**EZRA’S DEVOTION**

*Ezra 7:1-10 (key 7:10)*

“For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”

The world is in a spiritual crisis. Believers and unbelievers alike, are pulled further and further away from God. Is there anything we can do to help even one person turn to God? Ezra was an ordinary man like anyone of us. Yet, in a similar time of spiritual crisis, God choose Ezra and use him as a good bible teacher. Through this one bible teacher, God turned the hearts of a whole nation back to him. Then how did Ezra become such a spiritually powerful bible teacher? It was because Ezra had **devoted himself** to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord. I sincerely pray that God may use Ezra’s as an example, to encourage our hearts so we too want to become good bible teachers like him. I Also pray, for God to raise many good bible teachers like Ezra among us, so they can be used to turn students’ hearts back to God. Amen.

Look at verse 1a. It starts with the phrase: “After these things…” What were these things? It all started with the Israelites in Judah and Jerusalem when they turned their hearts from God. As we heard from shepherd Jacob last week, the Israelites worshipped idols, sacrificed their children to foreign gods and stubbornly refused to seek or listen to God. So in 586 BC God sent the Babylonians to judge His people. The Babylonians completely destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They not only broke down the city walls and burned down the city but also demolished the temple of God. They caused utter and complete destruction. And the Israelites who were not killed by the Babylonian forces were taken captive to Babylon. Only a handful of people was left behind to stay in the rubble. However, forty seven years later (in 539 BC) Cyrus the king of Persia conquered the Babylonian Empire. God amazingly moved his heart to send the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem; specifically to rebuild the temple that once stood proudly in the city. After 20 challenging years since arriving back in Jerusalem, the Israelites successfully rebuilt and rededicated the temple. (In 516BC, exactly 70 years after its destruction). These events is written down for us in Ezra chapters 1-6.

But it did not take long for the Israelites in Jerusalem to once again go astray. In the course of time the people of Israel, **including the priests and the Levites**, did not keep themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices. (9:1) Instead, they disobeyed God by taking some of their unbelieving daughters and sons as wives and husbands for themselves. So a spiritual crisis arose, yet again, as these unbelieving wives and husbands caused the Israelites to worship foreign gods. What compounded the crisis, was the fact that the leaders and officials in Israel led the way in this unfaithfulness (9:2). Within 58 years of rebuilding the temple, the Israelites was yet again in a spiritual crisis.

How did God help his people? Look again at verses 1a and also verse 6a. After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia (1a)…..Ezra came up from Babylon (6a). During this spiritual crisis God sent one man, called Ezra, to help the Israelites in Jerusalem. According to verses 1-5, Ezra was a 16th generation descendant of Aaron; the first chief priest in Israel. Which meant that Ezra was not only a Levite but also a priest in the house of God. This identity as a priest, was very important to Ezra. Look at verses 1-5. Why would he name each of his 15 ancestors by name? It was because, Ezra deeply understood that as a priest, God had had a very special purpose for his life just as with each of his ancestors. And that purpose, was to be a bible teacher. Look at verse 6b. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses. God’s purpose for Ezra the priest, was to be a bible teacher. This is as significant for us as it was for Ezra. Peter declared to all believers (change slide): “You are a chosen people, **a royal priesthood,** a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Pet 2:9) This is our spiritual identity in Christ. We are not mere students or employees or a brother or sister to others. In Christ, we too form part of God’s royal priesthood, just like Ezra. Then as fellow priests in Jesus, what should be our purpose in life be? Like Ezra, we too must be bible teachers. When we compare student’s spiritual condition with that of the Israelites during Ezra’s time, we will find that there is not much difference. Students today are mixed up in all kinds of worldly things that pulls them away from God. However, throughout God’s history we will see that whenever there is a spiritual crisis, God always sends one or more bible teachers to solve the problem. Ezra was no different. When there was a spiritual crisis in Jerusalem, God sent him as a bible teacher. The truth is, God is aware of the spiritual crisis on our campus. And He wants send bible teachers to address this **spiritual crisis.**

