

Revival of Faith
Ezra 7:1-10, 25-28**I . Greeting:**

Hello everyone. I am Naoki Yoshimura from Nagoya. I used to work in Tokyo as a pastor for 10 years, and I once gave sermon at Grace City in 2010 and 2016. I also have participated in Grace City Gospel Choirs and badminton activities. I remember that in 2010 worshiping was still in event Hall at Ginza. In badminton activity, pastor won the others with a nasty smash (despite his serious imagine as a pastor). Though I was not very good at badminton, it's a good memory to see everyone play sports with a lot of fun.

Have you ever experienced that God guide you with situations or non-Christian people around you? A big incident that led me to church was my brother's change. My younger brother's personality was like rootless grass (it seems like a floating grass that does not has root on the ground) in the past. He left hometown after graduating from high school and went to a vocational school in Shizuoka. However, he quit the school because it didn't fit him. Later he worked in a pub, then turned to a host club, but since he is a serious person in heart, and in such an occupation there were many lies in important situations, he felt stumbling and returned home. Then one day I heard that he decided to go to a monastery for being a volunteer to distribute food and clothing in a slum in Baltimore, USA. I thought it was introduced by my mother who is a Catholic. At that time, I talked to my brother via a call, got to know that he had started reading the Bible, and until then he was the type that "acting ahead of thinking" and "never doing deep thinking", but I heard him say "I found the pillar in my life." It was such an impact to me. At that time, I was not a "rootless grass" yet, but was going through the time that absent from college and immersed in different activities, and struggling with being not sure about what I should do in the future. Inspired by my brother's words, and invited by a college missionary, I started to go to church. Eventually, I became a pastor, however my younger brother discovered his interest in welfare work by the volunteering and restarted his study in Japan Welfare University in Aichi Prefecture, and then worked as a wonderful home medical device salesperson. I'm praying for my brother who impacted on me would also know the gospel. I also thank God for guiding me with the words of my brother, so that I have my lifework now.

Background and abstract:

Today I'd like to talk about Ezra 7. Nearly 60 years have passed since the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem (515 BC). During this time, there was an accusation against the Jews of the Xerxes period (4: 6), and there was the history of Esther in the same period. Ezra 7-8 specifically describes the journey of Ezra's party back to homeland. In the first half of the book of Ezra, it focuses on Zerubbabel, Haggai, Zechariah, etc., but later Ezra became the new focus. Ezra played a role in the reformation of religion and the revival of faith.

On the return of Ezra, Artaxerxes the king of Persia offered also protection and cooperation more than just permission. It seems like "it is a different person from the attitude in Chapter 4" (he got an accusation and ordered to cease the reconstruction of the temple. 4: 7-24), but God's guidance can work in people's heart.

II .Ezra's Mission (verses 1-10)

1 Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra 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 Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest

It is said that there is a gap of nearly 60 years between chapter 7 and the previous chapter 6. The temple was completed in 515 BC, and the seventh year (verse 8) of King Artaxerxes, it is said to be around 458 BC. The name "Ezra" means "God helps". And in verses 1-5, it is Ezra's family tree, who revived the faith. Dating back to Aaron, the originator priest, it counted 16 generations, and showed Ezra's legitimacy as a Reformer. For example, Hilkiah, the high priest of third generation before him, rediscovered the book of the Law at the temple and was a major contributor to King Josiah's reformation.

6 this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

7 And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people

of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. 8 And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him.

In verse 6 there is an introduction of Ezra. He was born in the foreign land of Babylon and returned to the promised land. It's written that he is a "scribe", skilled and familiar with God's laws. Ezra has earnestly studied and obeyed the Law and is said to be the root of the "scribes" (the "scribes" that often appear in the New Testament as enemies of Jesus, it was a word of good meaning as enthusiastic about faith.)

"The Law of Moses" refers to the teachings of the Bible, and it is said that in this era, or shortly thereafter, the Five Books of Moses in the Old Testament was written and spoken. Ezra received the special blessing of God and was given an important role (responsibility and privileges) by King Artaxerxes.

From verse 7 it's about those who accompanied Ezra. The titles include priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. Details are written in Chapter 8, it seems that he spent about four months traveled thousands and hundreds kilometers from Babylon back to Jerusalem with a considerable number of people.

10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Verse 10 talks about the mission given to him. What Ezra had "set his heart," for, that is, firmly determined "to study, to do and to teach the Law of the Lord". This is,

- 1) studying and learning the Word,
- 2) living in the Word,
- 3) teaching it to others.

The reformation of religion, the revival of faith that based on the Word was his lifework (A mission to work on over the life). Here it doesn't say that King Artaxerxes trusted Ezra specially and gave him the privilege of delegation, but it says, "the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. (verse 6), "which indicates that God had special protection and guidance. It's reasonable that Ezra was the person God initiated to revive faith for the returning Jews, but it is certainly incredible for the pagan king to fully support it. It can only be said to be the work of God's hand.

(Application 1) The relationship and order of the three processes, "study", "do", and "teach", are important here. If the "teaching" is not accompanied by doing, the "teaching" becomes shallow and dishonest, and "doing" requires accurate learning and understanding of the Word. On the other hand, the vision that always leads to "doing" and "teaching" is important so that "studying = learning of the Word" is practical, not just something on desk. "Learning the Word" → "Living in the Word" → "Teaching and telling". Let's confirm this order again. Are you on this cycle as a disciple of Lord? The cycle in which people grow based on the Word is very important.

