

*DEDICATION
TO PREPARATION*

Mark Minnick

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

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DEDICATION TO PREPARATION

Have you ever wondered if God would bless you in the ministry? Have you feared that He would not? And if He were to bless you, what kind of man would you have to be? There's no more specific answer to that last question than Ezra 7:10: "*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.*"

This verse begins with the little preposition "*for,*" indicating that the verse itself is the answer to a question. Although not actually asked in the passage, the question is one that God anticipated a preacher would have after reading of His exceptional blessing on Ezra's life. And it is the very question of which we're seeking an answer: What kind of man does God bless in the ministry?

The year is 458 B.C., and Ezra the scribe has a commission from Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, to move to Jerusalem in order to teach God's people the Law. According to Ezra 2:64 there had been over forty thousand Jews who returned to Jerusalem some eighty years earlier, meaning that Ezra's potential congregation numbered in the tens of thousands. Now what kind of man would God entrust with such a large and strategic ministry? Our text describes him. He is the man who has *prepared* for it. Note carefully the wording of the text: "*For Ezra had prepared.*" Preparation is the credential God requires.

As you pursue your formal training for the ministry, there is nothing God requires any more of you than *dedication to preparation*. It is the compass by which you must chart the direction of every day. It is the priority by which you must gauge the legitimacy of every claim on your time. In short, it is the all-encompassing will of God for your years of training. Whatever contributes to your preparation will be your friend. Embrace it as a brother! Whatever distracts from it will be your foe. Resist it with all that lies within you! This does not mean that you will have no time for social or recreational activities, for these too are valuable in preparing for ministry. But it means that each claim on your time will be given its proper place and not an inch more. Only with this determination will you be able to bend every activity into some profit to your future ministry.

Ezra was a model of preparation in that he began at the right place. He began with his heart. The heart includes the whole man his thinking, his feelings, and his decisions. Therefore, to prepare the heart is to prepare yourself in entirety—Intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally—to prepare all capacities for the coveted goal. Can you say that you have determined in your heart to bring every portion of your being into submission to God's will for your preparation? Do you hesitate to give your whole mind to preparation for the ministry? Does part of your mind shrink from the rigors of sustained effort to master the Scripture? And if it does, can you honestly say that it is because you don't have the ability? Or is it that you have not entirely surrendered the ability you have? And what about your emotional commitment to preparation? Do you *love* preparing for the ministry? Are there other interests you love more? Have you given your emotions to some hobby or recreational interest so that you have very little left in you for really loving the ministry? How pleased God would be if you would set aside your other loves and find all your happiness in what He's given you to do!

You will notice that Ezra had prepared his whole being for three things: (1) seeking the law of the Lord, (2) doing the law of the Lord, and (3) teaching in Israel the law of the Lord. With all the skill born of holy desire, Ezra had fashioned his being into a literal Gibraltar of dedication to these demanding preparations. And God blessed him! And God will bless us too when we are so convinced that seeking, doing, and teaching the law of the Lord are business enough for us that we will resist everything that would lure us away from our dedication to these high callings.

I. INVESTIGATION OF THE WORD

Let's begin where Ezra began. His desire was to be a Bible preacher-teacher. Every destination has its proper road, and Ezra's road to preaching should be ours. He began by "seeking the law of the Lord." We could call this starting point *investigation*.

Investigation of the Bible is mandatory for a man who wants people to listen when he speaks. If we want people to listen, we'll have to have something to say. If you will dedicate yourself to the investigation of the Bible, God will fill your heart with scriptural things to say to His people. During these school years think of yourself as the privileged apprentice to skilled workmen who have dedicated their lives to the investigation of God's Word. During your training you will collect the dividends of their lifelong efforts to uncover the truths of the Bible. All God will require of you in return for their teaching is your dedication to study as they lead

you. But what a tragedy it will be if you squander away these precious years in puttering about with interests unrelated to the ministry. And do you realize what you'll reap in character if you're a sluggard? What a genius you'll develop for procrastination! What skills you'll perfect for avoiding study! What a stock of shrewd excuses you'll devise for disappointing God and men! And in you the Scripture will be fulfilled which says, "*The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason*" (Prov. 26:16).

Do you realize, preacher, brother, that many a man fails in the ministry, not because he has no ability, but because he has such an aversion to work! Before you presume that God's people will gather to hear you spill an empty mind, hear these men who can render a reason.

Study the Bible, dear brethren, through and through, with all the helps that you can possibly obtain: remember that the appliances now within the reach of ordinary Christians are much more extensive than they were in our fathers' days, and therefore you must be greater Biblical scholars if you would keep in front of your hearers.

