

Ezra Seeks God's Law

Printed Text • Ezra 7:1–10, 23–26

Devotional Reading • 2 Timothy 3:14–17

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND the historical and spiritual significance of Ezra's return to Jerusalem, VALUE how God works through various types of people to bring His plan to fruition, and THANK local leaders and teachers of God's Word.

In Focus

"Pastor, our church is gone," cried Deacon Jenkins. "The hurricane swept everything away; there's nothing left but the foundation." Pastor Joel looked around. He saw what Deacon Jenkins saw: piles of rubble to the south of the building, furniture soaked by hammering rains, and plans for the church's 100th-anniversary celebration put on an indefinite pause.

"Then, Deacon, let's get ready to rebuild. And I'm not talking about the building," said Pastor Joel. "I'm talking about rebuilding the faith of our community. We've got to build up everyone's faith in the goodness of God, despite what we see around us." Deacon Jenkins could hardly see how. "Well, the school on Pine Hill was hardly touched," began Pastor Joel. "Let's see if we can have services there. We'll use the classrooms for Sunday School and have Wednesday Bible class and Friday prayer meeting there, too. But first, let's see if we can organize a community-wide prayer of thanksgiving in the school's auditorium soon. We must thank God that no lives were lost. One day, Deacon Jenkins, we'll not only have a church on this site, but a school where we can study God's Word and learn how to live it out in our lives."

"That's a pretty big vision," Deacon Jenkins observed.

"Yes, and we worship a pretty big God," Pastor Joel proclaimed.

Churches, communities, and families can experience losses that seem insurmountable to overcome. Name a Bible verse, spiritual song, or a sermon that offered encouragement, strength, and hope during a difficult life experience.

Keep In Mind

"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." (Ezra 7:10, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Prepared (Ezra 7:10) *kun* (Heb.) — Established, firmly fixed, made ready

B. Seek (v. 10) *darash* (Heb.) — To ask or inquire of someone or something; to diligently study

Say It Correctly

Artaxerxes. ARE-tah-ZERK-zees

Zerubbabel. Zeh-ROO-bah-bell

Nethinims. NEH-thin-eems

KJV

Ezra 7:1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

2 The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub,

3 The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth,

4 The son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki,

5 The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

23 Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?

24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not.

26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

NLT

Ezra 7:1 Many years later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, there was a man named Ezra. He was the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah,

2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub,

3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth,

4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki,

5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the high priest.

6 This Ezra was a scribe who was well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given to the people of Israel. He came up to Jerusalem from Babylon, and the king gave him everything he asked for, because the gracious hand of the Lord his God was on him.

7 Some of the people of Israel, as well as some of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants, traveled up to Jerusalem with him in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes' reign.

8 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in August of that year.

9 He had arranged to leave Babylon on April 8, the first day of the new year, and he arrived at Jerusalem on August 4, for the gracious hand of his God was on him.

10 This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the Lord and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel.

23 Be careful to provide whatever the God of heaven demands for his Temple, for why should we risk bringing God's anger against the realm of the king and his sons?

24 I also decree that no priest, Levite, singer, gatekeeper, Temple servant, or other worker in this Temple of God will be required to pay tribute, customs, or tolls of any kind.'

25 "And you, Ezra, are to use the wisdom your God has given you to appoint magistrates and judges who know your God's laws to govern all the people in the province west of the Euphrates River. Teach the law to anyone who does not know it.

26 Anyone who refuses to obey the law of your God and the law of the king will be punished immediately, either by death, banishment, confiscation of goods, or imprisonment."

The People, Places, and Times

Rebuilding Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah both chronicle the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return from exile. The book of Ezra starts with those returning under the leadership of Zerubbabel with the patronage of King Cyrus the Great (Ezra 1:5–7). Their first order of business was to rebuild the altar at the site of the ruined Temple (3:3). Soon after, they began rebuilding the Temple itself (3:8). Outside agitators, however, kept them from this work for the rest of Cyrus' reign (4:5). During the reign of the next king, Darius, the prophets Haggai and Zachariah (whose books contain their calls to work) encouraged the people to work on the Temple again (5:1–2). Agitators again tried to stop them, but Zerubbabel insisted Cyrus had sanctioned the rebuilding efforts (5:17). Darius was convinced and again put imperial funds and patronage behind rebuilding the Temple (6:14). It was completed in time to celebrate the Passover that year (6:15, 19).

