

Beautifying God's House

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Turn with me in your Bibles to the seventh chapter of Ezra, Ezra 7. The title of the message this morning is "Beautifying God's House." Beautifying God's house. We're going to see that as we've seen earlier in Ezra, that we are called as Christians, as people who love Jesus Christ, we are called to the work of building God's house. One of the major themes in the book of Ezra, the first six chapters particularly, is about the call to build God's house and now we're not talking about the buildings, physical buildings, we're talking of the spiritual building that is God's house. I mean, we're gonna look at a passage that's talking about building the temple and beautifying the temple in Jerusalem but in terms of the way God has revealed himself to us in Scripture, that applies to us today as building the spiritual temple, that is the people of God. We are to build and to beautify God's house.

We're gonna see that chapter 7 to 10 of the book of Ezra as we move into a new section in the book, we move into a new focus, and that we're not just called to build God's house, we're called to beautify God's house. In fact, there's a key word before we read the chapter I'm going to call your attention to it. Actually in verse 27 of the chapter, I think that gives this emphasis and shows us the purpose of all that has happened in the previous verses. In verse 27 he says, Ezra then speaking about what has happened, the miracle of what God has done in sending them back and giving the king of Persia a motivation to send them back, he says in verse 27, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart," and here's the key word, "to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem." To adorn the house of the Lord. That's the New American Standard that I'm reading from, and the idea of this word "adorn" is "to beautify," and it's actually translated that in a couple other translations, the ESV and the King James. The word means "to glorify; beautify." It comes from the idea of gleaming. The root word that this word comes from is the idea of heat, a glowing heat, and so the idea is we're called to adorn, to beautify, to make it glow, to make it shine, to make its brilliance and beauty evident. He said this is what the amazing thing, Ezra is marveling that God has put into the heart of the unsaved king of Persia, Artaxerxes, he has put into the heart of the unsaved king of Persia to adorn his house, to beautify his house, and he's sending Ezra back with a number of people that go with him in the second return from exile, and the stated purpose of that second return of exiles from Babylon is to beautify the house of the Lord.

As we read, I want you to listen, what we're gonna see is Ezra introduces for us, first of all, tells us what happens about the second return, how amazingly successful it was because of the hand of God upon them, and then he shares with us the text of the letter that the king of Persia, Artaxerxes, gave to him in verses 12 to 26, and in the text of that letter that Artaxerxes gives to Ezra the priest, you'll see Artaxerxes six times says, speaks about the house of God, the house of your God, the house of the God of heaven which is in Jerusalem, which is in Jerusalem. The Lord put on the heart of the king this burden to deal with the house of God which is in Jerusalem. It's been rebuilt but it needs to be beautified. In reality, Ezra's going to find that things are not good when he arrives but this chapter is not about what he finds, this chapter is about what his purpose is in going and his purpose is to beautify the house of the Lord.

Let's read the text, the entire chapter together, and listen for those six times he speaks of the house of the Lord, Artaxerxes does, as we read. Chapter 7, verse 1.

1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra 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. 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him. 7 Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. 10 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. 11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel: 12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand, 15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem; 17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently

buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. 19 Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. 20 The rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury. 21 I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently, 22 even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed. 23 Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. 24 We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God. 25 You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them. 26 Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment."

That's the end of the letter. Now Ezra says,

27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, 28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we marvel at Your greatness and Your majesty, at the way that You work in the affairs of men, how You turn the heart of the king like a water course wherever You wish. Lord, we praise and honor You and we ask that You might now speak to us by Your word, that You might make the law of the Lord alive in this place, that Your Spirit might apply it to our hearts and that we might become people who can adorn the house of God, that we might be equipped to beautify, to build up and to beautify one another for the glory of our great Savior. We pray in His name. Amen.

