

Luck or Pluck? (Ezra 7:11-28)

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[0 : 0 0] So Ezra chapter 7 verse 11. This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest, a teacher of the law, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the Lord for Israel.

Artaxerxes, King of Kings. To Ezra the priest, teacher of the law of the God of heaven. Greetings. Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go.

You are sent by the king and his seven advisors to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisors have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem.

Together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem.

With this money, be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs together with their grain offerings and drink offerings and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem.

[1 : 2 1] You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold in accordance with the will of your God. Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God.

And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you are responsible to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury. Now I, King Artaxerxes, decree that all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates are to provide with diligence whatever Ezra the priest, the teacher of the law of the God of heaven, may ask of you.

Up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cores of wheat, a hundred bars of wine, a hundred bars of olive oil and salt without limit. Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven.

Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons? You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.

And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates, all who know the laws of your God.

[2 : 5 1] And you are to teach any who do not know them. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property or imprisonment.

Praise be to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way, and who has extended his good favour to me before the king and his advisors and all the king's powerful officials.

Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go out with me. And that is the word of God. Thank you.

Luck or plug? How many of us still believe as Christians we need some luck? No? No need, right?

Yeah. I think on some Kiwi they would like to put some rabbit's foot above the dash or some key rings. What's that for?

[4 : 07] For giving them some luck, right? But I think it's certainly no luck for the rabbits. Yeah. I think luck, destiny, coincidence.

I think as Christians we should delete these sort of phrases from our minds. Because we believe everything is in God's control.

And we can, and even in our lives, how God will use us or things that we encounter, I believe that there is no coincidences.

You know, as you see a people, a person standing on top of the mountain, he did not just fall from there. Right? He, because I didn't see him, how difficult he climbed up there.

I didn't mean that he was up there just like that. Right? I'm sure for a lot of us, what the achievement that God has enabled us to today, I'm sure there has been a lot of hard works in the past.

[5 : 15] Right? So I think the passage today, especially when we focus on Ezra, you know how great he has been used by God, right?

We want to study a little bit more about how he got there. And we should try to think how we ourselves can be used by God.

All right? Now the passage, Ezra simply said, Ezra was sent by the Persian king to Jerusalem. All right? For a Jewish religious matter, a mission.

He was sent by the king for a religious mission. All right? And he went back there and he got commissioned. And he was saying that, To God be glory.

It's not just me that I achieved that. And I think for us today, we are not Ezra. I think we're all different.

[6 : 19] But I think God still uses us in various ways. But how we can use us by God, I think, No coincidences.

No luck. But how we can prepare ourselves so that God can use us in the right time And given the right opportunity. There are a few things, I think, from the passage we have just read.

Accuracy in God's word. We need to know and teach God's word correctly. And approvals from others.

We don't do our own things. We're not one man band. All right? As a church, we need to, you know, others will command you.

You know, you don't just go do things by ourselves. And even as a pastor, we, our pastors and deacons work very closely. I don't just say, I want to do this and you just follow me.

[7 : 20] All right? So, unity is very important as we want to be used by God. And more importantly, we need to acknowledge it's God doing it.

Like the song we just sung. Yet, it's me. But yet, not I. But Christ is in me. So, I think these are the things from this passage want to remind us.

Okay? Now, 1 to 6. Ezra 1 to 6. We're finished. Okay? We're finished with that. So, that was the time. Passages 1 to 6. It was this sort of time.

The two kings, Cyrus and Darius. Okay? We're finished. Chapter 1 to 6. We are here. 1 to 7 to 10. Okay? Last week, Pastor William preached 7, 1 to 10.

Okay? And verse 10 was the verse of the month last time. Right? Ezra dedicated himself to follow, to observe, and to teach the will of God diligently.

