

Ezra, the Man for the Task

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[0 : 00] We come now to our Bible reading, which is in the book of Ezra, and if you'd like to follow it in our big church Bibles, you'll find this on page 393, Ezra chapter 7.

I'm going to read only verses 1 to 10 today, and you'll see that it begins with the words now after this. It was in fact about 60 years after the end of chapter 6, but I'll say more about that when we get to the sermon.

So Ezra chapter 7, verses 1 to 10. Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Saraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shalom, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Merioth, son of Zerariah, son of Uzi, son of Buki, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, 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.

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.

[1 : 28] And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

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. 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.

This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing to us from God tonight. Well, let's turn to Ezra chapter seven.

Once again, page three, nine, three. My title for tonight is Ezra, the man for the task. Certain individual leaders are the key to how God works his purposes out in history.

Now, of course, it is God who superintends history. It's God who makes history. It's a corny old pun, but it's a great theological truth that history is his story.

[2 : 51] It really is. And the Bible makes that fact plain again and again. But God uses, has always used, remarkable individuals to move that story on from one stage to the next.

Just think of the great names that mark the developing story of Israel in the Old Testament.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon.

And think of the great prophets and kings. Isaiah, Jeremiah, King Josiah, Daniel. From the human point of view, these are the movers and the shakers.

From God's point of view, they were the instruments in his hands. Now, Ezra is without doubt one of the great men used by God to further the story of Israel in the Old Testament.

Things had got stuck. And then along came Ezra. He was the man for the task. He was the right man prepared for action at the right time.

[3 : 55] And let's remind ourselves briefly about the situation in history. Jerusalem had been sacked. You'll know the year, won't you? I won't ask out loud. But Jerusalem had been sacked in the year 587 BC.

And many of its inhabitants had been deported to Babylonia. This was the beginning of the exile. But some 50 years later, Cyrus took control of the Babylonian Empire.

And he brought it into the even bigger Persian Empire. And immediately, he began to send groups of deported people back to their homelands, including Jews, to Jerusalem.

And because of God's will and purpose, Cyrus didn't merely permit the temple at Jerusalem to be rebuilt. He decreed it. He ordered it.

So in 539 BC, quite a large number of Jews crossed the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. The first thing they did was to build an altar in the center of the temple ruins.

[4 : 53] And then they laid or relayed the foundation of the temple. But then there was opposition. And the building work ground to a halt for some 18 years. And then, as we saw last week in chapters 5 and 6, the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, brought a spine-stiffening and stirring message from the Lord to the Israelites.

And they took up their picks and shovels again and restarted the work. That was in 520 BC. And they worked so diligently that by 515 BC, the temple rebuilding was complete. So Jerusalem was, to all intents and purposes, a going concern again. The regular sacrifices were being offered at the temple. The choirs were singing the Psalms. Passover was now being celebrated again. We saw that at the end of chapter 6. But the whole thing was a bit like drinking weak tea. There was something disappointing about it. It wasn't like the great days of David and Solomon, 500 years earlier. Israel was in a rather sorry state. It was no longer a sovereign nation state.

[6 : 01] It was just a small corner of the huge Persian Empire, a little bit like Estonia or Latvia used to be in the days of the great communist bloc, a country with identity but without independence.

Zechariah, the prophet, had said to them, don't despise the day of small things. And that was a real encouragement to them. But the fact remained that things were small.

Jerusalem was a shadow of her former self. The new temple, because of economic constraints, was not the same in size or magnificence as the splendid temple that Solomon had built. So the years following 515 BC, when the temple building was completed, it seemed to have been rather quiet years, when the people of Jerusalem managed to hang on in there, but didn't see much progress and development in God's great purpose of raising up Israel to be a light to the Gentiles. But then enter Ezra. Look at chapter 7, verse 1. Now after this. It's a bit of a pregnant phrase. Because nearly 60 years have passed between the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7.

[7 : 14] 60 years of doldrums and difficulties. But then God brings in a man who is fitted for the task of moving the work forwards. Now it's rather odd that the man after whom this Bible book is named, Ezra himself, doesn't actually appear in the story until we get to chapter 7 in a book of only 10 chapters.

But in chapters 1 to 6, Ezra has been giving us the back story, the information that we need to have so as to understand his place in the story. Now the book of Ezra falls into two distinct parts, chapters 1 to 6 and then chapters 7 to 10.

