

The Time to Pray

By David H. Roper

One of the hazards of teaching the Bible is that sooner or later you are going to come across a passage where the truth outruns your experience. In such a case, you can fake it, or you can bypass it, or you can teach it and tell people where you are. Frankly, that is the alternative that I have chosen this morning. I honestly have to say that I am going to be talking about an area of truth where I have a great deal of struggle. But it is truth, nonetheless, and we need to give heed to it. Therefore, I would like to teach it in that light.

I am comforted by the fact that Jesus points out it is entirely possible to teach truth to others, though you yourself have not yet entered into it. Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees of his day sat in Moses' seat, i.e. they had the authority that Moses had and taught the scriptures, and that the people were to do as the Pharisees said but not as they did. So it is possible to lead other people into truth that you yourself are still a little bit insecure in.

I want you to turn to the ninth chapter of Ezra, where we will look at something of the life and ministry of this scribe. Ezra's ministry took place during the post-Exilic period, i.e. the period after the Babylonian captivity when the exiles returned to Jerusalem. For the last two weeks we have talked about the lives and ministries of two men who lived during the Exilic period (606 to 536 B.C.) when the nation of Judah was taken off into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, in a series of invasions beginning in 606 and consummated by the invasion in 586, when the temple was destroyed and the city burned and left in ruins. The princes of Judah, the artisans, the professional people, and the leading individuals of the nation were taken off to Babylon where they remained until 536 B.C. We saw something of the ministry of Isaiah to these two men; though he lived 150 years before the Exile, he left behind a book that ministered to the needs of these people, by preparing them for that time and being a source of encouragement to them. Last week we looked at Daniel, who ministered to the Babylonian and Persian courts. Today we want to look at a post-Exilic ministry, that of Ezra the scribe.

Beginning with the period under Cyrus of Persia, the Judeans began to return to the land of Palestine. In 536 there was a decree that sent them back to rebuild the temple. However, there were a large number of Jews that remained behind in Babylon. We know that from both scripture and other writings. The Jews were highly successful, blended right in with the Babylonian culture, were able to do well financially, and were reluctant to leave the city. Someone has said it is a characteristic of Jews to go to a place and do quite well while they are there. That was true of the Jewish people in Babylon. They had become wealthy and were reluctant to go back to Jerusalem where there was nothing. The city had been destroyed and even the outlying regions were lying in ruins.

But some did return under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, Judean princes who were the political leaders, and Jeshua, the high priest. They went back to rebuild the temple. Their first action was to rebuild the altar and to reinstitute the sacrifices. This is always the place to begin when you return to the Lord. Go back and once more put the Lord in a place of centrality in your life, put him in the very center of your experience and worship him. That is what these repatriated Jews did; they worshiped him at the rebuilt altar.

They were hindered in their work of rebuilding the temple for some years. The Samaritans who had settled there tried to prevent them from rebuilding. But about 520 B.C., God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, whose ministry it was to encourage the Jews to rebuild. Some four years later the temple was completed. That history is given to us in the first six chapters of the book of Ezra, and I invite you to read those on your own.

There are several intervening years between chapters 6 and 7, which occurs about 458 B.C. Chapter 7 concerns the second return of the exiles to Jerusalem, this time under Ezra. Ezra brought a very small number of Judeans back; about 1,800 returned with him. His ministry was primarily that of teaching. The temple was rebuilt, sacrifices

were being carried out, and the priesthood had been reinstated and the priests were carrying out their duties. Now the great need in Jerusalem was for biblical teaching, and it was Ezra who carried out that function. Let's begin reading with chapter 7, verse 1, which will give us something of the background of Ezra's life and ministry.

Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah... [and there follows a long list of unpronounceable names I will not try to read]

Though Ezra is called the son of Seraiah, Seraiah is actually his great-grandfather. It is typical of Jewish genealogies in scripture to skip generations like this. Seraiah was a high priest who had the dubious distinction of being killed by Nebuchadnezzar, and his son was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. Ezra was the grandson of the priest taken into captivity, so he was born in exile. We are told by other writers that he was the high priest of the Jews living in Babylon. Jeshua ministered as a high priest in Jerusalem, while Ezra ministered to the people living in Babylon. Verse 6,

This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. And some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances to Israel.

There is a description here of the four-month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. This small group of exiles, 1,800 strong, carried some of the treasures of the Persian empire with them into Jerusalem, to be used for the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls. It was a difficult journey. They had to travel about 400 miles through the Fertile Crescent down into Jerusalem. They were unprotected, and were counting on the Lord to provide for their needs as they returned to the Land.