- [8 : 25] Right? That was Ezra's kind of a... That was him. All right? He dedicated his whole life doing it.
- And here, we're in this stage. The king is Arctexes. Right? Another king. From... From these two.
- Cyrus and Darius. And before that, it was the king in the book of Esther. Right? The entire Jewish community almost got genocide.
- Almost kind of got killed. But praise God for his safekeeping. Now we are entering into this period of time.
- Ezra was the second group of people. Came back from Babylon, but from Persia. Right? And came back to reform the hearts of the people.
- [9 : 28] How God would use this person, Ezra? I think three things. And let's check with our lives.
- I'll spell that wrong. It's accuracy, not accuracy. Accuracy. All right? A-C-C-U-R-A-C-Y. Accuracy in God's word. All right?
- Do we study? Do we teach? Do we know the word of God accurately? And would other people trust me when I serve?
- Or just I do my own things? And if any accomplishment that God is doing it through me, do I give the honor and glory to God?
- I think these are the three things that we really need to pay attention as we serve God. Firstly, accuracy in God's word. Okay? And verses 11 to 12.
- [10 : 33] It says that this is a copy of the letter. This is actually the king's decree. All right? This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra, the priest and the teacher of the law.
- Now, this is how the king described this person, Ezra. He was a priest, a teacher of the law. What did he mean? So he had a dual kind of title, dual kind of identity.
- It's like Reverend Doctor today, right? He is a priest that's teaching. He's offering sacrifices.
- All right? He's a descendant of Aaron. So last week when Pastor William introduced, there was a whole genealogy. His family lines traced back to Aaron.
- So he had this priestly kind of a family line, a pedigree. All right? But that prestigious family line could not take him to where he was.
- [11 : 45] Because right from the beginning, Aaron, his two sons, he got burned up for doing the wrong thing. Remember? In Leviticus 10.
- And even at Samuel's time, there was Eli, his two sons, got killed as well. So don't guarantee. I mean, your family, prestigious background, doesn't guarantee you're going to be used by God.
- How was he used by God? He was a teacher of the law. And the Bible says that he, in chapter 7, verse 10, he was dedicated, he was diligent in observing, studying, and teaching the word, the law of the Lord.
- So that, that was his quality that was used by God. Now remember, he was not in Jerusalem.
- He was in Persia. Right? He was a minority. He was a second class citizen. And Persia, you know, prior to that was Babylon.
- [12 : 59] Babylon was the country that defeated Israel and deported all these, the best of the people, to Babylon. And now, Persia, this kingdom has conquered Babylon.
- But still, these Jews, they were in Persia. They were still minority. They were still second class citizens.

Right? So, for Israel, he had to be, he had to be, a very, very firm in his, in his belief in the God of Israel to study his law.

It's all very well when, during the King Solomon's time, everybody studying the law of the Lord. Right?

All these scribes, all these teachers, everybody looked up to them. But if you are here in the foreign land, might as well study the Persian laws.

[14 : 02] It will help you, you know, to get better life. Right? You see, you know what I mean? I mean, when I was, when I came to New Zealand, when I was about 13, 14 years old, 13 years old, when I, amongst my, my relatives, in Dunedin, all these, even my nephew and niece, they were doctors, they were, they were, they were not teachers, Chinese didn't like teachers, right?

They were doctors, they were lawyers, they were architects, they were engineers, you know, for them, every occupation, every career, you need to have that C, Chinese, all right?

What C? Look, C, that's, that's master of the law, all right? Architect, Dixie, the master of architecture, all right?

So, every, every C, you know, earn money. And people, oh, your son, oh, your daughter, this C, and that C, and if someone mentioned, oh, your daughter is a, low C, teacher, nah, I won't make much money.

And then when they found out, Albert, you're going to study theological college, you're going to be a, Moksi, oh, no! You know, they almost had pity on my mom, you know, your son's going to be a, Moksi, you know?

[15 : 25] You know what I mean? Everybody, no one wants to study the law of the Lord in the foreign land. But, Ezra, he was dedicated to spend his life studying the word of the law, the Lord, in a foreign land where, where, no one would really want to.

And he could have failed in his Hebrew, or, you know, in his Hebrew language. I mean, his mother tongue would be Persian. You know what I mean?

And, against all odds, he was willing to spend the best of his time, not knowing how God's going to use him.

So, when we are young, while we are young, let's study the word diligently. Carefully handling his word, so that we don't know one day God can use us.

Often, I think we're just too careless in quoting or sharing the word of the Lord. Often, we commit the mistakes of interpreting the Bible with our own ideas.

[16 : 58] So, it's quite a bit of discipline in studying the word in a correct way. You know? And, in 2nd Timothy 2, verse 15, it says, do your best to present yourselves to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Now, of course, this teaching was to Timothy. Paul was saying that to this young pastor at the time. But, who knows?

God could use us as teachers to others who do not know the word of God. And, in just the appropriate time and opportunity, God can just use us to share his word to others.

And, so that we can lead others in the right way. And, this correctly handle the word, it's like, it's like, like doctor in the surgery.

Alright? You need to correctly handle your knife. Alright? You don't just, oh, just cut wherever you want to.

