

Pursuing God: The Word and Hand of God

Ezra 7

MPS The hand of God rests on the life centered on the Word of God to serve God's purpose for His glory.

OBJ Every person can understand a life centered on God's Word by **three distinct characteristics**.

INTRO A. W. Tozer is quoted for saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." This quote by A. W. Tozer is often cited to help one think about what it most important in life. Because what is most important is what centers your whole life. This morning I ask you, "What does your life revolve around?" **Is God at the center of your life? How do you know? Do you see and experience Him daily in your life, abiding with Him as Jesus taught?**

Today in our "Pursuing God" series we look a life that is marked by the Word and Hand of God. And to see this life points us to look up and see God, for who He is and how He works. And, to see how it is that we live this kind of life, a life centered on God.

The hand of God rests on the life centered on the Word of God to serve God's purpose for His glory.

READ Ezra 7:1, 6

*Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, 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. **Ezra 7:1, 6***

Ezra 7 occurs approximately 60 years after the end of chapter six and introduces to us a new leader for the Israelite people. Ezra is introduced to us by a shortened list of his genealogy that shows he was a descendant of Aaron, who served alongside Moses. Though not a high priest, like Aaron, Ezra was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses. We also learn about Ezra's role. He made request of Artaxerxes to return and the passage records, "*the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.*"⁶ So Ezra set out on the 500-mile journey from Babylonia to Judah and completed it in four months. Again we are told, "*the hand of the LORD his God was on him.*"⁹ Then we are provided the main thrust of Ezra's role for God's people. **Ezra committed his life to the study of God's law, to obey it and teach it to the people.**

Ezra 7:11-26 records the letter of Artaxerxes decree to authorize Ezra's return. The decree notes that anyone who wishes may go with Ezra. He also sent his own counselors to accompany him. Ezra was authorized to investigate the situation in Judah to see how well God's law was known and followed by the people.¹⁴ He was to be resourced as much as he needed by both freewill offerings and the King's treasury to restore right worship.¹⁶⁻¹⁷ And he was to establish a justice system based on God's law, endowed with great power to strictly enforce and execute the law.²⁵⁻²⁶ **God was using Ezra to center His people's lives on His Word, so that He would be most important to them.**

Finally, Ezra responds by recognizing the Lord's blessing and provision in all of this decree as an act of His steadfast love. He testifies how God's work strengthened his heart, and recognized "*the hand of the LORD his God was on him.*" So he gathered leading men from Israel to go with him.²⁷⁻²⁸

Certain characteristics distinguish Ezra for God's service. Ezra is identified as a man skilled in the Law of Moses. This doesn't simply mean he did a lot of Bible study, but that he had given his life to master the Law. Second, he is distinguished as one who set his heart on God's Law to obey and teach it. Third, we are told that he was strengthened to lead others in serving God because of the way his life was marked by God's Law. Even Artaxerxes recognized Ezra's distinctive characteristic. Ezra is held in such high regard among the Jews is noted by one commentator. "His name stands very high in Jewish tradition, where he came to be regarded as a second Moses; and indeed it was he, more than any other man, who stamped Israel with its lasting character as the people of a book."¹ **Ezra's life was distinct because he gave his full attention**

¹ Derek Kidner, [Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 70.



and energy to God's Law. And because he gave first priority to God's Law, the refrain of his life was the recognition of God's hand resting upon him.

What does it mean for God's hand to rest on one's life? "*The hand of the Lord*" is a phrase that denotes God's providential favor and representative of His power. The life of the one upon which it rests is one greatly blessed, as Ezra teaches us. But most of all it reveals for us that God was the one working through Ezra. All that was accomplished was not because of the greatness of Ezra, but because of the great hand of God that was at work. *When you recognize God's work being done, His favor bestowed or power displayed, its never about the person but a recognition that God himself is working for His glory.*

TRANS So, the question becomes, "**Do you have or want God's hand to rest on your life?**"

The message here is not "be like Ezra", though he is a noble model to be emulated. *The lesson for each of us is to understand God's Will to center your life on His Word to serve His purpose in the world through your life.*

The hand of God rests on the life centered on the Word of God to serve God's purpose for His glory.

God works by His Word. When God wills to do a work IN His people, among or through His people, He sends His Word as originating center of everything. *All the work of God is centered by the living Word of God*, who took on flesh and dwelt among us, who willingly laid down His life for us, and who rose and is seated at the right hand of the Father, ruling and reigning over all things, and interceding for each of His own. Jesus Christ, the Living Word, is revealed for us in the Bible, God's Written Word. This message is the central message of Ezra. *If you want to know God, you must know His Word.*

It may seem obvious, but it is by no means so. I've been talking about the absence of God's Word from the church for more than a decade. So much so that one of defining motivations for my doctoral work was to address the Biblical illiteracy that is increasing in the American church.² In research from 2010, the Barna Group identified the first of six megathemes as the Christian church becoming less theologically literate.³ The lack of biblical literacy has led to greater tolerance of a vast array of moral and spiritual behaviors and philosophies.⁴ Many notable scholars have sounded the alarm of the church's biblical illiteracy.⁵ The extent of the biblical illiteracy crisis has spread and become an issue for the Christian body in America.⁶ *The church in America today must address this crisis not by finding a new, creative way to do church, but by calling God's people to personally return to His way for every Christ-follower to live, a life centered on His Word.*

OBJ I appeal to you today to center your life on God's Word that His hand might rest upon you. **The life centered on God's Word is marked by heart set on three distinct characteristics.**

Ezra provides a helpful example for how he centered his life on God's Word; he "*set his heart*". To set the heart simply means to determine to fix one's whole life on God's law. *Centering your whole life on God's Word means setting your heart to be consumed by God's Word.*

Characteristic #1: Set your heart on a Commitment to know God's Word.

