the word of God through his unwavering commitment to the word of God. Most Israelites believed that marrying foreign women was not an issue. Even the Levites and priests participated in this practice. This was a highly sensitive and personal family matter. No one should say anything about it. In America, there are also many issues that people might consider acceptable, but the Bible teaches otherwise.

However, Ezra did not compromise. Rather, he alone stood against everyone’s sin, holding on the law of the Lord. When he heard the sin of Israelites, he tore his tunic and cloak, pulled hair from his head and bear and sat down appalled. Praying and confessing the sin of unfaithfulness of Israelites as his own, he threw himself down before the temple of God. Addressing their sins before God, he wept, fasted, and mourned over the sins of the exiles, which brought guilt upon them and made them unable to stand in his presence.

His devotion to the word of God driven by his deep reverence for it, opened the spiritual eyes of the people. They were terrified at the word of God. Then, they also wept together out of repentance. They themselves repented of their sins, deciding to send away their foreign wives and even children. God blessed his decision and brought about a great spiritual awakening in Israel. Israel could disappear so easily like other kingdoms of the earth. Even the Babylon Empire, Persian, Geek, and Roman empire had disappeared in History. However, Israel had remained as the ramanat of God, holding on to their spiritual identity as God’s chosen people. It was made possible through the spiritual revival brought about by Ezra’s devotion to the word of God.

When we look at the Christian history, the main characters who led the spiritual revival movements were always the ones who decided to devote themselves to deep Bible study like Ezra such as Martin Luther, Jonathan Edward, John Whiclif, Dr. Samuel Lee and Mother Sarah Berry. Likewise, all those who led a spiritual revival are those who loved the word of God and decided to devote themselves to the ministry of the word of God - studying, obeying, and teaching. God called us to be Bible teachers and spiritual leaders in this generation. In order to serve campus students and to bring about the spiritual awakening, we need to devote ourselves to the ministry of the word of God.

May God help all of us to have spiritual authority by studying and obeying one word of God and to live as fruitful Bible teachers and even as reformers for the spiritual reawakening of 169 Colleges in NJ including Rutgers U. May God bless each one of you to devote your heart to the intensive Bible study, so that you may penetrate one’s soul, spirit and marrow through our Bible Study. When we devote our whole heart to the Bible study like Ezra, then God will surely bless us to raise 70 spiritual leaders in 2025, but also bring a great spiritual revival in 169 Colleges in NJ, including Rutgers campus. May God bless each of us to make a decision like Ezra, so that Spiritual revival may come in your personal life, in your family, in our church. Let us 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.”