Chapters 1 to 6 are about the rebuilding, the reestablishment of the temple. And they cover those years 539 BC to 515 BC.

Then we have this 60-year gap. And then chapters 7 to 10 cover the period beginning 458 BC. And they describe the reestablishing of the teaching of the law of Moses in Jerusalem.

So to put that just briefly, chapters 1 to 6 are about reestablishing the temple. And chapters 7 to 10 are about reestablishing the law, the teaching of the law of Moses.

[8 : 27] Now that's not to say that the law of Moses was entirely forgotten or entirely absent in chapters 1 to 6. Not at all, because it's the law of Moses that drives the people to reintroduce the sacrifices and the Passover and the temple worship.

But Ezra's arrival is rather like the arrival of spring after winter. Suddenly there's a sense of new life and power. He brings the law of Moses to life and he begins to press it vigorously into the hearts and consciences of the Israelites.

And they begin to respond because he is a dedicated teacher of the law of the Lord, as we shall go on to see in a moment. Now just another brief word about how the book of Ezra is put together.

This second half of the book, chapters 7 to 10, is clearly written by Ezra himself. To demonstrate that, look with me at chapter 7, verses 27 and 28.

Where Ezra prays. Chapter 7, verse 27. Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem and who extended to me, me, Ezra, his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and so on.

[9 : 48] And so he goes on into chapter 8, verse 1. These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia in the reign of Artaxerxes the king.

Went up with me. Verse 15 in the same chapter. I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava. Verse 21. Then I proclaimed a fast there. And so it goes on.

The first 10 verses of chapter 7 are actually written in the third person singular. He, rather than the first person, which is I.

But the reason for that is probably that Ezra, at this point, was wanting his readers to look at him a little bit more objectively, to take note of his task and his role as an example to follow, without getting too involved in his feelings, which begin to show when he uses the first person singular. Chapters 1 to 6 are probably written also by Ezra, because they relate to this time 60 years earlier, probably before he was born. So, of course, he doesn't feature in that part of the story.

[10:52] But the book, the whole book, has been handed down from the earliest times in the form in which we have it, joined up from chapter 1 to chapter 10. So it makes sense to think that Ezra wrote all of it.

And that little connecting phrase at the start of chapter 7, now after this, suggests a single author for the whole book. Right, well, let's get into our passage now.

I want to spend a good bit of time on verse 10 this evening, because that is a delightful description of a Bible teacher, and it's very important for the modern churches. But before we get there, let's notice other things that Ezra is telling us about himself.

The spotlight is on him right the way through these verses. First, he tells us in the strongest way that he possibly can, in the first few verses, that he is a priest.

He is a real priest who can trace his family line directly back to Aaron, the first chief priest, the brother of Moses. I wonder how far you can trace back your personal ancestry.

[11:55] Maybe three generations or so? Well, I know the names of all four of my grandparents, but I don't know the names of all eight of my great-grandparents.

I might be able to name about three of them. And my guess is that many of you would be the same, unless you've made a special study of your family tree. But Ezra runs off these names right back to Aaron.

And the reason he does this is to show that he is a genuine bona fide priest of Israel. And the reason why that is important is because the priest's God-given task was to teach the law of God, the Torah, which is the basic instruction of the Bible.

Now, priests also have responsibility for offering the sacrifices to the Lord. But that's not what Ezra is interested here. It's the teaching role of the priests that he is pressing home to us in this passage. About the priests, here's what the Lord says through the prophet Malachi about their role. The priest, he says, Now, historically, of course, the priests had often not lived up to that level.

[13:25] Think, for example, of Eli, back at the beginning of 1 Samuel, Eli and his ne'er-do-well sons. But a major part of the true priest's work was to be a Bible teacher.

Why? Because people have always needed Bible teachers. And why do we need Bible teachers? The reason is that, by nature, we are dumb ignoramuses. I speak for myself.

And if, I know for myself, that if there isn't somebody who is regularly pressing the Bible's teaching into my system, like a person pressing the poly filler into the cracks in the wall, I shall go astray, run amok, and get into trouble.

So Ezra tells us that he is a priest because that means that he is a teacher of the law. Just think, for a moment, of that story in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8, of Philip, the evangelist, who meets the high-ranking Ethiopian on the road to Gaza.

You remember the story? Philip is told by the Holy Spirit to go and join that chariot on the Gaza road. And the Ethiopian, sitting up in his chariot, is reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

[14:31] And he invites Philip to come up and join him. And Philip asks him a point-blank question. He says, do you understand what you're reading? It's a rather rude question, isn't it?