(Application 2) As stated, "had set his heart," Ezra understood that the revival of the Jewish people's faith based on this Word was the mission that Lord gave him. God gives each person a task that should be his or her own vision. That is exactly the life work (mission of life) that Lord gives to that person. Lord sometimes moves and guides people and things in pagan societies to let you do his work. For you, what is the mission that Lord give you for the gospel of Tokyo?

III. King's Order (verses 11-26)

From here on, verses 12-26 are the contents of the king's letter. From verse 12, it is written in the official language of that time, Aramaic (at that time Hebrew was the language for religious practice). The beginning of the letter in verse 12 reads, "Artaxerxes, king of kings," meaning the king reigning above the kings of the nations. The king of Assyria and Babylon, who ruled the whole area, also used it. The king though did not fully understand the true God, he said, "Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven," and acknowledged that Ezra had authority from Lord. The king's orders were extremely favorable to the Israelites. To briefly explain its contents, they were

- ① Religious investigation (verse 14)
- ② Babylon's offering to the Temple of Jerusalem (verses 15-20).
- ③ Orders to local officials. Supply of food and necessities and tax exemption for those who serve the

temple (verses 21-24).

④ Appointment of administrative leaders (verses 25-26).

Let's look at the contents one by one.

① the first purpose was religious investigation. It said, "The law of your God in your hand the Law of your God, which is in your hand, (verse 14)," and it was an investigation of whether religious things were being done correctly. Persian policy was to govern while recognizing the independence and unique culture of each ethnic group. From the Persian side, it seemed that he aimed for stable control through Ezra.

② It is also surprising that the offering was made from Persia, but the motive of this offering was political to gain the Jewish favor and to stably govern the region. Nevertheless, the king is like a totally different person, surprisingly friendly, compared to chapter 4, which issued an order to stop reconstructing the temple. You can see the prayers of Ezra and how hard it was to earn trust. For those who read the Bible often, here may catch your interest "God of Jerusalem" in verse 19, which Jews do not usually use. Jerusalem is a city name or a place name, and the expressions of "God of Israel" and "God of Abraham" are common. It is indeed proof that this letter is from the pagan king himself.

③ In addition, though Jews crossed the Euphrates River and returned to Jerusalem, there were orders to the treasurers across the river. 3,400 kilograms (100 talents) of silver, 23,000 liters (100 cols) of wheat, 2,300 liters (100 bates) of wine and oil, and unlimited salt (although the amount that can be carried will be limited) of supplies has been authorized. Though we don't know how much the king was afraid of God's wrath, it's said, "lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. (verse 23).", and Persia was facing various troubles. It struggled with Greek resistance and revolts in Egypt. Jew, where Jerusalem is located, served as an important stop and supply point for its expedition to Greece and Egypt. The Persian emphasis on the region was also a necessity of historical necessity. But even that was in the hands of God, the ruler of history.

(Application 3) Humans always have problems, no matter how proud we are. For humans, the controllable part of life is very small. Even recently, the new coronavirus has been rampant and has caused a big impact on the preparation of various events. Who could predict this one year ago? At that time, even the kings of the Great Empire, who had a great influence on the entire Middle East world, were no different in that they were threatened by threats outside their control. King Artaxerxes feared without knowing God (verse 23, "Wrath is"), but we know the Lord God well, so we can recognize our limits, and come to God. Today, let's also recognize our own limitations, commit that we are not God, and confess if there is any idol in our minds (They may be praise from others, favors from the opposite sex, friends and family, or successful career), and come to God. Fears of God counteract fears of our lives. And even today, God accepted you as a child just by the grace of Christ's cross and make you worth loving.

④ The "appointment of government leaders" is also in today's scripture, so let's take a look at the scripture again.

25 "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. 26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment."

The king has designated Ezra as Secretary-General of the Jewish region. That is, to grant the appointment of administrative leaders and judges in the region, and to enforce punishment for violators of the law. These were very large authorities. It seems that king of Persia was thinking of maintaining Jewish peace through Ezra and other leaders. And this has greatly helped Ezra revive faith here. God works in our human history. And Ezra did it "according to the wisdom of God", that is, not by his own power, but by God's power.

IV. Thanks to Ezra's God (verse 27-28)

27 Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, 28 and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand

of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

From here, it is written in Hebrew and the word "we (first person)" indicates that it is based on Ezra's own records. Ezra was grateful to the Lord God. The reason for this gratitude is, firstly, that God worked on the heart of king of Persia to receive such favorable treatment, and secondly, that his work could start smoothly." Glorify the temple of the Lord", and "glorify; Baaal in Hebrew" is a word meaning "decorate", and Isaiah 60: 7, 9, 13, etc. is translated as "beautify." This Isaiah chapter 60 is a prophecy of revival. The proper religion in the temple, respect for God's laws, and reverence of the Lord God, that is, the revival of faith with substantive content, will be "to beautify the temple of the Lord."

The "God of our Fathers" refers to the God who have made a covenant with patriarchs of Israel like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc. and the kings of Israel like David, etc. It expressed Ezra's conviction that exactly the covenant god working in history has guided this. "Grace / favor" is a Hebrew word called Hesed, which is an important word to express love based on God's covenant. The word is not a temporary mood favor, but a firm foundation and guaranteed favor. Here we can see that the King's letter, and the covenant of God's grace to Israel behind it, is a revival of Ezra's faith based on such unwavering support.

(Application 4) In various difficulties and pagan cultures, we need to progress in trusting in the Lord's hand, which works on everything and the hearts of all people. What is your task at hand right now? Let's focus on the grace and guidance of the Lord's covenant, which never shakes, and expect God to work on the situation.

Isaiah 43: 1-4

1 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
4 Because you are precious in my eyes,
and honored, and I love you,
I give men in return for you,
peoples in exchange for your life.