THE LIFE THAT GOD BLESSES

Ezra 7:1-28

By

Steven J. Cole

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Ezra Lesson 7

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Over thirty years ago, I read a sermon that has impacted my life as much or more than any of the thousands of sermons that I have read. It is titled, "Expecting the Lord's Blessing," by the late Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee (in Twelve Baskets Full [Hong Kong Church Book Room], 2:48-64). That sermon, based on the Lord's feeding of the 5,000, has affected the entire direction and motivation of my personal life and my ministry.

Nee hammers home a simple but profound truth: "Everything in our service for the Lord is dependent on His blessing" (p. 48). He observes that in the feeding of the 5,000, the supply in hand was totally inadequate to meet the demand, and yet the demand was met. He says, "The meeting of need is not dependent on the supply in hand, but on the blessing of the Lord resting on the supply" (ibid.). That leads Nee to ask a question that I want you to ponder seriously: "Do we really prize the Lord's blessing?" (p. 49). Do you really want and seek God's blessing on your personal life, your family, your service for the Lord, and on His church?

We all know the right answer to that question. Few would be so brazen as to say, "No, I don't want God's blessing. I'd rather try to make my own blessings apart from God!" But I don't want you to give a knee-jerk "yes" answer just because it is the obviously correct answer. I want you to think about the implications of the question before you answer.

There are a number of men in Scripture whom God blessed: Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and David are prominent examples. But Ezra is also a man whom God blessed, even though he is not so well known as those other men are. We first meet him in chapter 7 of the book that bears his name. There is a 57-58 year gap between the events in chapters 6 and 7. The temple had been rebuilt under the ministries of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, aided by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The exiles that had returned to Israel during that first wave were either dead or very old by now. They had settled into the land and, as we will see, in many cases
had begun to blend together with the pagans of the land. The walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt, leaving the city vulnerable to attack. God raised up Ezra and Nehemiah to bring spiritual reform to His people.

Both men were born in Babylon and had close connections with King Artaxerxes. No doubt they both enjoyed comfortable living conditions there. But both men were burdened with the low spiritual state of the exiles that had returned to the land. Both men were willing to give up their comfortable situations in Babylon and endure the hardship and hassles to bring reform to God’s people. But how could they accomplish this overwhelming task?

The answer occurs in a phrase that first occurs three times in our chapter, and then five times in the rest of Ezra and Nehemiah: God’s hand was on these men (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh. 2:8, 18). God’s hand is another way of saying God’s blessing. God blessed these two men and their labors for Him. If we want His blessing or hand to rest on us, we would do well to study their lives. We could add more factors, but limiting ourselves to Ezra 7, we learn that...

To have God’s hand of blessing on us, we must study and obey His Word, with a view to teaching others and glorifying God for everything.

That theme is stated in Ezra 7:10, which explains why “the good hand of his God was upon him” (7:9): “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.” The connection between Ezra and God’s Word is repeated no less than eight times (7:6, 10, 11, 12, 14, 21, 25, and 26)! There is a definite correlation between our commitment to know and obey God’s Word and His hand of blessing being upon us.

1. All of us should seek God’s blessing on our lives above all else.

A. God’s blessing is the only blessing that counts both for time and for eternity.

If you have God’s blessing on your life, you may die a painful martyr’s death in your twenties or you may live happily into your nineties. You may live in a physically impaired body like Joni
Eareckson Tada or in a robust and healthy body. But either way, you will be irrepressibly joyous and successful in the true sense of the word if God’s hand of blessing rests on you.

The world’s blessings promise happiness but deliver ultimate emptiness and pain. Yet most people, and sadly, even many professing Christians, live for the world’s blessings. Last Sunday night, Marla and I had what was for us a first-time experience: we spent the night in Las Vegas. It was on the way to where we were going, the right distance for the driving time that we had, and the rooms were cheap. They hope to make up from your gambling what they discount on the price of the room. In our case they lost, but it was obvious that they were making out big time on everyone else!