God, the Creator of the all, reveals Himself in His Word. In God's Word we learn how He works for us to accomplish His Will in us. His righteousness is revealed in Jesus. His authority is granted and faith given to us to obey. His power works through us for His purposes to be accomplished in us. His Truth is revealed to renew our mind and discern His will. His love abides in us to strengthen and sustain our heart. His blessing is bestowed to make glad the soul. And His faithfulness is

² M. Lane Harrison, Strengthening the Christ-Centered, Expository Preaching of the Lead Pastor of LifePoint Church from Select Passages in Deuteronomy. (Wake Forest, NC: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 10-12.

³ "Six Megathemes Emerge from Barna Group Research in 2010," Barna Group, last modified December 13, 2010, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/462-six-megathemes-emerge-from-2010#.VQCh-EaBKPR.b>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Berding, Bible Revival, 17-18. Berding cites three other scholars in addition to the Barna Group research including Timothy Larsen in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society; Michael J. Vlach, Professor of Theology at The Master's Seminary; and David Nienhus, Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Seattle Pacific University.

⁶ Ibid., 17-20.



demonstrated time and again to anchor our hope. You may not master all of God's Word like Ezra, but knowing what God reveals makes a high commitment to know His Word important. [In His Word God reveals all we need for life and faith.](#)

When one sets their heart to know God's Word, it begins with a commitment to read God's Word regularly. By "regular" I mean as much as necessary to get the Word in you. The main aim is to make sure that what you take from your reading takes hold in you, to resonate in your mind and settle in your heart. Regular reading introduces meditating, slowly reading, on God's Word so that it permeates into the heart and soaks the soul. Meditation should also be accompanied by study, to know what it says, to comprehend what it means, and to understand how it applies. [God reveals Himself for you to know His Word to guard your life against sin and walk in His wisdom.](#)

APPL I have found that a failure to make a plan for Bible reading always leads to a failure to read regularly. You need a simple plan that includes when you will read (time of day), where you will read (a place) and how (a schedule). Start with achievable goals that can be accomplished and built on. [When you will commit to God's Word by giving Him the first part of your day, you will find Him faithful throughout your whole day and life.](#)

TRANS A commitment to know God's Word by a regular schedule of reading leads to this second characteristic.

Characteristic #2: Set your heart on a Desire to obey God's Word.

You cannot, and will not, recognize God's hand of power or blessing on your life until you obey. And the less intake of God's Word, the weaker the desire to obey. For God's Word gives the motivation to do what it commands. And obeying God is the most glorious activity for our lives, to walk by faith in the way and wisdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest problems for Christians today is the "obedience gap", the difference between our knowledge of and obedience to the Word. The truth is, until we obey, our knowledge is incomplete. It remains a set of data bytes until faith enacts obedience that triggers its transforming power for renewing our minds. One way we "avoid the gap", but inadvertently widen it, is to consume more information without obeying for transformation. [Truth is intended to be absorbed into the heart for transformation, not just stored in the mind for recollection.](#)

Obedience to God's Word is not about completing a task list for God but walking in relationship with Him. Obedience turns data into desire because we experience God's faithfulness, recognize the blessing of His hand, and have our life filled with His love. Ezra's prayer in verses 27-28 is the result of a life immersed in God's Word and walking by faith in obedience. Our desire to obey is fueled not simply because God's Word works practically, but because it speaks to the depth of our heart and life as much as the daily demands. God labors for your desire in obedience because our life lived for Him is one designed to be fueled by love for Him.

Consider the Psalmist's Word that instruct and train us. **READ Psalm 119:1-2, 9-16**

¹*Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!*

²*Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,*

⁹*How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.*

¹⁰*With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!*

¹¹*I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.*

¹²*Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes!*

¹³*With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth.*

¹⁴*In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.*

¹⁵*I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.*

¹⁶*I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. Psalm 119:1-2, 9-16*

APPL The whole of the Christian life is a matter of closing the obedience gap by a greater desire to obey. [What is one step God is leading you to take today to close your obedience gap?](#)

TRANS The Psalmist provides our third characteristic for us too.



Characteristic #3: Set your heart with Zeal to share God's Word.

Knowing God always brings a zeal to make Him known to others. Knowing God's Word produces a greater zeal to share Him with others. The purpose of all study is to culminate in sharing. Sharing doesn't have to be a planned presentation. It is far better to simply begin by a shared conversation. Zeal for the Lord increases and deepens when you talk about what you have come to know and desire from His Word. The more personally you walk with the Lord, the more zealously you will share the Lord with others. **The simplest message of personal encounter with God shared regularly produces the strongest zeal for God in the heart.**

God wants your life centered on his Word. You can't be absent from his Word and know, commune with, or follow God. **Where God's Word resides in you reflects where you are with God because when you think of God you source that thought from His Word.** To know, obey and share God's Word is to know God. **Do you have a plan to commit to reading His Word? Will you grow your desire today in obedience? Who can you share Christ with this week?**