You try asking that question to the person sitting next to you on the train, who's reading the Glasgow Herald. I say, do you understand what you're reading? You're inviting a Glasgow kiss, aren't you, with a question like that.

But that is the question that Philip puts to the Ethiopian. And the Ethiopian, although he's a very high-ranking man, says very humbly to Philip, how can I understand unless somebody teaches me? In other words, I've got the Bible, but I need a Bible teacher. And we all need Bible teachers. I need Bible teachers. Ezra is a Bible teacher. Now, secondly, as well as being a priest, Ezra is also a scribe.

As he puts it in verse 6, a scribe skilled in the law of Moses. Now, that word scribe literally means somebody who can write. It comes from scribo in Latin, I write.

[15:36] But in the Bible, the scribe is much more than a person who is able to pick up a pen and write words or copy texts. In the Bible, the scribe was somebody who had undergone serious training for some years in the law of Moses.

He would know Moses backwards. Just as our top judges and QCs in this country know the laws of Britain, upside down and back to front, so the scribes of ancient times made minute, detailed study of the words of Moses.

Of course, they were capable of perverse misunderstandings. Jesus had to say to the scribes of his own day, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. He said, the scribes preach, but they do not practice.

In other words, there's a gap between what they say and how they live. But Jesus also speaks of the true scribe. He says in Matthew chapter 13, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. So he teaches the treasures of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. He's a true teacher of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. So back to verse 6 in our chapter.

[16:56] Ezra was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses. Now, how did he acquire that skill? We'll come on to that in verse 10. But there's something else to notice important in verse 6.

Skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. Now, that word given is a small word, but it tells us so much.

The law of Moses was given. It was not the work of man. It was the gift of God. How generous God is to give it to the Jews and to give it to all of us.

It is our Torah. It's the foundation instruction of the whole Bible, not just of the Old Testament. But that word given is not only about God's generosity.

It also shows us that God's teaching has borders and boundaries which we cross or blur at our peril. It is, as we say in modern speech, it is a given.

[17:56] It is as it is. And we can't tamper with it. We have no right to rearrange it or to add to it or subtract from it. As Jesus says, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until everything is accomplished.

So given is generosity, but given is also limiting. And what a blessing it is that it sets limits for us. I say that because by nature we need those limits.

We don't know how to live life. We don't know how to put one foot after the other. And so God, in his kindness, has given us the law of Moses and, of course, the whole Bible to be a lantern to our feet and a light for our path.

And Ezra was skilled in teaching what the Lord had given to Israel. Then thirdly, Ezra is a man of courage.

We can see this towards the end of verse 6. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given.

[19:00] And the king granted him all that he asked for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. The king granted him all that he asked. Now, that required courage.

Can you imagine making arrangements to go to speak to someone like King Artaxerxes, the king of the dreaded Persian Empire, which stretched all the way from Greece in the west through Turkey and Syria, Iraq and Iran, all the way to Afghanistan in the east?

Imagine going to speak to him having made arrangements through one of his private secretaries. Your imperial majesty and your royal highness, I have a request to make. Now, these kings, they were absolute monarchs.

They were dictators. They were despots. We know from the book of Daniel that King Darius had a den of lions, and not because he was a student of natural history.

Think of the courage that Esther had to show when she went to King Ahasuerus to ask him to show mercy to her people, the Jews. And he was her husband. Think of the courage that Nehemiah had to show a few years later after Ezra when he went to this same Artaxerxes to ask for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

[20:14] These kings had great power. They only had to raise an eyebrow or drop a thumb to order somebody's execution. Even Henry VIII in the 16th century had two of his wives beheaded.

That wasn't so long ago. It required courage to go to that kind of a king and make this kind of a request. Now, in the same way, courage is required of Bible teachers in every generation.

Now, you might say, why should courage be required? Well, the answer is that the Bible teacher not only teaches the truth, but exposes the lie. And it's the exposing of the lie that risks bringing trouble onto his head.

It's not too difficult to say that Christianity is true and life-bringing. But to say also that atheism is false and destructive of true humanity, that will stir up anger and risk a person making enemies. It's not too hard to affirm Christian ethical teaching. But if you also publicly speak against lifestyles that are incompatible with Christian ethics, you can risk being locked up, or worse, in some parts of the world.