Having completed the altar and the Temple, the work in Jerusalem turned to the walls. In reign of Darius' successor, Xerxes, little could be accomplished again because of Israel's enemies (Ezra 4:6). When Artaxerxes succeeded Xerxes, however, they began to build the walls again. Leaders in the other people groups surrounding Israel warned Artaxerxes that if Jerusalem's walls were restored, there would surely be rebellion (vv. 12–16). Artaxerxes did not want to take that chance, and the halfbuilt walls were destroyed (v. 23). This is where Nehemiah's account begins. He is distraught about Jerusalem's lack of walls and convinces the king to send him with men and money to see to the protection of the Israelite's renewed capital city (Nehemiah 2:2–8). Through many setbacks and much opposition, Nehemiah leads the people to finish rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. Once that is accomplished, Ezra himself reads the Law to the assembled people, and they rededicate themselves to honoring the full commands of God (Nehemiah 8:2–3).

Background

The Babylonian captivity of the people of Israel ended with the defeat of the Babylonian Empire by King Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC. Cyrus allowed many conquered people to return to their homelands and to their forms of worship. This was a strategic move by the Persian Empire meant to gain loyalty from formerly exiled peoples, and it established imperial outposts that buffered the empire's capital from invaders. In 538 BC, a group of exiles, led by Zerubbabel, returned to Jerusalem. They entered a demolished city and started to put the pieces of their city and their heritage back together. This group rebuilt the Temple. A second major group arrived from Babylon in 458 BC, led by Ezra. With the backing of the next Persian king, Artaxerxes, Ezra set out to return the people to the laws found in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Ezra was a contemporary of Nehemiah who led the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem. Ezra's focus was on establishing the Torah as the governing laws that would inform how this re-emerging city would conduct their daily lives.

What are some reasons people give for returning to places of devastation and loss and deciding to rebuild?

At-A-Glance

1. Godly Heritage (Ezra 7:1–5)
2. Personal Commitment (vv. 6–10)
3. The Favor of God and Man (vv. 23–26)

In Depth

1. Godly Heritage (Ezra 7:1–5)

Ezra had a priestly pedigree. He could fill in the names on his family tree all the way down to its roots in Aaron, the first high priest. Handed down to him would have been the history, religious instructions, and cultural practices of his people. He learned of the Promised Land and of God's promise to return the exiled to that land.

His heritage inspired him, and his occupation as a scribe educated him. He could reproduce texts, those of the Babylonians as well as the narratives of his own people. Being a scribe called for more than merely copying words. A scribe also had to have a profound understanding of the words he copied and become qualified to interpret and teach what was written. Ezra was just such a scribe and became an important link in the long line of individuals who preserved the history and religious life of a people and the works and ways of their God. What are the benefits and responsibilities of having a godly heritage?

2. Personal Commitment (vv. 6–10)

Though Ezra came from an impressive lineage and had a noteworthy occupation, he possessed something that was far more significant. Ezra had an abiding love for God's Word. He was an ardent student of the Torah and wanted to bring to his people a greater understanding of and obedience to the teachings of God's Law. It wasn't enough that the Temple had been rebuilt. From his studies, Ezra realized that the hearts of his people needed to return to God's Word.

Ezra's passion for God's Word rallied the support of others to join him in the journey. These individuals would be part of the leadership team that would conduct worship and praise to God. The risks inherent in the four-month journey did not deter the travelers, especially Ezra. Ezra desired that the Word of God would once again flow from the Temple and into the lives of God's people so they would love, know, and follow the ways of God. In what ways could your occupation be used to spread God's Word?