It was amazing to see thousands of people sitting in the casinos of our hotel and in every hotel we walked by, playing the machines, hoping to strike it rich. I thought, “This isn’t just a freak occurrence! This happens all over this city every day and night of every week of every year!” Little old grannies and young people and foreigners were all feeding the machines in the hopes of hitting the jackpot. I wanted to scream, “What do you think you will gain if you win?” “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

God’s blessing is the only blessing that counts both for time and eternity. If you gain and die with the world’s blessings, but lack God’s blessing, woe to you! You are poor indeed! If you live and die with God’s blessings, even though you lack what the world calls “blessing,” you are truly blessed! As John Newton wrote, “Fading is the world’s best pleasure, all its boasted pomp and show; Solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion’s children know” (“Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken,” stanza 4).

B. God’s blessing flows through family lines.

Verses 1-5 trace Ezra’s family lineage back through 16 forefathers to Aaron the chief priest, brother of Moses. There are a number of gaps in the list. Seraiah (7:1) was the high priest at the time of Nebuchadnezzar, who executed him about 130 years before (2 Kings 25:18-21). Thus Ezra was a great or great-great grandson of Seraiah. The point of the genealogy is to show that Ezra was qualified as a priest to teach God’s law. Also, it “prepares
us to meet a man of considerable importance” (Derek Kidner, Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 62).

You may be thinking: “If God’s blessing flows through family lines, that’s not fair! What if I came from a godless family? What hope is there for me to experience God’s blessing?”

The answer is, first, never ask God to be fair with you! That’s a bad prayer! You want mercy, not fairness. But, second, there is great hope for you, because you can be the start of a long heritage of God’s blessing on your children and grandchildren. You can’t do anything about your ancestors, but you can do some things that will positively affect your descendants. As Psalm 128:1 promises, “How blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.” It goes on to show how the wife, children, and grandchildren of the man who fears the Lord will be blessed. No matter how rotten your upbringing, if you will follow the Lord, you will be blessed and you also will be the source of great blessing to your children and grandchildren, perhaps for many generations.

This genealogy also should serve as a warning to us who have been blessed with godly parents. Aaron had some sons who were consecrated as priests, but they did not obey the Lord and He struck them dead with fire from heaven (Lev. 10:1-3). Aaron also had a grandson, Phinehas (Ezra 7:5), who took bold action for God so that a plague was stopped among the Israelites. Israel had fallen into the insidious plot of Balaam, who counseled the Midianite king to seduce Israel into idolatry through intermarriage. An Israeliite man brazenly had brought a Midianite woman into his tent in the sight of all Israel. Phinehas took a spear, went into the tent, and pierced them both through, probably while they were in the act of immorality!

As a result of Phinehas’ bold action, the Lord told Moses that He was giving to Phinehas His covenant of peace, and then added, “and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God” (Num. 25:13). Phinehas’ bold obedience resulted in blessing on his descendants for hundreds of years, right down to Ezra!

The lesson for us who have godly parents is, we can either disobey the Lord and deprive our descendants of God’s blessing,
or we can be bold in obeying the Lord and bring His blessing on our descendants. But the point stands in Scripture, that God’s blessing flows through family lines. We never obey or sin in isolation. That sobering thought should motivate us to follow the Lord.

C. God’s blessing refers to God’s doing above and beyond what human effort can produce or expect.

Just before He fed the 5,000, Jesus asked Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?” John adds, “This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (John 6:5-6). Philip does a quick calculation and answers, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.” Philip and the disciples didn’t have 200 denarii, which was about 200 days’ wages. Even if they could scrape together that much, it would not have been sufficient for everyone to receive just a little!

But Jesus could do far beyond what human calculations and effort could ever hope to do. The result was that the people all ate “as much as they wanted” (John 6:11), and they even gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers, a full basket for each disciple!