[21 : 28] So before we get to verse 10 in our passage, which is all about Ezra, the teacher, it's good to see that Ezra was a man with sufficient moral courage to go and ask a favor from a despotic dictator.

Then fourth, let's notice Ezra's qualities of leadership. Verse 6. This Ezra went up from Babylonia. And then verse 7.

And there went up also to Jerusalem from Babylonia 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.

Now, that didn't happen by accident, that all this large number of people should go there. And we're going to discover, when we get to chapter 8, that it was a large number of people who went to Jerusalem with Ezra.

And it was clearly Ezra who led them, and Ezra who organized the whole expedition. Just glance over to chapter 8 for a moment, and you'll see something of the scale of the operation.

[22 : 33] He starts off by saying, these are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia in the reign of Artaxerxes the king. Now, look at the numbers.

Chapter 8, verse 3, 150 men are mentioned. Verse 4, 200 men. Verse 5, 300 men. These are all different groups.

And so on down to verse 14. I did my maths, actually, from verse 3 to verse 14, and the total came to something like 1,500 men. It's a small army.

And they had to get all the way across an 800 or 900 mile stretch of inhospitable desert country, on foot. Now, of course, the leaders of these various groups of travelers would have helped Ezra to organize the journey.

But it's clear that Ezra was himself the overall leader. Look at chapter 8, verse 15. I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava. That's still in Babylonia. Then verse 21.

[23 : 32] I proclaimed a fast there. Verse 24. Then I set apart 12 of the leading priests. Verse 25. I weighed out the silver and the gold and the vessels.

So this is active, hands-on leadership. And if Ezra had not had the qualities of an able leader, none of this could have happened. He must have been a man of calm, resolute temperament, not easily flustered, not easily angered, able to face each moment of difficulty as it arose.

And there must have been all sorts of problems arising amongst 1,500 men on a four-months-long desert trek. Which of us would offer to lead 1,500 men on a four-month foot slog through desert country in days before diesel and piped water and factor 50 sunblock?

He was a great man. I'm filled with admiration for him. But look at the way that he talks about this great journey. Look at chapter 7, verse 9. For on the first day of the first month, he began to go up. That means he left Babylonia. And on the first day of the fifth month, he came to Jerusalem. Now look at this phrase. For the good hand of his God was on him. Now isn't that telling?

[24 : 53] Well, it's telling the truth. Here is Ezra writing up his own story. And Ezra knows that the hand that writes history is not his hand. It's the good hand of God that has been graciously laid upon him.

It's in a verse like this that we can see the loving and lovely hand of God taking the frail hand of his servant into his own infinitely powerful hand and then making things happen.

So yes, it is true that Ezra had many qualities that he could trace his genealogy back to Aaron, a genealogy a thousand years long. It is true that he was a skilled scribe trained in the law of Moses. It is true that he was a man of courage with great powers of leadership. But his account of the success of his great trek across the desert is that the good hand of his God was on him.

That was why the project went forward. You'll see he used almost the same phrase back in verse 6 where he tells us that the reason for the king granting him all that he asked for was again that the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

[26 : 00] So we have here a great example of the conjunction of the kindly grace of God and the determined efforts of God's people. Both of those things are necessary for the Lord's work to prosper.

The people roll up their sleeves, get to work, acquire skills, exercise courage. But without the good hand of our God upon the work, nothing will prosper.

What happens is that people work and God works. But it's the good hand of God that lies behind any work that proves fruitful. Well, let's turn on now to verse 10 to see how the good hand of God on Ezra's life fitted him to be an instrument in God's purposes.

But also an example to all later generations of Bible teachers. In fact, this verse 10, we often use it at the Cornhill training course in the very first week of the course.

Those of you who've been to the course may remember, possibly on the first or second day of the course, to give our new students a glimpse of what we are hoping they will become. It's possibly the best short summary in the Bible of the work and the character of the Bible teacher.

[27 : 13] So let me read it again, 710. 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.

This has four component parts. First, it speaks of the determination or decision of Ezra's heart. He set his heart.

Or to be a bit more accurate, he had set his heart, which suggests that he had come to this decision early on in life. Perhaps like many young men, he'd spent a few years looking around at the different possibilities.

Now, he came from a priestly family, from Aaron's line, but a priest could well have other strings to his bow. So perhaps he asked the question, should I be a farmer or a merchant or a musician? How should I direct my energies? But there came a point when he set his heart on being a Bible teacher. Now, we all know of people who, quite early in life, set their hearts on a particular career or way of life.