3. The Favor of God and Man (vv. 23–26)

God honored the desire of Ezra's heart, giving him favor with Artaxerxes, the king. A royal decree helped to secure safe passage. It also ordered the leaders of the provinces that Ezra would travel through to supply all of Ezra's material needs. The king exhibited a holy reverence for the laws of God and the person who taught them, Ezra. The king also noticed that God's laws gave Ezra wisdom, making him a person of integrity. Such a leader would govern well and make just laws. Ezra's devotion to studying, obeying, and teaching God's Word made him a person with godly influence.

How might your knowledge of Scripture influence your community, nation, or the world?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why did the king show such generous favor to Ezra (Ezra 7:6)?

2. Name the individuals who would work in the Temple. Why did the king exempt them from paying taxes (Ezra 7:24)?

Discuss the Meaning

Before the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon, their nation was a sovereign theocracy, the Law of God was the law of the land. On Ezra's return to his homeland, it was a small portion of the Persian Empire. While Ezra was charged with restoring the laws of the forebearers in his ancestral home, he also had a mandate to institute the rules of the Persian Empire (Ezra 7:26).

1. Did Ezra face any conflicts because of this dual responsibility? Explain.
2. What are some challenges that people of faith can face if their faith and the laws of the land are in conflict?

Liberating Lesson

The First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, was one of the first congregations formed by the enslaved people brought to America from Africa. This church dates back to 1773, its members witnessed the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, it was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and it organized the first Sunday School for African Americans in 1826. In 1930, it had more than 2,000 members. Its commitment to its location and its people has been an inspiration to all who have visited this National Historic Landmark.

How is your family or church recording its history and its godly legacy in your community? In what ways can the history of your family or church be an inspiration to your community and nation?

Application for Activation

Having a working knowledge of biblical themes, narratives, and history is crucial to understanding world history, and more specifically an understanding of the people who founded our country. The American countryside is dotted with the names of places pulled from the Bible. The motivations of early European and African American settlers were often based on whom they identified with in biblical stories. What are some ways a church can help to enhance the biblical literacy of the children and adults in its congregation? How can congregations make biblical literacy available outside the doors of their churches?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ezra 7:1–10, 23–26

1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, 2 The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub,

Ezra 7 picks up after the returning exiles under Zerubbabel's leadership have rebuilt the altar and the Temple. After that, Ezra knows it is time to reestablish clear teachings from God's Law. He decides to leave Babylon (now the capital of the Persian Empire), and King Artaxerxes gives him permission to go with anyone who wishes to go with him, to appoint leadership positions within Israel, and also gives him funds to pay for sacrifices to God at the new Temple in Jerusalem.

This is the reader's first introduction to Ezra himself, and the first thing we learn about him is his impressive priestly heritage. Ezra begins his family tree with the last priestly ancestor who had lived in Israel. Each of Ezra's grandfathers and great-grandfathers listed here served as high priests in Israel before the Exile. They were men who helped guide Israel back to God during the reforms of Hezekiah's and Josiah's reigns.

Hilkiah (v. 1) was the high priest who found the copy of the Law in the Temple that launched Josiah's heartfelt reforms. This is likely the same text that Ezra would read before the people during his own reforms. This Hilkiah was also likely the father of the famous prophet Jeremiah, who wept for his nation's neglect of God. Shallum is possibly the husband of the prophetess Huldah, who foresaw that Israel would fall after the time of Josiah.

3 The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, 4 The son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, 5 The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

Between Meraioth, son of Zerariah and Azariah, who fathers Amariah, Ezra seems to skip back six generations. This is made easier by the fact that the names Amariah, Ahitub, Zadok, and Azariah are all repeated in this section of the family list (1 Chronicles 6:7–14). Just as families do today, Ezra's family named their children after previous generations. Even though modern genealogists would never make a practice of leaving out any generations, the Hebrew language allowed the words "son" and "father" to mean "descendant" or "ancestor" as freely as they mean relations within one generation (cf. 2 Samuel 9:7).