God’s hand of blessing on Ezra is seen in that this pagan king “granted him all he requested” (7:6). The king’s grant is stated in the letter that he gave to Ezra (7:12-26, written in Aramaic). To summarize, the king granted five things: (1) He authorized Ezra to go to Jerusalem and insure that God’s law was both taught and observed (7:14, 25). (2) He provided a generous grant to buy supplies and temple vessels for the temple worship (7:15-20). (3) He commanded the treasurers in the provinces to supplement anything else that Ezra needed, up to 3¾ tons of silver, 600 bushels of wheat, 600 gallons of wine, 600 gallons of olive oil, and salt without limit (7:21-22). (4) He exempted all temple officials and workers from taxation (7:24). And, (5) he authorized Ezra to set up a judicial system to see that these laws were obeyed and that violators were properly punished (7:25-26).

That is no doubt far more than Ezra dreamed that a pagan king would grant to him. From the king’s perspective, it was wise and cost-effective policy. He had already had trouble with Egypt revolting. He figured that if he granted political and religious self-
governance to the Jews, they would live contentedly under his reign. Also, his superstitions motivated him: He didn’t want to incur the wrath of the God of heaven (7:23). By providing generously for the people who followed this God to worship Him as He prescribed, Artaxerxes hoped that this God would be nice to him and his sons. But God used the king’s superstitions and political strategies to bless His people through His servant Ezra.

Verse 27 makes it clear that it was none other than God who put it into the king’s heart to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. But Ezra still had to go and ask for it (7:6, Kidner, p. 62). Sometimes the Bible compresses a lot into a passing phrase (“the king granted him all he requested,” 7:6)! To go before such a powerful monarch and his counselors and powerful princes (7:28) and ask for such extravagant provisions for a subject people whom the king easily could have exterminated, took some courage! The source of Ezra’s strength is stated: “Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me” (7:28).

Thus we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and yet at the same time, it is God who is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13). God’s blessing involves and requires our working, and yet it goes far beyond anything that we can do. I covet for my life, for my children and grandchildren, and for my ministry that God would work far beyond my effort, ability, or expectation. I hope that each of you will do the same. All of us should seek His blessing on our lives. But, how does that blessing come?

2. **God’s blessings come to those who study and obey His Word.**

I realize that Ezra was specially gifted for the role of teaching God’s Word, and that not all are so gifted. But whether you are gifted to teach in a formal way or not, you are nonetheless required to learn God’s Word so that you know how He wants you to live. Every Christian wants to live in a manner pleasing to the Lord. To do so, you must grow in your understanding of His Word.

Concerning Ezra’s emphasis on God’s Law, Derek Kidner (p. 62) says, “indeed it was he, more than any other man, who stamped Israel with its lasting character as the people of a book.” Kidner
also observes about verse 6 that it does not share the doubts of modern critics about the antiquity (Moses) or the authority (the Lord) of the law, “nor does it see Ezra as a reviser or compiler. He is concerned with it as something given” (p. 62, italics his). Modern critics sit in judgment on God’s Word. The proper order is to allow the Word to sit in judgment on us!

Bible scholars believe that Ezra wrote the great Psalm 119, which extols God’s Word for 176 acrostic verses. Ezra 7:6 says that he was “skilled in the law of Moses.” The word “skilled” means “swift” or “ready,” implying that Ezra was quick to understand and put together the various parts of God’s Word. While giftedness has something to do with it, skill also requires effort and practice. Ezra had “set his heart to study the law of the Lord” (7:10). It was a deliberate decision on his part to spend time in God’s Word.

Even if you are so gifted, studying God’s Word will not happen automatically and spontaneously. You have to discipline yourself to do it, and the minute you let up, other things will crowd out the Word. We all lead busy lives. We all have the same number of hours in our day. We all must make decisions about how we spend those hours. Will I read the paper, watch TV, play computer games, or get into God’s Word?