[28 : 19] I guess that Andy Murray must have set his heart at the age of 12 or 13, perhaps even younger, on being a top tennis player. Or think of Nicola Benedetti, the violinist, who I think went at the age of 10 to the Yehudi Menuhin School down in England to learn the violin.

She was very young, but the rest is history. And I guess we all know people who have set their hearts on being a doctor or a policeman or a primary school teacher or whatever. Well, Ezra set his heart early on.

He doesn't tell us why he did. He doesn't tell us what influences might have been at work in him. Possibly, as a young man in Babylonia, he'd seen older men who were skillful and thorough teachers of the law of Moses.

And perhaps he was able to see just how effective their work was, how they were able to open up the teaching of Moses or other parts of the Bible, the books of Kings or Samuel or the Psalms.

And as he heard them, perhaps he felt the force of God's words in his own heart. And then he said to himself, this is the life for me. What better work could I possibly do?

[29 : 26] My life as a believer has been so nourished and strengthened by the words of God through the mouths of the teachers. So if I can do for others what my teachers have done for me, I'll be serving God's people in a most important way.

When I was about 15 or 16, I was in the Army Cadet Force at school. And they used to send us to wild places for exercises, usually in bad weather. And one of the things that we had to learn was to use an Army compass, one of those big old-fashioned heavy Army compasses.

And you had to learn to set your compass. Now that means that if visibility becomes difficult because of fog or snow coming down, you could still follow your compass setting.

And you could be sure that you were walking in a straight line across the hills rather than just going around in circles. So it kept you moving in the right direction, even in difficult circumstances.

Now in the same way, if a Bible teacher's heart is set on teaching the Bible, he will keep at it even in difficult circumstances.

[30 : 33] And it is such a strength to the life of a church if a Bible teacher keeps at it even when the wind is blowing in his face and life is tough. Now notice what Ezra said.

It was his heart. Not just his mind, but the control center of his whole life and determination. So there's the first mark of Ezra, the model Bible teacher.

He set his heart. That was a determination to learn to be a skillful dispenser of the nourishing words of God. Secondly, he set his heart to study the law of the Lord.

So he was a serious student. Now I know that many of us have listened to many sermons over the years.

At a rough guess, I've listened to at least 100 sermons a year for the last 40 years. That is at least 4,000 sermons. Some of you will have a higher mileage than that.

[31 : 36] When you've listened to many sermons, you know what a blessing it is to hear a good Bible sermon. It strengthens you deep inside. It feeds you, doesn't it?

It builds up your confidence that the Bible is more than a match for any of its detractors. Good Bible teaching makes you overflow with thanksgiving to God.

It humbles you and it exalts the Lord Jesus and it strengthens your resolve to live for him. But whenever you hear a really good Bible sermon or good Bible teaching in some other context, you know that the teacher has been studying.

You know that the sermon didn't fall out of a tree and land in his lap. You know that it's the fruit of painstaking, prayerful, hard work. Let me pass on a great little quotation which I think came down from James Philip from years ago.

The scriptures will not yield their treasures to chance inquiry. Isn't that a great saying? It's rather as though the Bible is like a great gold mine.

[32 : 44] It's full of the highest quality gold. But the gold will not come to the surface unless the miner digs deep and breaks sweat. Study is hard work.

I remember hearing Dick Lucas tell a story from his youth when he was a student for the ministry. I guess he would have been in his early 20s, just after the Second World War. And he and a number of friends of his were at a training conference for young pastors.

And one of the speakers was the principal of Oak Hill Theological College in London, which to this day is a fine training college. I think his name was Principal Wilkinson. Anyway, after the principal had given an address to the students, a good address, a number of them, including the youthful Dick Lucas, gathered round the principal for an informal discussion.

And one of them said to the principal, the principal was a mature man, well past the first flush of youth. And this student said to him, Principal Wilkinson, will you tell us what are the secrets of preaching really good sermons?

Yes, he said, I'll tell you. Then there was a pause. And he added two words. Hard work. The students, I think, went away rather deflated, rather crestfallen.

[33 : 58] They were hoping for something more exciting and less daunting. But Dick Lucas didn't forget that answer. And at the age of 90, he's still preaching. And he's still preaching so well at the age of 90 because he still studies.

He doesn't just pick up notes from 50 years ago. He does his fresh work. That's what the Bible teacher has to do. Now think of our lives in general. Does anything worthwhile happen without hard work?