—C. H. Spurgeon

If the study is a lounge, the pulpit will be an impertinence. I remember in my earlier days how I used to hear the factory operators passing my house on the way to the mills, where work began at six o'clock. I can recall the sound of their iron shoes ringing through the street. The sound of the shoes fetched me out of bed and took me to my work. I can no longer hear the Yorkshire shoes, but I can see and hear my businessmen as they start off early to earn their daily bread. And shall their minister be behind them in his quest of the Bread of Life?

—John Henry Jowett

I would have laziness held to be the one unpardonable sin in all our students and in all our ministers . . . Do we work as many hours every day, and as hard, as the people who support us work? As early in the morning, and as late at night, and as hard all the livelong day? Oh no! We cannot look seriously in one another's faces and say it is want of time that we have. It is want of intention. It is want of determination. It is want of method. It is want of motive. It is want of conscience. It is want of heart. It is want of anything and everything but time.

—Alexander Whyte

The preacher, as God's ambassador, is a mediator between God and men, and slovenliness or even sluggishness in getting one's self ready for such service is a fundamental, if not unpardonable fault; it reveals not only a lack of conscience but of competency for such a holy task.

—A. T. Pierson

Resist sloth with all your might until it flees from you! Impress God with your dedication to studying His Word, and He will surely find a people with whom you cash share your profiting.

Learning to investigate Scripture is the gateway to many blessings. One of the greatest of these is the thrill of discovery. It is important to realize that discovering truth is never an accident. It is a reward. Some of us are alive today because of a substance discovered by the British bacteriologist, Alexander Fleming. That substance is penicillin. When Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, he was catapulted into international recognition. There were other scientists who coveted his honors. They said that he had been lucky—that he had stumbled upon penicillin by accident and experienced a stroke of good fortune. But those who said such things never reckoned with the twenty-two years of twelve- to sixteen-hour days that Fleming wearied through in a cramped London laboratory before his great moment in 1928. Fleming discovered penicillin because he was dedicated to investigation! And the same dedication that rewards the scientist rewards the preacher.

People used to say that G. Campbell Morgan was an expository genius. They marveled at the magnetism of his ministry and were overwhelmed by the power of his preaching. So they called him a genius. But Morgan's biographer relates that those who said such things never observed him almost every morning (Christmas holidays included!) at five o'clock sitting in a little pool of lamp light with his Bible, a pencil, and a well-marked notebook. Morgan was a great expositor because he was a great investigator! You too will experience such rewards of discovery if you will rise early and work hard with the Flemings and the Morgans!

Dedication to Bible study will do something even greater for you. It will ensure you of a future place of service. Have you ever worried that there might be no opportunity for you? If you will study God's Word with diligence during these training years, He will bring you to the attention of those who are looking for a qualified man for ministry. This was what happened to Ezra. He had so distinguished himself as a student of Scripture that even the heathen king, Artaxerxes, respected his expertise. Reading through Ezra 7:11-26 you will observe that the entire passage is a letter of recommendation written by the king for Ezra. Twice he refers to Ezra as "*the scribe of the law of the God of heaven*" (vv. 12, 21), and in verse 25 he commissions Ezra to teach the laws of his God according to "*the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand.*" It was surely no accident that out of all the Jewish law teachers available Artaxerxes chose Ezra. And there were other law teachers available. According to

Ezra 2:36-39 there were over four thousand priests who had gone back to Jerusalem! But the king chose Ezra. Ezra had evidently been so diligent in his preparations that he had come to the king's attention. He had experienced the truth of Proverbs 22:29: "*Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean [obscure] men.*"

If you would follow Ezra into an audience with the king, and out again into a place of privileged service, be diligent in your business of investigating God's Word. It is to the diligent that kings grant ministries.

II. INCARNATION OF THE WORD

During these years of intense Bible study, you will discover much that should be incorporated into your own life. It is then that you will have to determine to pattern yourself after the second characteristic for which Ezra had prepared himself—"*to do the law of the Lord.*" Revelation always demands response. The Lord Himself said that the man who would have the ability to distinguish true doctrine from false was the one who had determined ahead of time that he would do God's will if he knew what it was (John 7:17). Like Ezra, we will have to pledge to God that we will respond to what He teaches us.

The verb translated "to do" in our English Bible has some very picturesque uses in the Old Testament. This is the same verb used of God's creative activities (Gen. 1:31) and Bezaleel's craftsmanship of the tabernacle (Exod. 36:1). In this context of the book of Ezra, we might remember these uses of the word and think of the preacher as "creating" or "fashioning" an obedient response to all that he finds in the Word. And this is always the necessary link between learning the Bible and preaching it. It is an impossible leap from "seeking" the law to "teaching" the law. Between the seeking and the teaching there must be the doing of the law. Apart from such surrendered responses a man will never have a powerful ministry. Even the most impassioned preaching cannot hurdle a disobedient life.