[18 : 18] Oh, oh, sorry, I cut your iota. Sorry. Oh, let's stitch it up and do it again. No, you don't do that. You need to be very careful handling the word of God.

So, Ezra, he had, he had this, this, this, mentality, even, I don't know how young he was, when he committed, when he dedicated himself to study, to observe, and now he had the opportunity to teach his fellow people.

Now, I think this is, firstly, if you want to be used by God, please, know our Bibles well. Of course, it's a journey.

It's a process. You don't, you don't, you don't achieve, you know, straight, right away. But if we're not serious, and, we'll never be able to be used by God.

Okay? So, accuracy in God's word. And secondly, approvals from others. Now, this is quite amazing. You get approval from who?

[19 : 38] From king, from the king. And from the seven advisors. Who were they? The Persian advisors, not Jewish advisors.

Persian king. He was sent, that, the Artaxerxes says, you are sent by the king, me, king of kings. And his seven advisors.

And those, who are those advisors? They, they may be the council, king's council. Actually, in Esther chapter 1, also name all these seven men. And this, the, the king before Artaxerxes.

All right? He actually named it the seven guys out there. Okay? So, the king, he, Ezra, got approval, commanded by the king and all these seven big guys.

If just one king, oh, he could be very subjective. But seven other councils, councillors in the, in the king's council, all agreed. Now, he, his life's got to be pretty, interesting.

[20 : 50] Pretty, I think he, he would have got, got along well. Not just in interpersonal skills, but I believe these, these wise guys. You know, you've got to be wise.

You rule the country. Persia, big, huge area, right? So, these, they're not stupid. So, are you wise? Are you mature?

Are you trustworthy? They would know. So, the king and the seven advisors approved him. A big delegation, right?

So, he, these, these guys entrusted these responsibilities to Ezra. First, to evaluate the situation in Jerusalem.

They have given Ezra that full authority. all right? And to present, now, they had given him, given Ezra the resources, the gold, the money, and everything for him to take back to Jerusalem the free will offerings to God.

[22 : 02] Now, they didn't know the God of Israel, all right? But they, he, okay, we'll give you the money, you offer to your God, pray to your God in Judah so that we are safe, we're blessed.

It's pretty selfish, but still, God worked through the hearts of these guys, all right? So, they have entrusted all this money and all the resources for Ezra and his people to take back 11,000, it was a 11,000 mile case, a long way, you know, what happened in between?

Would they run away? No, they trusted Ezra. And, thirdly, and even he's got this letter with him, when he presented the letter to the local authorities of a trans-Euphrates, that's on the west side of the Euphrates River, that's, that's the Arabia, Arabia desert and, and the Palestine area, even to Egypt to obtain supplies and finance and money from the governors on the west of the Euphrates.

peace. And, lastly, to allow, to give authority to Ezra to institute judicial reforms.

Now, can you imagine, huge power in Ezra's hand. And, and, he was trusted.

[23 : 42] He got approved by the king and the seven wise guys in the empire. Now, we may ask, do we really need to agree, be agreed by others before we can actually serve?

Now, the answer is, if everybody's against you, it's pretty hard to serve, right? And, I believe if, if God has enlightened, or God has told you to do this sort of thing, I don't think he would just bypass everybody in the church.

Right? If, say, what, God wants me to take down the church and we build the whole church building, I say, I don't think the deacons wouldn't get it, right?

I don't think the whole of the department leaders had no idea about it. Even if they, if they didn't agree, but still, we could talk and we can pray, and up to the, until God revealed to us as a church.

church. So, for Ezra, he was not just a one-man band, he did his own thing. As we serve, I believe we need to hear, we need to relate to other brothers and sisters, especially as a New Testament church, a church of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 31] it did not just give one person. He gives apostles, prophets, right? Teachers, evangelists, and pastors, and deacons, and elders, and presbyters, and bishops, right?

And, and there's no one, no one person who gets the full picture. We need to, we need to listen to one another, we need to support one another, and we need to discern God's will together.

And, during the course, unity, right? Trust, humility, and look at each other as fellow servants of God.

That's Ezra. He did not, he did not just take charge by himself. Even he went back, all right? He had some priests, he had some Levites with him.

All right? Even the next chapter, when we read, he was doing things not by himself. He always had people around him. So, if you want to be used by God, reject this idea of one-man band.

[26 : 57] I do my own thing. There's no way in the New Testament, even in the Old Testament, no way you are the only one that's used by God.