The beautification of God's house, the beautifying of God's house, that's what we're called to. This second return is all about that and I want to call your attention before we

get into the outline proper, I want a preliminary observation that we just need to take note of as we read into this first verse of chapter 7, "Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes." After these things, that is the transition from chapter 6 to chapter 7. Chapter 6, we remember the temple had just been completed, they had dedicated the temple in 516-515, and they had observed the first Passover in early 515 BC. We looked at that last time.

Then it says, "Now after these things," and we hear about this thing with Ezra now coming back in a second wave, a return of exiles returning from Babylon, and what's actually happened is it's 57 years later. Let me show you this. Let's look at the slides, we're gonna look at this one more time. This is the books of Ezra/Nehemiah that we've been looking at and you see how Ezra chapters 1 to 6, that's showing you that Cyrus and Cambyses are the Persian rulers. Thanks, Ted. And Zerubbabel and Joshua are the Jewish leaders and the first six chapters cover the building of the temple, and then you have this gap through the entire reign, the beginning of Darius' reign there but the rest of his long reign, the reign of Ahasuerus and then the beginning of Artaxerxes' reign until right here and here you have the beginning of chapter 7 to 10 of Ezra and they cover just a few months. Then we're going to see that there's a 13-year gap between the end of Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1 at 445 BC.

So let's see the next slide. And what you have is the first return is chapters 1 to 6, the second return is chapters 7 to 10, the third return in about a 13-year period is covered in Nehemiah. This is a very short period. That's a 20-year period, basically 536-516. This is a very short period. Now what's interesting is why the gaps. I mean, you know, when I'm reading something, I like to kind of keep up with what came next. So did anything else interesting happen? Well, God is not into just satisfying our curiosity so he doesn't tell us things that we might otherwise want to know, he tells us what he wants us to know. So there is that 57-year gap between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7 and why is that?

That's all we need of the slides. Thank you, guys.

Why is that? Because the focus of the books of Ezra/Nehemiah, we said that these are two books that are basically one book. The focus is on the three returns from exile. It's not so much what happens between them as the returns themselves. The people have been exiled to Babylon, the nation of Israel has been carried away into slavery because of their rejection of God, and now God is gloriously bringing them back and he brings them back in the first return, the first six chapters, to build his house, to build his temple. Then there's a 57-year interlude and then the second set of chapters, 7 to 10, is about the beautification of God's house. The second return is all about beautifying God's house as we saw a moment ago, the key word "adorn." The Lord had put in the heart of the king to adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

So that's what we are called to do. As Christians, the way this applies to us today on this side of the cross, on this side of the resurrection, on this side of the giving of the Holy Spirit, is that we are called to be about building God's house in the same way they built God's house and also about beautifying God's house, adorning God's house. I mentioned

the flow of redemptive history, I mean, we're looking at something, it's talking about an actual temple and actual things to be done with the temple, but as the Scriptures unfold for us, we see that the tabernacle, originally the pre-temple, that was the tent temple that in Exodus God prescribed the tent of meeting. This was the first time there was a place, a designated place to meet God. So when you read in the book of Exodus, you read about the specifications and instructions for the construction of the tent of meeting, it was a tent because it needed to be portable. They were moving from place to place. Remember the pillar of fire, the pillar of cloud that led them through from Egypt into the Promised Land?

So the tabernacle was the tent of meeting, it was the place they were to go to offer sacrifices to meet God, and so the idea was that you can meet God only by offering a sacrifice and only at his designated place. Then the tabernacle becomes permanent in the temple when Solomon builds the temple. Remember King David wanted to build a temple and God did not allow him to, "Your son will build My temple." And so Solomon built the temple, you find the story of that in 1 Kings and also in Chronicles, and in the building of the temple, the place that you meet God becomes permanent in Jerusalem. This is the one place in the universe that you can meet God. God prescribes how he is to be sought. We don't make it up. He's not, he doesn't give an A, you know, for sincerity and creativity. God says, "You seek Me the way I prescribe to be sought or you don't know Me."