Ezra is the likely author of both this genealogy and the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6, and he makes different records for different literary purposes. In 1 Chronicles, he is making a full list of all the members of the priestly families. This means he must include every generation. Here in Ezra 7, he is introducing himself and giving his priestly pedigree. His audience does not need all 24 generations between him and Aaron to know Ezra is a trustworthy source. He only recounts those famous for reforms in the late Israelite monarchy, and those famous for establishing correct worship at Sinai and in the Promised Land.

Phinehas is famous for stopping a plague that was ravishing Israel because of their disobedience (Numbers 25:7–13). This deed is even remembered in holy song (Psalm 106:30). As reward for Phinehas' zeal, God promised that his line would forever be priests. A thousand years later, Ezra is part of the fulfillment of that promise.

Eleazar is Aaron's third son, but after God kills the older sons, Nadab and Abihu, for making an improper sacrifice, Eleazar rises to be Aaron's heir (Leviticus 10). He helps purify Israel after the rebellion of the sons of Korah (Numbers 16) and continues to work closely with his uncle, Moses, to lead the people during their forty years in the wilderness. God appoints Eleazar to work with Joshua to divide the land of Canaan fairly among the Israelites (Numbers 34:17).

All of Ezra's famous priestly ancestry of course goes back to Aaron, the first priest of Yahweh, who stood alongside Moses as he confronted Pharaoh, guided the people out of Israel, led the people in worship at Mt. Sinai, and ministered to them throughout the forty years in the wilderness. Aaron, like his brother Moses, did not get to enter the Promised Land, but is forever remembered as one of the most influential leaders in Israelite history.

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

Ezra is a scribe (Heb. safar, saw-FAR), a word with roots meaning to number or recount. Scribes would be charged with keeping exact records of censuses, tallies, or events, and with reporting on the same. To be a scribe of the Law meant that Ezra could be trusted to flawlessly reproduce a Torah manuscript. Such an extremely intimate knowledge of the text meant he could also help explain and teach the meaning of the Law to others. Ezra is further described as a "ready" (Heb. mahir, maw-HERE) scribe, meaning he was quick and skillful in his role, working efficiently and effectively with his deep knowledge of the Torah.

Ezra comments on the hand of the Lord being upon him or upon Nehemiah many times as he recounts their resettlement of Jerusalem (Ezra 8:18, 31; Nehemiah 2:8, 18). When the hand of the Lord is on them, they are successful in all they do. Ezra explains to the king why God sets His hand on people: "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him" (from Ezra 8:22). Those who seek (Heb. baqash, baw-KOSH) for something are not always physically searching their query, but are requesting or asking for it to be where they are, often as a matter of life and death. The Lord places His almighty hand on those who are asking to receive God's presence.

Often in Scripture, the hand of the Lord being on someone means they are being punished (Exodus 9:3; Deuteronomy 2:15). This is perhaps why sometimes Ezra clarifies that it is the "good hand" of the Lord at work (see verse 9 below). The hand of God is at all times supremely powerful, and will not be put off. Whether we are joyful about our divine work or not, the hand of the Lord guides us, pushing His followers into action and clearing obstacles from their path.

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

Ezra made the 900-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem with a large company of people, as was usual for the day. The road between major capitals would be watched by brigands, so large groups provided protection. Additionally, travel would be faster with fewer stops at oases or settlements along the way, and large groups can carry more supplies with them.

In this caravan were common folk ("some of the children of Israel") and many Temple workers. All priests were Levites (from the tribe of Levi), but not all Levites were priests. Some Levites' jobs were more in the administration of the Temple, guarding the gates, or caring for Temple furnishings. Nethinims (from Heb. natan, naw-TON, "to give") were a servant class "given" to service at the

Temple. This word is only used in Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, implying it was a position only established after the return from exile (when Ezra wrote those books).