I mean, who said that? I am the only one serving now! Who said that? Elijah. And God said, no, open your eyes. I have reserved myself 7,000 people who have not bowed, have not bowed to bow, right?

Don't think that I'm the only one who's righteous. I would blind my own eyes if I said that. All right? Thirdly, acknowledgement of God's favour, 27 to 28.

When he realised that he has been given this mission to take all these things back to Jerusalem, it was full authority by the king, he did not just say, ah, look, finally, finally I got the opportunity to flex my muscles now.

No, he did not say that. Praise be to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who has put this into the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem because he recognised that it's the hand of the Lord, my God was on me, so I took courage.

[28 : 24] It's me, yes, but yet not I, but it's Christ working in me. Now, this is something, you know, the more gifted that we are, the more experiences we have, the greater the temptations that we think we can do it by ourselves.

Please believe me. There have been ample of times that I thought I could do it because I'm gifted in this, because I'm 22 years in PCBC, I'm 30 something years as a pastor now.

The moment I have this kind of an attitude, the moment I will fall flat on my face. This kind of, it's not just a virtue of humility, but it's a reality, because really, really, really is the hand of the Lord, it's not me.

Yes, he chose me, but he could have chose others, he could have chose others and bypassed me, and his sovereign will, right?

If he's gracious enough to use me, he's allowed me from my youth, from my childhood, he's shaped me, he's moulded me, and now today, he's used me in this particular way, praise God, praise be to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, his hand was on me.

[30 : 01] I think that's the most I could say. Right? No matter what expertise you guys have, you know, you young people are so bright, you know, I just feel, well, I'm not up to it, right?

And praise God for it. You know, when Mrs. Bin, they're actually trying to work the TV for the ladies fellowship, she asked me, I said, no, don't ask me, I don't know nothing about it.

So she came and asked Gary, and just 10 minutes or so, he fixed everything, right? And Mrs. Bin said to me, well, I didn't ask you.

Yeah, you didn't ask me. I would have wasted you 30 minutes and accomplished nothing. Right? Okay, God has given us different kind of talents, giftings, experiences, expertise.

Praise God for it. Please, give honor and glory to God. If it's, and he can use you in appropriate ways if we allow him.

[31 : 12] And just be humble before God. And this hand of God, it actually appeared seven times in chapter seven and eight.

So, the author of Ezra really wanted to tell his readers is really the hand of God. He was freely, he's sovereign in choosing whoever he wants.

If he wants to use you, he can. If he doesn't use you, he'll use the person next to you, of course he can. Let's submit to his sovereign will and give honor and glory to him.

Sometimes someone asked a very famous pastor, a person that's actually an Indian evangelist. He's passed away now.

Very greatly used by God. Someone interviewed him. Even in the 1940s, 50s, he was traveling the world and speaking for Christ and holding crusades and meetings and bringing huge numbers of people to Christ.

[32 : 26] And the person who interviewed him said, look, you're getting so famous. Do you worry you would steal the glory from God? And this guy, and he said, look, say, in the triumphant entry of Jesus, entering Jerusalem, on the donkey, when the people was putting palm trees of clothes on the road and say, Hosanna, Hosanna, the one who comes in the name of the Lord be praised, you know, do you think the donkey would think they are welcoming me?

Of course not. He's not the donkey of Shrek, you know, thinking I'm the donkey of the donkeys, you know. No, of course not. The donkey knew very well they were welcoming Jesus.

All right? Yes, it's me serving. Yes, it's me preaching. Yes, it's you leading worship. Yes, it's you playing the keyboard.

Yes, it's you doing this and this. But yet not I. I'm just donkey. If we realize, we just, I would count it a blessing that Jesus would even sit on me to enter into Jerusalem.

Amen? Amen? So, never stand in front of the cross and get all the attention, but to hide behind it and let Jesus receive all the glory that is due to him.

[34 : 23] that is something that I've heard from a pastor when I first became a Christian 40 something years ago and I still remember that.

Do not block Jesus so that when people just only see you, they will never, never get anything because what they see is a fallible person.

But if I hide behind the cross and when they see the perfect Jesus, their lives will never be the same. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that you help us to know we are just servants of Christ. Apart from you, I can do nothing.

But yet, Lord, help us to be diligent in knowing and studying and observing your word. And help us to work alongside our brothers and sisters so that we discern your world together.

[35 : 37] And Lord, and help us in our whole life, in our ministry, to give glory and honour to your name. In your most powerful and precious name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.