Along with the treasures from Babylon, Ezra carried with him the scriptures, what today would correspond to our Old Testament. By this time, all thirty-nine books of our Old Testament were completed. It was this body of scripture that Ezra took back with him, in order to teach the people. That was the great need in Jerusalem. Their worship was established, but they needed to be reminded again of the great truths of scripture, and that was Ezra's function. He is described, therefore, as a skilled scribe.

In verse 10 we are told that Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord; to practice, or do it; and to teach it. The term that is translated "study" here is a word that means to search diligently. He was given to that sort of inquiry into the Word. He was a student of scripture. Much later this term came over into Jewish practice as the word "midrash." There were schools of midrash that were given to biblical interpretation. They began with Ezra. He was the first in the line of the teachers of the midrash.

It is also said that he gave himself to practice it, which suggests that he was not only a student of scripture, he was a man under its authority. He did not study the scripture as an end in itself; he put himself under the scripture and was responsive to it.

We are told also that he taught its statutes and ordinances. Here the term is one that later was used as the basis of the term "talmud." The Talmud was the great work of the rabbis. After Christ, they gathered together all the commentaries and teachings about the Old Testament, and this collection came to be called the Talmud. Again, the Jews say that the Talmud had its origins with Ezra. He was the first Talmudic scholar, the first teacher in Israel. He gave himself to the study of scripture, and then to the exposition of that scripture to others. Ezra was a Bible teacher. In our experience today, he would be much like some of the great Bible teachers in the church, such as H.A. Ironside, G. Campbell Morgan, John R. W. Stott, or people of that stature.

The Jews, by tradition, also say that Ezra was the founder of the synagogue, the great teaching institution of Israel. He was the one who gathered together the books of the Old Testament, for by this time they all had been written, and from that point on, the Old Testament has remained in the same form. That was Ezra's contribution to his people. He was a teacher, a scribe.

The following chapters, through chapter 9, describe some of the circumstances of the journey to Jerusalem and the difficulties encountered. After a four-month journey, the group arrived in Jerusalem and handed over the treasures to the priests. Then, for four or five months, Ezra gave himself to teaching the Word. We are not told about that period; as a matter of fact, you would conclude from reading verse 1 of chapter 9 that there is no duration of time between chapters 8 and 9. But if you look at the chronology of this period, there are some months that intervene between the two chapters, and it was during this time that Ezra was engaged in a ministry of teaching. In verse 1 of chapter 9, we read,

Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

The reason Ezra was so concerned was that he saw the beginning of the vicious cycle which, again and again, had destroyed the nation. Max Dimont, the Jewish historian says that it was the pattern in Israel, to embrace the women of the Gentiles and, eventually, to embrace their idols. That was borne out, time and time again. In the book of Deuteronomy, they were prohibited from marrying Gentiles because God knew that the practice would result in the introduction into Israel of idolatry. When these women came into the nation, they would bring with them their idols, and thus pollute the entire nation, so that was prohibited. Ezra saw that this was beginning again. They did not learn their lesson in exile. The same sin that drove them into exile was being repeated, which explains Ezra's consternation. As is the custom of orientals at times of great distress, he expressed his grief by tearing his clothing and tearing some of the hair from his head (you can see that I've been in deep mourning this past week!), and he sat down appalled, until the evening sacrifice. You see, Ezra saw what was happening. He saw the same process that resulted in the exile. And he had reason to be concerned. Despite his teaching, despite the fact that he had called them back to the Word again and again, they were turning away. In verse 5, we read,

But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the Lord my God; and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day. But now for a brief moment grace had been shown from the Lord our God [referring here to the return from exile, the brief period of time that intervened from the first decree of Cyrus to Ezra's day], to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage."

This term, "a peg in His holy place," is very graphic. It is as though their existence in the Land is a mere peg, a nail driven into the wall from which you would hang some object. It is that sort of precarious, tenuous existence that the Jews had in the Land. They lived in an unwalled village, where any of the surrounding nations could have conquered them at will; they were totally dependent upon the Lord their God. It was as though they were a mere nail driven into a wall.

"For we are slaves [they were yet subject to the Persian empire]; yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended loving kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. [Again, he is speaking symbolically, for at this point there was no wall. It had been torn down. It was not until four years later that the wall was rebuilt] And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Thy commandments, which Thou hast commanded by Thy servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to take possession of it is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.' And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since Thou our God hast requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us an escaped remnant as this, shall we again break Thy commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Wouldst Thou not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? O Lord God of Israel, Thou art righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before Thee in our guilt, for no one can stand before Thee because of this."

That is a remarkable prayer. And, you will note in chapter 10 verses 1-5, the results are truly remarkable.

Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women, and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God, and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise! for this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act." Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.