When you do spend time in the Word, make sure that your bottom line is obedience. Ezra “set his heart” not only to study God’s Word, but also “to practice it” (7:10). It is nonsense to say that you want God’s blessing while you are knowingly living in disobedience to His Word. The goal of Bible study is not to fill our heads with facts, although facts are important. It is to change our hearts and lives into conformity to Jesus Christ. Note, by the way, that Artaxerxes trusted Ezra’s character and integrity to the extent that he gave him enormous material resources and told him to use it for the temple. If anything was left, he told him to do with it according to the will of his God (7:18)! Ezra’s obedience was obvious to this pagan king. Our obedience should be obvious to those in the world who know us.

3. The study and obedience of God’s Word are the foundation for teaching it to others.
Again, not everyone is gifted to teach in a public setting. But whatever you have gleaned from God’s Word and incorporated into your daily life ought to be passed on to others whom God puts in your circle of influence. If you teach others what you know in your head but do not practice in your life, you become like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day—hypocrites. This does not mean that you must be perfect before you teach God’s Word, but it does call for the integrity of admitting your shortcomings and the honest effort to apply it to yourself.

One of the occupational hazards of preaching God’s Word each week is that I can easily fall into the trap of studying the Word so that I can tell everyone else how they should live, but not applying it to myself. I often think of what John Calvin said, “It would be better for the preacher to break his neck going into the pulpit than for him not to be the first to follow God” (cited by J. I. Packer, in a sermon in Anaheim, California, 3/5/86). Or, as Charles Spurgeon put it, “If any man’s life at home is unworthy, he should go several miles away before he stands up to preach, and then, when he stands up, he should say nothing” (The Soul Winner [Eerdmans], p. 174).

Thus we all should seek God’s blessing above all else. His blessings come to the ones who study and obey His Word. Such study and obedience are the foundation for imparting the Word to others, whether personally or in public settings. Finally,

4. The final end of God’s blessing should be our glorifying God for His abundant mercy.

After Ezra cites the incredible letter from King Artaxerxes, he breaks forth in praise to God (7:27-28): “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart ... and has extended lovingkindness to me.... Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me....” Ezra didn’t take credit for devoting himself to studying God’s Word or for his bold presentation to the king. He gave all the credit to God for His abundant mercy. Any good that appears in anyone’s heart, whether in a believer’s heart or in the heart of a pagan king, comes from God who deserves all the glory. When God blesses us, our response should be to bless God for His great mercy in using such imperfect vessels as we are.
Conclusion

It is remarkable that God is pleased to be known in the Bible as the God of Jacob (Ps. 46:7, 10). Jacob was a man with many shortcomings and faults. He connived his brother out of the birthright. He bargained with God at Bethel, promising to follow Him if He would take care of him and bring him back safely to the land (Gen. 28:20-21). After his many years of trying to out-maneuver Laban, he returned to the land full of fear about what Esau might do to him. The night before he was to meet Esau, the Lord met him and wrestled with him, dislocating his hip so that Jacob always walked with a limp after the encounter.

But before dawn, the angel of God said to Jacob, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” Jacob gave this great reply, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26). The Lord did bless Jacob, the conniver, by changing his name to Israel, one who has wrestled with God and prevailed. The greatness of Jacob was not related to the strengths and abilities of Jacob. It was due to God’s hand of blessing resting on Jacob.

I hope that you will join Jacob and me in praying, “God, I won’t let You go until You bless me.” His blessing comes to those who study and obey His Word with a view to imparting what they have learned to others, all to the glory of God. May the hand of the Lord our God be upon you for His name’s sake!

Discussion Questions

1. What does “God’s blessing” mean? Why is it crucial to define this concept biblically?

2. Is it selfish to seek God’s blessing? How do His blessing on me and His ultimate glory fit together?

3. Are all Christians required to be students of God’s Word? What about illiterate people or those who aren’t inclined toward book learning?

4. In what sense are those who are not gifted as teachers nonetheless required to teach others?