Does a business or a school do well without hard work? Can a home run smoothly without application and effort? Of course not. So with the Bible teacher, study is necessary.

But as we'll see in a moment, it's not just study for the sake of the one who studies. Certainly the student himself benefits hugely. But the main purpose of the study is so that the teacher can pass on the treasures of the word of God to other people.

Now have a look again at our verse 10. And you'll see that Ezra had not only set his heart to study the law of the Lord, he had also set his heart to do it, to live it out in practice, to embody the Lord's teaching in his own life and lifestyle.

[35 : 12] So here's our third point. Ezra determined to live by the law of the Lord. So for example, if he was studying the book of Deuteronomy, one of the main themes in Deuteronomy is obedience or disobedience.

Will you obey the Lord or will you disobey? If he was studying Deuteronomy, he would have to keep asking himself how his own lifestyle measured up to the standards that Moses was teaching.

Now of course all Christians are under the loving orders of heaven to live lives according to the Bible's teaching. It's not as if the Bible teaches one standard for leaders and preachers and then a

different standard for others.

Not at all. The godly life is the same for all Christians. But teachers and preachers inevitably are somewhat more in the public eye than other Christians. So their lives are more open to inspection. So it's all the more important that leaders and preachers live lives that show a good example of godly living. So as to encourage other Christians to live in the same way. The apostle James famously says in his letter, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

[36 : 27] For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. So James is saying nobody's perfect, but anyone who aspires to be a Bible teacher must keep his life and his lifestyle under careful scrutiny, his own scrutiny.

Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 4, Watch your life and teaching closely. Not just your teaching, but your life. Life, conduct, lifestyle.

Now it's a very exacting standard, and it makes you wonder how anybody could aspire to be a Bible teacher when you read words like that. But we know that the Lord is able and is willing to help his servants in their frailty.

John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace, he was a very fine pastor and preacher in the 18th century, and he once wrote this, I'm not what I wish to be.

I'm not what I ought to be. I'm not what I hope to be. But by the grace of God, I'm not what I was. So he knew that perfection in this life was far beyond anybody's grasp, but he also knew that the grace of God was able to take a frail, sinful life and make of it a fruitful and useful example to other people.

[37 : 53] So friends, let's pray for our preachers and our teachers that although their lives will always be frail and sinful, they may increasingly show the marks of God's hand being upon them as they live out the standards that are taught in the Bible.

Then fourth, Ezra set his heart to study the law, to do the law, and to teach the Lord's statutes and rules in Israel. He knew that this hard work of study was not just for his benefit, it was all there to be passed on.

And this is why the Lord sent Ezra to Jerusalem in 458 BC. The temple had been rebuilt some 60 years previously, and the Israelites were using it and they were offering the appointed sacrifices. They were doing their best, but they needed a skillful teacher of the Bible to bring impetus to the work and to bring the power of the Lord's words into their lives. And this is what churches in every generation always need all the time.

Now some of you younger ones here inevitably will belong to different churches in years to come. You'll move away, you'll move to other parts of the country, perhaps other parts of the world.

[39 : 07] And many of you will become responsible senior members in your congregations, perhaps as elders or deacons or administrators or whatever. And discussions will arise in your church on the question, what does our church need in order to make progress?

Well, the church, the local church, may need a number of different things. It may need new accommodation, for example, a bigger and better building. It may need more funds. It may need better systems of caring for its elderly members.

It may need better programs for its young people. But there is one thing that it will always need every year. And that is, it will need Ezra's.

It will need a senior pastor, a senior leader who follows Ezra's pattern. And hopefully, others to work with that senior leader who will also follow in this great pattern.

So Ezra chapter 7, verse 10 shows us what every Christian congregation needs if it is to love and serve and follow the Lord. It needs those who have set their hearts to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

[40 : 25] Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Dear God, our Father, we know what a miracle of grace it is that you are able and willing to take the intractable raw material of a human life so full of frailty and sinfulness and to change it and to make it not perfect but the sort of life that can show an example of godliness and wise judgment and good and sound teaching.

So we do pray that you'll provide for our churches teachers and preachers and leaders who show integrity of life, commitment to careful and thorough going study of your word, courage in preaching and teaching it and the skill required so that there will be growth in confidence and growth above all

in the true knowledge of you, knowing who you are and what it means to love you and to be loved by you.

So have mercy upon your churches, we pray. Have mercy upon us and bring this blessing that we may continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.