Now that is a remarkable prayer. There are many things we can say about that prayer. The first and most obvious is that Ezra identified himself, at the very outset, with the people. He does not point a condemning finger at them and say, "You sinned." He says, "We sinned." He sees himself as one of them, and he needs the grace of God just as much as anyone else in the nation. He has no special claim or demand upon God. The second thing he does is to appeal to the grace of God for deliverance. He points out that the history of Israel can be characterized by rebellion and apostasy. The only reason that they have any existence at all is that God has been gracious and merciful. They have no special claim on his grace. That is true of their history from the beginning. The nation of Israel was an unfaithful nation. Of course, we are no better. We cannot sit in condemnation of them. We are just as prone to wander.

It always seems strange to hear people refer to the Jews as having some special genius for spiritual or religious things. If anything, they had a gift for apostasy, just as we do. They turned again and again from the Lord and from his Word. The wilderness experience was characterized by idolatry. They worshiped the stars and moon. Even during the twenty-five-year period of the conquest, when it appears that they were free from idolatry, Joshua had to say to them: "Put away your idols. Set aside the idols that your fathers worshiped on the other side of the river." Throughout the periods of the Judges and the monarchy, on down to the Exile, the people were idol worshipers. There were brief and superficial reformations or attempts at reform, but the people, almost without exception, were unfaithful. To this day, geologists are finding small statues of the fertility goddess, Astarte, scattered throughout all Palestine. God was gracious to them. He gave them his best out of his mercy and his grace, and not because they deserved it. And it is that to which Ezra appeals in his prayer. "Lord, we don't deserve anything. It was our sins that took us off into exile, and it wasn't our righteousness there that qualified us to come back." While they were in exile they forgot God. There was a believing remnant, but the majority of the people turned their backs on God.

It seems to me that this is the point of the whole book of Esther. The name of God is not mentioned once in that book. There is an almost obvious avoidance of that name. When Mordecai appeals to Esther to represent the nation to the king, he says, "If you don't do it, help will come from some other." But he doesn't say "God," because the people did not make room in their life for God; they ignored him. Esther tells us very clearly that God was at work providentially, to support and preserve the nation, but the people, as a whole, had not responded to God. Because of this, Ezra says: "We don't deserve anything. We're deserving of judgment, we were deserving of the exile; we're not deserving of the return. But here we are, God, doing it again! Be gracious to us again."

This is a strong appeal to the character of God to deal with them, not in justice, as Ezra could well have asked, but in love and mercy. There is much that could be said about this prayer, and I would like to expound on it. But this morning I want to take you in another direction and expound on the fact that he prayed. And repentance came as a result of his prayer. That is what struck me. He prayed; he did not teach. Now I am a teacher, by gift, office, and desire. And as I came to this point in the book of Ezra, I began to look between the lines a bit to see what was happening, and to see how I would have responded in that situation. My natural response would be to take out the scroll of Deuteronomy and begin to teach Deuteronomy 7, because that, I would think, was the great need. The people had turned away from the truth; they needed to hear the Word again. As we would say today, they needed to have the truth laid on them.

But that is not what Ezra did. Ezra did not teach, because he knew that was not what they needed. They already knew the truth, they had been exposed to the truth time and time again. Their great need was not for truth, but for obedience to the truth that they had. Therefore he gave himself to prayer, because it is prayer that moves the will. There is a time when we should no longer teach. As a matter of fact, any balanced ministry ought to be characterized by both aspects of ministry: the teaching of the Word, and individual and corporate prayer. One without the other is an imbalance. Here at PBC we are known as people who love and know the Bible, and many of you are Bible teachers. That is right and proper. But with it, would that we all were known also as men and women of prayer. Maybe you are. I wish I were, because I think that constitutes the balance of any ministry--not only the teaching of the Word, but prayer. The problem with me is that prayer often seems irrelevant. In a time of crisis it is much easier to take out the scroll and begin to teach someone, than to go someplace and pray. But it is prayer that moves the will. It is prayer, dependence upon God, that causes people to respond to the truth that they know.

Last week Carolyn asked me if I would pray with Joshua before he went to school. He had some sort of crisis coming up in his kindergarten class (I don't remember exactly what. Our family crises sort of all run together, and I find it hard to get them all sorted out.). I went into the family room, where he was watching Bullwinkle on television, and pulled up a chair beside him. "Hey, Josh, Mom tells me you've got something going on today. Let's pray about it." Joshua gave me a wry look and said, "Aw, Dad, I haven't even had breakfast yet." I couldn't help but think that that frequently is my response to situations. There seem to be so many other more relevant things to do than pray.