Persian records tell us Artaxerxes began his rule in the year 465 BC by our modern calendar, so the seventh year of his reign would be 458 BC. However, sometimes nations in the ancient Near East counted a king's first year as his "ascension year" and did not start numbering the years of his reign until the second year. If this tabulation includes an ascension year, Ezra's journey was in 457 BC.

8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

"The first day of the first month" here does not refer to January 1 on our calendar. The "first month" as reckoned by the Jewish calendar is called Nisan and corresponds to our March or April. By combining surviving information about Artaxerxes' reign and the year Ezra notes (v. 7), scholars can deduce that the dates of Ezra's travels were April 8, 458 (or 457 as noted above) BC through August 4 of the same year.

Figuring out dates on ancient calendars can easily get confusing or boring. However, these specific dates can help the modern reader remember that our sacred texts are historical documents. The Bible is not based on a single revelation from a single self-proclaimed prophet. It is the cultural history of God's people, written down over the course of a thousand years, from the Exodus from Egypt to the return from Babylon. The various books of Scripture were written down because the events they relate really took place at a particular time and in a particular place. This particular event of Ezra departing from Babylon took place on April 8, 458 BC.

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Ezra is so revered in Jewish history that he is considered a second Moses for the people of Israel, since he introduced the Law to them again as they reentered the Promised Land, just as Moses had instructed the people before they entered the Promised Land for the first time. He is not celebrated solely because of his parentage, nor because of his high position in the Persian court. He does not do all he does for Israel simply because he figured it would be a good idea. He is deeply moved in his soul to establish God's holy Law again at the newly reconstructed Temple because he is prepared (Heb. kun, KOON), meaning firmly fixed in his mind, to do three things: to seek God's Law, to do it, and to teach it to God's people.

To "seek" (Heb. darash, daw-ROSH) the Lord's Law means to study it diligently, to inquire of it how one should act. It is a close synonym to baqash, discussed above. In fact, the two words are often paired (Psalm 105:4; Jeremiah 29:13) to intensify the notion of a person doggedly seeking out what they wish to find. The thing Ezra seeks with such passion is the will of God as revealed in His Law. When he finds it, he will also "do" it (Heb. 'ashah, aw-SHAW). It is no good simply to know God's Word; we must act on it. James, the half-brother of Jesus, makes this clear when he says, "be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (James 1:22). Ezra is not content to merely study the Word. Nor is he content to simply do it himself. Ezra has also firmly fixed his mind to "teach" (Heb. lamad, law-MOD) the Law to the people. Ezra knows, as all Christians should know, that God's way is not just a nice way for him to follow, but the best way for anyone to follow. Today, we ought not to be content to let people practice whatever spirituality they wish as long as we are allowed to practice Christianity in peace. We know Jesus is the Way—the only Way, and the best Way. Like Ezra, we should teach others the Way of God, with gentleness and wisdom.

23 Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons? 24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

Here we read the words of King Artaxerxes to Ezra in a letter he gave to the scribe granting him permission to return to Jerusalem with any Israelites who wished to join him, and granting him large sums of money to beautify the Temple and make sacrifices once he got there. Artaxerxes' interest in sacrificing in Jerusalem is a clear indication of the differences between Babylonia and Persia. While the Babylonians saw conquering other nations as a sign of their gods conquering the other nation's gods (or God), the Persians were happy to let cultural groups within their empire practice their native religions. The Persians hoped this would foster good relations between the Persian government and the foreign gods, or at least between the government and the foreign people they now ruled.

Babylonian policy of dealing with conquered nations and cultures is seen in the book of Daniel. Babylonians took the wealthiest and the aristocrats (who would have the most means and inclination to rebel) from their newly conquered territory and forced them to assimilate into Babylonian culture. This is what happens to Daniel and his three friends and why it is so noteworthy that they refuse to eat the king's food (Daniel 1). The rest of the population, however, was left alone in their original land with either no leadership or with Babylonian leadership enforcing Babylonian culture and religion. The Babylonians saw their ability to conquer another nation as proof that their god was superior, and so they discouraged worship of the gods of conquered territories, including Israel's Yahweh.