Whenever you encounter a demand of the Lord in Scripture, you might remember the pithy definition of preaching coined by Philips Brooks. Brooks said that preaching is "truth through personality." Notice the channel for communicating truth through personality. People need to see what the truth looks like when worn on the life. Had God intended only for people to *know* what the Bible says, He could have provided each believer with a library of inspired commentaries. Instead, He sends them preachers. And in preachers people see the truth incarnated. That is why Brooks discerned that good preaching is much more than sermon

preparation and delivery. William Quayle, a godly Methodist preacher from the first part of the twentieth century, expanded Brooks's principle when he wrote,

Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it? Why, no, that is not preaching. Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering *that* . . . Therefore, the elemental business in preaching is not with the preaching, but with the preacher. It is no trouble to preach, but a vast trouble to construct a preacher A great life, telling a great truth, ought to be a definition of a preacher at his message.

Think ahead to your first church. How will your people learn to pray? They will learn by hearing you pray. How will they learn to win souls? They will learn by seeing you will souls. How will they learn to behave like good soldiers for Christ? They will learn by watching you do battle for the Lord. Now that means that during your apprentice years, when God reveals to you the elements of effectual prayer, you callous your knees! When God reveals to you His burden for souls, you learn to fish for men! When God reveals to you the qualities of a good soldier, you enlist for boot camp! As you dedicate yourself to fleshing out the truth, God will send you people to see how you do it. But if you have resisted God during these formative years, then His people will *see that too*. They will not know exactly where the trouble lies. They will not know that you lied about completing assignments, that you were irregular in church attendance, that you went to ball games but not to soulwinning visitation, or that your roommates had little respect for you. They will not know the specifics, but they will sense the inevitable results. They will sense that you don't ring true. They will *feel* the powerlessness of your ministry. They will marvel that you are a cloud without rain—that there is no healing in your wings—that no virtue spills from your life. People expect that the man who binds them to such high ideals Sunday after Sunday shall have the breath of Christ about him. They expect that he shall do valiant deeds, work righteousness, obtain promises, wax strong in battle, and turn to flight the armies of the wicked one. In short, they expect a man of God. And now, during your training years, is the time God is giving you to become holy.

Before leaving this point of doing the law we should note that all of his life Ezra had the reputation for living what he preached. For instance, the letter of commendation that Artaxerxes wrote for Ezra included the command for the king's ministers of finance to provide Ezra with whatever he needed to fund the worship services in Jerusalem. The

expense was to be born by the king's treasury (Ezra 7:20). Ezra had such a reputation for integrity that the king drafted him a blank check on the royal treasury!

Years later there is another indication of Ezra's personal testimony. Some fourteen years after he arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra saw God bring revival to the nation (Nehemiah 8-10 records this). At that time the people hungered for the preaching of the law. So intent were they on hearing Ezra expound it that they erected for him a platform of wood on which to stand so as to give him added stature as he preached. Why were these people so concerned to hear Ezra preach? It can be credited to the fourteen years during which Ezra had been erecting for himself a platform of his *life* from which to expound the law. Platforms of wood are erected for preachers known for their platforms of life. For fourteen years these people had seen Ezra *live* the law. When God sent revival to them, it is no wonder that they wanted him to *preach* the law.

When Ezra mounted his platform of wood to preach, he was God's giant. But you can be sure that had he not already been fixed on his platform of life, the platform of wood would have served only to expose what a spiritual dwarf he was. You too can erect for yourself a preaching platform if you will dedicate yourself to incarnating God's Word. On the platform of your godly life you will have stature in the eyes of God's people so that they will cry, "Preacher, preach to us! Tell us what you've seen in God's Book! Tell us what you're living out of God's Book! Preacher, for the sake of Christ and His kingdom, teach us what God says in His law!"

III. INSTRUCTION OF THE WORD

Much of your success or failure in the ministry hinges on your dedication to these first two steps of preparation. But one day you will pass beyond the stage of the apprentice into the dimension of a fulltime preacher. What a great day that will be! But it is something that must be prepared for just as you have made investigation and incarnation of the Word your preparation. There is a necessary preparation for instruction.

Ezra 7:10 contains at least two truths about what it is to instruct God's people: "to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." The first truth has to do with the character of the instruction itself. The word "teach" is thought provoking in that it means far more than standing in the pulpit three times a week. The word means "to train" and was used of the training of an ox to carry its yoke, to stay in the furrow, and to persist in the plowing until the field was finished. This helps us understand that a preacher's job is far more than communication. His job is something like

that of a coach. He is to train the saints. He is to equip them for their work in the Body of Christ (see Eph. 4:11-13). This involves an almost herculean effort to be a good coach. It involves bulldogged commitment to the methodical and sometimes tedious routine of exercising believers in the spiritual endeavors that build maturity. It means one-on-one discipleship of “faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (II Tim. 2:2). No one but the preacher knows the many hours that are required for repeating truths and rehearsing skills so that the believers are functional for Christ. It will take every preacher an oceanful of determination to stick with it.