But what exactly does it mean to be a good bible teacher? We can find the answer when we closely observe Ezra’s life. Look again at verse 6b. We tend to think that to be a good bible teacher, we only need to know many bible verses and be able to explain them to others. But this is not true! If we carefully observe verse six, we will see that Ezra believed that the Law of Moses, was something which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The God of Israel is the awesome living God. He is the great “I am” who exists without any beginning or end. He is the Almighty God and everything that has life has its origins in Him. A good bible teacher is, therefore, someone who believes that the bible was given to us by this God. For us to study it with great humility and devotion, until we can answer the fundamental questions about life. **So often we are tempted to think that to be a good bible teacher we merely have to memorise many bible verses. But it is not about memorising God’s word. It is about our attitude towards the word of God. And whether we truly believe that it was given to us by God- so that we can deeply study and accept it in our hearts. Once we do this, we are well on our way to become a good bible teacher.**

Secondly, a good bible teacher is a man who puts God’s word into practice. Look at verses 8-9a. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. 9He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month. The 1450 km journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was very dangerous. Not only because of the long distance but also due to the risk of being attacked by enemies and bandits. According to Ezra 8:22, Ezra travelled with large quantities of gold, silver and other valuable instruments that were destined for the temple of God. In addition, the exiles also brought along their children and possessions. It was therefore crucial for their safety that a group of soldiers and horsemen went along to protect them. Yet, Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen, because he had told the king that God protects everyone who looks to him. (8:22) Indeed, this was a bold statement to make. And we will all agree that indeed, God protects everyone who looks to him. Yet does it also apply when we travel a 1450km on foot with large amounts of gold, silver, our children and loved ones as well as all our possessions? Only a person who puts God’s word into practice can say “yes it does!” and actually undertake the journey without any human protection. Ezra was such a man. Before leaving for Jerusalem, he proclaimed a fast and humbled himself before God. (8:21). He petitioned God about their predicament (8:23). Then with only God as his protection, he set out from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and **safely** arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month. Here we can see that Ezra was not only well versed in the Law of Moses, but also **acted by faith** upon what he learned about God in the bible. A good bible teacher is therefore someone who does not only fear God and respects his word. But also someone who puts into practice what he or she has learned from the bible; even in the most life threatening situations. What good is it to merely know the word without the word generating faith in our hearts to act upon! And what good is it to teach others about God’s word if we ourselves do not have faith to act upon it! If this is the kind of bible teacher that we are, then I am sorry to say but we are all hypocrites. And our teaching will do more harm than good. May God help us to become bible teachers who practice what we preach. Amen!

You may ask yourselves; what is the spiritual significance of practicing what we preach? Can’t I just share the word? Why do we have to also practice it? Look again at verse 9b. Ezra safely arrived in Jerusalem, **for the gracious hand of his God was on him.** This means that when Ezra travelled to Jerusalem by faith in God’s word, he practically experienced the power of God. Because amazingly, in the absence of any soldiers or horsemen to protect them, Ezra arrived safely in Jerusalem. It could only be because God protected them. It was then through experiencing God personally in his life that Ezra gained a deep and practical understanding of God’s word. God’s word therefore was no longer just theory or something nice to say to others. Instead, God’s word became alive in his heart! Then when he taught others, he did not offer them the dry and boring words of God. Instead, he preached the living word of God sincerely from his heart. What a great bible teacher Ezra must have been!

Then what about us? Do you think it is possible for you and me to become good bible teachers like Ezra? Yes, it is possible. In fact, that is what God has called all of us to be. But how? We must learn from Ezra. Look at verse 10. Can we please read today’s key verse together? For Ezra had devoted **himself** to the study and observance of **the Law of the Lord**, and to teaching its decrees and laws **in Israel**. Of first importance, we can see that Ezra’s attitude to the word of God was one of devotion. The ESV describes Ezra to have set his heart on the bible. There are so many things in the world on which we can set our hearts. But we should know, whatever we set our hearts on will occupy our hearts of first importance. If we set our hearts on money, then we will only think about how to make and spend money. If we set our hearts on our education, then we will only think about our school work night and day. Or if we set our hearts on gaining people’s recognition then we will think only about how we can make other people to accept us. Whatever we set our heart on, will consume our thoughts and behaviour. That is why, a good bible teacher sets his hearts on the Bible. He reads the bible and thinks about the bible as the most important thing in his life.