And yet this was the balance of Ezra's life. He was not only a man of the Word; he was a man of prayer, and his prayer reflects that fact. He knew when there was a time to pray. This was no new experience to him; it was the pattern of his life. I am convinced that the reason for the failure of the Jewish nation and the decline of Judaism was that the people failed to give heed to this principle. I love the Jewish people, but from the standpoint of the truth, the nation from that point on went into deep decline, ultimately to reject their own Messiah, the Lord of glory. I firmly believe it is because they did not understand the need to rely upon the Spirit of God to quicken their hearts to respond to the truth. They did not understand prayer. They called their temple a house of prayer, but they did not pray as Ezra prayed. And they did not pray as we should pray.

If you know anything about the history of this period, the decline from this point until Jesus' day was steep. Shortly after Ezra's ministry, about a hundred years later, they fell under the control of the Greek empire, under Alexander the Great. Later, this empire was divided among his generals, and the Jews fell under the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires. The most devastating influence in the history of Israel was that of the Seleucids. The Greeks tried to introduce Greek culture and thought into Jerusalem. They built gymnasiums and stadiums. The books of

the Maccabees tell us that during this period the priests would cut their services short on the sabbath day so they could get to the gymnasium in time for the events. That has a kind of modern ring to it!

In reaction to this, the scribes began to take a stand on the scriptures. This was the beginning of the Hasidic movement, which was the conservative, orthodox element of Judaism. Recently, there was a very interesting article in the National Geographic on the Hasidim. Now that movement began shortly after the influence of the Greeks. The Hasidim gave themselves over to preserving and teaching the scriptures. This group later became the scribes of Jesus' day. They were the lawyers, i.e. they interpreted the Old Testament Law; they were basically Bible teachers. They were called masters or doctors of the Law. The people called them "lord," the Aramaic word is "rabbi" or "rabboni". They were revered, looked up to, respected, admired, and listened to, because they were the teachers of their day. The priests were involved in other things and, almost without exception, tended to be the more liberal element in Judaism. But the scribes were not. They were true to the Word. You need to realize that these people believed in the inspiration of scripture. They fully accepted its authority and inerrancy. They would never tamper with the text of the Old Testament. If there was a mistake, and occasionally there were scribal errors, they would never tamper with the actual text, but write the correction in the margin, they believed that it was inspired, even the minutia of the text. They loved the Word and spent hours studying and teaching it. It is out of these teachings, commentaries on every book in the Old Testament, that the body of literature, later called the Talmud, came into being.

This group had tremendous authority in Israel. By Jesus' time they were not called the scribes or sopherim; they were called tannaim, which means "repeater," because they repeated what the other scribes had said about the Law. It was said of Jesus that his authority was not like the scribes, because he did not repeat anybody; he just taught the Old Testament. His was a different kind of authority. He spoke of himself, because the Father taught him. The scribes were the revered teachers of their day. They knew and loved the Word, but they were empty, fruitless, barren, dead. That is why Jesus said they were like whitewashed sepulchers. They looked good on the outside, but inside they were decadent. They believed all the right things, but inside they were living a lie. There was nothing there.

In John 5:39 Jesus said to them, "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me that you may have life." You see, the Word had become an end in itself. If someone would stand up here and say there is no life in the Word, you would throw him out as a heretic. But that is exactly what Jesus is saying. If the Word is an end in itself, and you search the scriptures because you think there is life in them, you are mistaken. The fact is, there is no life in them unless they lead you to Christ. Unless you are willing to submit to the Word, and put yourself under its authority and allow it to lead you to Jesus Christ, for that is the purpose of the Word, there is no sense in studying it. I am convinced that the Jews missed that entire process, and the Word came to be an end in itself, instead of a means to the end of knowing Christ. They did not give heed to this principle which we see in the life of Ezra. His life was balanced. He not only taught the Word, but he was dependent upon the Spirit of God to open hearts. He was a man of prayer.

We at Peninsula Bible Church are known as people of the Word. It is my prayer both for myself and for you that we may be people who pray--that we might be a house of prayer. Our confidence is in the Word, and it can become just as sterile, dead, lifeless, and academic, as it was under the Pharisaism of Jesus' time. God forbid that that should happen to any of us.

Father, how instructive this man's life is to us. As is so often the case with your Word, it penetrates the areas that we would like to have remain unknown, unrevealed. We thank you this morning for instructing us through this man's life. We ask that we would be men and women, not only of the Word, but also of prayer, who clearly have our priorities straight and who see the necessity of reliance upon you and upon your Spirit to lead us into all truth. Spare us, Lord, from any tendency to become students and lovers of the Bible alone, instead of seeing the Word as the means to the end of knowing and loving you. Help us to be free to know you in that way. We ask in Christ's