A second thing indicated here about instructing God’s people is the commitment a man must have to the exact requirements of God for His people. Ezra was going to face some tough issues in Jerusalem. As soon as he arrived, he had to deal with mixed marriages that had been made between the Jews and the heathen (Ezra 9-10). Ask any preacher ministering in today’s degenerate society if that’s an easy task! And later on Ezra had to enforce the keeping of the Sabbath, the giving of tithes, and the maintenance of a pure priesthood. But when Ezra was preparing to go to Jerusalem, he didn’t know about any of these problems. But God knew about them, and He knew that Ezra was equal to the responsibility because of his commitment to training God’s people in the statutes and judgments of the law. We ought to look at those two words for a moment—*statutes* and *judgments*—because they reveal God’s thinking about His requirements.

A *statute* is a demand that is as inviolable as though it had been inscribed in letters of lead on tablets of stone. It is a standard that cannot be altered. It is only to be obeyed. The word *judgment* is just another way of referring to these same inviolable standards. But it views them as requirements that are so well established that they have become customs. We might call them the etiquette of God’s kingdom—His customs for thought, word, and behavior. Unfortunately, even God’s people are often unaccustomed to God’s customs. Often, their thoughts, words, and behavior are the etiquette of the heathen. This is one of the heartbreaks of the ministry for which you must prepare yourself. How often you will be tempted to leave an application out of your sermon because of its exposure of some present evil in your congregation. Even worse, you will be tempted to avoid certain passages of Scripture because you know that they rebuke the practices of influential members of your assembly. But your job, like Ezra’s, will be to view God’s standards as statutes and judgments—as inflexible standards by which

to govern the personal, domestic, social, and religious behavior of believers. Right now, as you study the Scripture, you must develop such an exalted view of what you discover there that you will never waver about preaching it. If it will help you, remember that Moses (Exod. 17:4), Jeremiah (Jer. 20:7-9), Peter (Gal. 2:12), Timothy (II Tim. 1:7), and most of God's great men have had their battles with the fear of man. And as you remember them, make earnest vows to God about yourself. Ask Him to inscribe His words on your heart as statutes. Ask Him to incorporate His customs into your life as etiquette. And may He impart iron to your blood to keep those vows.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Parker, a British preacher whose influence was so vast that the pews in the back of his London church were said to stretch to the Rocky Mountains, used to marvel when people would ask him to reveal the secret to his powerful ministry. To Parker there was no secret. He would reply, "There is no need of explanation. I have lived for my work. That is all. Mystery there is none. I have made my preaching work my delight, the very festival of my soul."

And then Parker would challenge young men studying for the ministry, "Young brethren, go thou and do likewise, and God bless thee!"

Ezra never knew Joseph Parker. They were separated by 2,300 years. But Ezra and Joseph Parker both lived by the same formula, and God richly blessed them both. Ezra is credited with authoring at least three books of the Bible, I and II Chronicles and the book that bears his name. He is also recognized as the one who first gathered into one collection the thirty-nine Hebrew books that make up our Old Testament canon. He was the one who organized a group of scribes called the *Sopherim*. They were the official Bible publication society of their day and were the conscientious caretakers of the text of the Hebrew Bible for some six hundred years (400 B.C. to A.D. 200). So effective and influential was Ezra that for centuries after his death the Jewish people referred to him as the second Moses. He is one of the outstanding examples of the principle that there is a never ending variety of ministries available to the man who has adequately prepared.

Whenever you wonder if God will bless your ministry, remember where Ezra got his start. He began where we all must begin with dedication to preparation. Where does God find qualified men for strategic ministries? He finds them wherever they are—wherever they are, all consumed with their dedication to preparation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Minnick is the pastor of Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, where he has served on the pastoral staff since 1980. He holds a Ph.D. in New Testament Interpretation (1983) from Bob Jones University. He began teaching at the university while pursuing his graduate degree and since then has held various positions on the Bible faculty, teaching on both the undergraduate and the graduate levels.

Dr. Minnick is well known as an able expositor of the Scriptures, and his preaching is characterized by interpretation and application of Scripture based on biblical truth rather than human experience. He is much in demand as a speaker at churches and conferences across the nation and frequently ministers on mission fields around the world. He and his wife, Linda, have reared three daughters, and they work together in helping to fulfill the mission of Mount Calvary Baptist Church: *Taking the Word to the World.*