Then how can we know if someone sets his heart on the bible? Look again at verse 10. It says that Ezra devoted himself **firstly** to **the study** of the bible. A good bible teacher is someone who firstly studies the bible himself. To study something is to read with the intent to learn and understand. When Ezra came to the bible, he had many questions about God, about life and even about himself. **So he earnestly studied** God’s word to find the answers to these questions. He would make bible study questions for himself on a particular passage in the bible. Then he carefully observed each verse in relation to the other verses in that same passage. Sometimes he even looked at other passages which amplified what he was studying. Then he wrote down his answers and notes in his bible study book. And so Ezra spent a lot of time studying God’s word – until he became well versed in it. To study God’s word in this way is the basic requirement to become a good bible teacher who God can use to help others. Before we even think of teaching others, we must first teach ourselves through diligent and sincere bible study. We must sincerely prepare bible study notes before attending bible study. We must also write sincere bible testimonies. Not because our shepherds or the missionaries or the members of UBF says we must. But because, we personally want to please our God who called each one of us in Christ to be a good bible teacher. Amen!

Then after Ezra studied the bible, what did he do? Look again at verse 10. It says he studied and then **observed** the word of God. As we have seen earlier in the passage, when Ezra travelled from Babylon to Jerusalem he put God’s word into practice. He not only said that God’s eyes are on those who look to him, but he practiced it by traveling without any soldiers or horsemen to protect him. In this way God’s word sank from his head and became alive in his heart. Then when he taught others, he did not offer them the dry and boring words of God. Instead, he preached the life giving words of God straight from his inmost being. And brought all the exiles in Jerusalem back to God. So we can see, that to have spiritual authority and power to move a sinner’s heart, it is essential to put God’s word in practice. Without doing so, we will cause more harm than good through our bible studies.

Look again at verse 10. After studying and observing God’s word, what did Ezra do? Yes, only after Ezra devoted his heart to study and put God’s word in practice that he taught God’s words to others in Israel. It is easy to think that Ezra must have been a good bible teacher because he was a priest and descendant of Aaron the chief priest. But this is not true. Ezra was an ordinary man just like me and the other men in this room. What pleased God about Ezra, was his personal devotion to word of God. God could use Ezra to help the exiles in Jerusalem, not because he was a priest. But because Ezra made a personal decision to set his heart on studying and putting into practice the word of God. This caused him to become a good bible teacher and shepherd for his people. Moreover, through this one man, God turned the hearts of a nation back to God.

In conclusion: The spiritual condition today is no different from the Israelites in Jerusalem during Ezra’s time. There are so many things that pull students away from God and that makes them unfaithful to him. It was for this reason, that God established the UBF ministry 56 years ago, as a bible centred ministry focused on preaching God’s word to students. But sometimes we can shift our focus too easily on preaching to others instead of first studying and obeying the bible personally in our lives. If the tree steps to becoming a useful bible teacher is to first study God’s word, then put into practice and only then teach it – what will happen if we skip steps one and two and go straight to step three by teaching? We will never have the confidence to teach the bible, saying that teaching the bible is not for me. But this is not true. God has called each one of us to become a bible teacher. Only, before we can teach others we first need to grow in God’s through personal study and observance. Other may be tempted to skip step one and two yet confidently teach God’s word in spiritual ignorance. They will only cause harm to those they teach and to themselves. And if as a ministry we fail to devote ourselves to study and put God’s word into practice, it won’t take long for all members and shepherds to disappear. So to encourage each one of us, God has given Ezra 10:7 as our ministry’s key verse for 2018. Can we please read it again? “For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” Through this verse we learned that to become a good bible teacher who God can use to help others we must:

1. Devote ourselves or set our hearts on the word of God.
2. Then we must study God’s word with a desire to learn and discover who God is, what He has done and what he wants us to do. Therefore let us diligently and faithfully prepare bible study notes and write sincere bible testimonies.
3. Then we must put God’s word into practice so that it can become alive in our hearts.
4. Only then go out to teach others, by God’s leading and in obedience to His purpose for our lives. If only one of us follow in Ezra’s footsteps will God turn the hearts of many students on this campus to himself through that person.

May God raise many good bible teachers from among our brothers and sisters. May God also help the local shepherds and missionaries to first study God’s word and observe it personally, before teaching it to others. And lastly, may God use each one of us as a good bible teacher like Ezra, to bring many university students on this campus back to Him. Amen!