

The Second Day...

Ezra and Effective Bible Teaching

Ezra's Background: Ezra 7:1–10 (ESV)

7 Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, ² son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, ³ son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, ⁴ son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, ⁵ son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest— ⁶ this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

⁷ And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. ⁸ And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. ¹⁰ For Ezra had **set his heart to study** the Law of the LORD, and **to do** it and **to teach** his statutes and rules in Israel.

On April 8, 458 BC, 81 years after King Cyrus sent a decree for the exiled Jews to return to Israel, Ezra and some other Jews begin a four month journey from Babylon back to Jerusalem. On August 4 of the same year he arrives in Jerusalem, and within 6 months he is already acting to improve the moral poverty of the Jewish nation (Ezra 10).

Ezra was a priest and a scribe, being of the lineage of Levi. But his lineage did not equip him to be an effective teacher of Scripture. Twice here in Ezra 7 it says that the hand of *Yahweh* his God was on him (vv. 6 & 9). Why was God's hand favorably on him? Because he "set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach His statues and rules in Israel" (v. 10).

It is significant that Ezra states these three infinitive verbs in this order. God's blessing came as he opened God's Word (the Law) and studied it, applied it, and taught it. Any other order would have been a train wreck. He could not have taught something he hadn't studied. He would have been a hypocrite had he taught something he didn't live out.

God is here telling us that to be effective teachers we first need **to study** His Word. The Hebrew word here is *darash*. It is used 164 times and generally means "to seek with care with the end 'to know.'" This is not a casual reading of Scripture. While the activity is mental, it is a thorough investigation done with care in order that a knowledge of the truth is obtained.

The next logical step after Bible study has taken place is **to do** it. The Hebrew word is *asa*, a very common word that means "to do." It can have a meaning of "practice" or "obey" as it most certainly does here. We are reminded immediately of James 1:22-25 where we are to be doers of the Word, not merely hearers. The Bible teacher must be walking the talk or he is a hypocrite.

Finally, after studying and living out God's Word we are able **to teach** it to others. The Hebrew word here is *lamad*. While Greek has separate words for 'teach' and 'learn,' Hebrew does not distinguish between the two. This is because of the fact that "all learning and teaching are ultimately to be found in the fear of the LORD" (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament [TWOT]) (cf. Deut. 4:10). It carries the idea of training or educating.

Ezra's infallible order here for effective Bible teaching is study-practice-teach. Teaching cannot come before careful, investigative, thorough study of the Scriptures. And those being taught must see the Scripture lived out by the teacher. As we will see in the next passage, through Ezra's teaching, God touched and transformed the minds, the emotions and the wills of individuals who were diligently seeking Him.

Ezra's Teaching for the Mind, Emotion and Will: Nehemiah 8:1–13 (ESV)

8 And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ **They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.**

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for **the joy of the LORD is your strength.**" ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and **to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared** to them.

¹³ On **the second day** the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, **came together** to Ezra the scribe **in order to study the words of the Law.**

The account above takes place on October 8, 445 BC. It shows very clearly the effectiveness of Ezra's teaching of God's Word. We see here how Ezra expounds on the Scriptures and touches the people's intellect (vv. 1-8), their emotions (vv. 9-12), and their will (v. 13). Ezra had been living in Jerusalem and ministering to the Jews there for over 13 years now. Nehemiah had just finished rebuilding the walls

around Jerusalem the week before (Neh. 6:15). The nation was on a high, and they realized that God was with them and doing mighty things in the land. So now, all the people gathered as one man (Neh. 8:1). This passage exemplifies Christian Community (cf. Acts 4:32-37). They recognized God's help in rebuilding the walls and protecting them from their enemies, and were now living in complete unity, of one mind. Then they asked for Ezra to "bring the Book."

Ezra brought the Book to them and taught the men, women and all who could understand (Neh. 8:2). To "understand" here is the word *bin*. It is related to the preposition "between" and therefore means to have penetrating insight, to discern between...in this case words of truth versus words of error. He first opened in prayer (8:6) then proceeded to read for about 6 hours while the people stood (8:6) and were "attentive to the Book" (8:3).

I think it is very significant that Ezra is not alone in his ministry. He had 26 other men, plus an unnumbered group of Levites, with him that were helping minister to the people. These men helped the people understand (*bin*) what Ezra was reading. This shows an important point in that there were multiple people who could teach and meet the needs of the individuals in the crowd. Their goal was to help them understand what was being read so they could experience the joy of the LORD which was to be their strength (8:10).

It would be tough to overstate the significance of verse 8. In order to touch the intellects of the people and point their minds toward *Yahweh*, Ezra and the others did two things 1) they read from the Book *clearly* and 2) they gave the sense. The result of these two things was that the people understood the Scriptures. The Scriptures were meant to be understood by everyone, not just the teachers, pastors, seminary students, etc... This reminds me of William Tyndale's famous quote to the proud clergyman who boasted in the Pope's words over God's Word. He said, "I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!" He had a death defying desire for everyone to read *and* understand the Bible.

How do we read the Word *clearly*? The word here is *parash*, and it means to make distinct or clear either by revelation, explication or translation (TWOT). Interestingly, the Pharisees derived their name from this word. Ironically, they were the ones who were to separate out, or exposit, God's Word. As a teacher of the Bible, we have here an example and a call to expositively read the Scriptures, leaving no room for misapplication. I believe we read the Bible clearly when we read it in the context that it is written.

Second, it says they "gave the sense." The noun here is *sekhal* (we will see the related verb *sakhal* in verse 13 as the people come back to "study" the next day). It means "understanding, wisdom," which in this case comes from the exegesis of the Scriptures. Ezra not only read to the people, he expounded and gave the meaning with the result of the people understanding what they read.

The most important thing to come from Ezra's reading and exegesis of the Scriptures was that the people were moved emotionally. Stimulating the mind should lead to stimulating the emotions. When the people heard and understood God's Word, they wept (v. 9). Ezra and Nehemiah told them not to weep, but rather rejoice and give to others in need, for the "joy of the LORD is their strength" (v. 11).

So the people went to their homes that day rejoicing. But why were they rejoicing? Not because they were told to, but "because they had understood the words that were declared to them" (v. 12). The words "were declared" are important here. It is the Hebrew verb *yada*, and it is used in the *hiphil* verb stem. *Yada* is a very common word that means "to know." The *hiphil* stem implies an active, causative sense. So, the people were caused (by God, through Ezra's reading and expounding the Scriptures) to know God's Word that day. But *yada* is not an intellectual knowledge. It is an experiential knowledge. In Genesis 4:1 Adam knew (*yada*) Eve and she conceived a son. It is very clear that Adam did not just know facts about Eve, he knew her in the most intimate way possible. It is this same full and complete experiential knowledge of God through His Word that made the people rejoice.

Finally, the teaching that stimulated the mind and touched the emotions of the people, charged the will of the people. Verse 13 states that people came back "the second day" for more. They came back to Ezra again "in order to study the words of the Law." This word for study is *sakhal*, which means to give close and thoughtful attention to. Their Bible study habits were changed. They no longer glossed over God's Word casually, they paid a closer attention to what they read, and were moved to obey it. The rest of Nehemiah 8 goes on to say that the people were so charged that they celebrated the Feast of Booths as God commanded them in His Word with such passion as had not been done in nearly 1,000 years!

This is equivalent of saying that the people woke on Monday morning with a thirst for more of God's Word. What they heard from the teaching on Sunday stimulated their minds, caused them to understand and experience God in a fuller way, which made them rejoice and want to love and serve others, and gave them a desire for more...the second day.

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