The Persian Empire worked differently. They preferred to conquer a nation and when their people were in charge, allow the conquered nations to be fairly unchanged. Persia still required tribute and military support from the new territory, but they allowed local religions to continue. This made the people less inclined to insurrection and helped the Persian nation flourish for many more years than the Babylonians did. The polytheism of the Persians figured it was better to assimilate and not anger the gods of foreign nations rather than try to conquer them and their people. Even though Artaxerxes did not honor or follow Yahweh, he did not want to anger Him against his country, asking "Why should there be wrath?" between them.

To show how he was humoring the Israelites and their religion, the king did not exact taxes from those who worked at the Temple. Neither "toll, tribute, or custom" would be taken from them (v. 24). Artaxerxes wanted the Israelites to be happy by practicing their own ancestral religion so that they would be less likely to rise up against him. He did this with tax breaks, just as a modern politician would bargain to obtain tax breaks for their special interest groups.

25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not.

As was Persian practice, they let conquered nations retain much of their usual command structure. The Persian king had hand-selected both Ezra and Nehemiah to be their regents in Israel, so he feels safe in letting these formerly suppressed people select their own leadership. Artaxerxes also stipulates that these new magistrates and judges should be those who "know the laws of thy God," even going so far as to order Ezra to "teach ye them that know them not." While many Jewish citizens were living in Babylon, it is possible King Artaxerxes familiarized himself with Jewish Law and found it to be a good set of instructions for a people group. If he did not have a favorable opinion of Moses' Law code, he would have ordered that the Jews adopt the Persian laws even when in their old land.

It is also possible Artaxerxes did not know the Law of Moses himself, but only knew Ezra for the wise teacher he was. If that was the case, Artaxerxes' entire outlook on Jewish Law was based on the upstanding conduct of one of his administrators. Christians must remember this possibility today. As the saying goes, "You might be the only Bible your neighbor ever reads."

Readers must remember that Artaxerxes himself does not practice Judaism. He has not given himself to belief in Yahweh. Still, sometimes even pagans following their own pagan laws and traditions can be used to the glory of God. He who makes "all things work together for good to them that love Him" (Romans 8:28) protects and prospers His people by all means, even the actions of unbelievers.

26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

Artaxerxes stipulates that the Israelites should abide not only by "the law of thy God" but also by "the law of the king" as well. This is where problems are bound to arise. God's laws are not human laws. What do we do when our country's laws are at odds with Scripture? Daniel and his friends show us two examples of how to hold onto God's Law without compromising. First, they refuse to eat the king's food, but negotiate an alternative that is pleasing all around. Second, in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's gold idol, the friends boldly proclaim they will follow God's Law even unto death. Their dedication and salvation from the fiery furnace deeply effect the foreign king, forcing him to recognize the power of God.

The king of Persia lets the Israelites practice their religion, even to the point of executions. Some empires did not give that right to their client states. This is why the Jewish leaders needed Pontius Pilate to order Jesus' execution rather than just stoning Him by themselves when they accused Him of blasphemy. King Artaxerxes trusts Ezra enough that he will even allow Israel a full exercise of their own laws. Again we see the benefit of Christians being citizens of excellent repute, especially among non-Christians. Daniel and his friends would not have had the chances the Babylonian king gave them if they had been rabble-rousers. Today, whether they be our boss, landlady, or elected official, Christians will be given more latitude from the unbelievers who command us if they know us to be people of good, honest, and wise character.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God's Law Is Perfect
(Psalm 19)

TUESDAY

Meditate Continuously on the Law
(Joshua 1:1-9)

WEDNESDAY

Obey God's Commandments
(1 John 3:18-24)

THURSDAY

Teach Me Your Statues
(Psalm 119:1-16)

FRIDAY

How I Love Your Law!
(Psalm 119:97-112)

SATURDAY

The King's Letter to Ezra
(Ezra 7:11-22)

SUNDAY

Ezra Leads the Exiles Home
(Ezra 7:1-10, 23-26)