This is the emphasis of why the temple is so important. This is why there is such emphasis on the heinous sin of people who make alternative temples which is what a wicked king, the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam, did. He made two temples in addition to the temple in Jerusalem. He made them and the Jerusalem temple is in the southern kingdom of Judah and so when the kingdoms split and you had the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, the king of Israel wanted his people not to have to go down to Judah to worship the Lord and so he made two temples, one in Dan and one in Bethel. You can read the story of it in 1 Kings 13 and what you will read as you read 1 Kings is you will find out God hated the fact that he did that. In fact, the whole rest of Kings you'll have this refrain run throughout 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Kings. This guy, he sinned in the likeness of Jeroboam. This meant he was really bad because Jeroboam was the guy who made those two temples.

What was he doing? He was saying that you can meet God wherever you want to. You can meet God however you want to. And God is saying emphatically in the book of Kings, "You will meet Me where I say to meet Me or you will not come to Me." There is one place to meet God and so the temple, you see, typified the one who would come to the temple and who in the beginning of his ministry would say this, remember when the Jews are accusing him and saying, "Why are You doing these signs? By what authority are You doing these things?" And he says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it, for He was speaking of the temple of His body," John writes in John 2. Jesus is saying the temple, his body is the temple. In fact, John 1 it said the exact same thing. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That word "dwelt" in Greek is

actually a word which literally could be translated "pitched his tent or tabernacled among us." John is choosing the word carefully to say that when Jesus, when God came into the world through Jesus, that in the flesh of Jesus, the flesh of Jesus is the tabernacle of the glory of Yahweh. God is among us. That's why he says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His," what? "His glory."

So that was all about showing the temple, the significance of the temple. Where do you meet God? You meet God at the one place. This is why there is no other name given among men by which we must be saved. Under heaven there is only one name, the name of Jesus. There's only one way. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but by Me." Paul says, "There is one mediator, there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." There is no other way to heaven but through the one man, Jesus Christ, and all of that Old Testament imagery was making this emphatically clear.

Now after his resurrection, he gives his Spirit, then the wonder of it is that the Lord begins to call us his temple. Now the place where his glory dwells, we're not, it's not the same, there's no more sacrifices, true sacrifices offered. Jesus has made one sacrifice for all time. The author of Hebrews makes this clear. There is only one sacrifice necessary. Jesus made it at Calvary. There is no other blood being shed for sins. Only that one sacrifice for one time for all people who will believe. Yet there are priests and he says that all of us as believers are priests because we are now offering spiritual sacrifices, not literal physical sacrifices, spiritual sacrifices of praise and obedience and surrender to God.

You see this in a couple of places. First in Ephesians 2:19-22. The important theme in the New Testament, the priesthood of the believer and the fact that the church is now the temple of God, the spiritual dwelling of God, the spiritual temple of God. He says in Ephesians 2:19, he's talking now to the believers in Ephesus, he says, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens," you who were Gentiles before you were saved, you are no longer strangers and aliens, "but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." Do you see that? The imagery is very vivid and clear. The spiritual temple of God is the people of God. The buildings themselves mean little, almost nothing. They just facilitate the meeting of the true temple and if you belong to Christ, you are a part of this temple of God.

So then that means that when we are called to build the temple, we're called to evangelize the lost so that we find new blocks for God's temple, and we're called to build up the blocks, the other people. Sometimes you feel like people are blockheads and in some sense maybe we all are spiritually, we're blocks, building blocks in God's spiritual temple. And not just building one another up, but beautifying one another is what we're gonna see in Ezra 7 to 10. They were called to move into the unattractive areas of each other's lives, the messes, the ugliness, and to love our brothers and sisters, moving toward

them and to bring beauty by God's grace. And they're to do the same thing for us because we all have ugly, dark corners that need to be cleaned up and beautified.

So that's the application of what we're doing, so the question is how, how do we beautify God's house? How do we beautify one another? This is what's really the focus of that seventh chapter of Ezra, turning back to the seventh chapter of Ezra. How do we beautify God's house? We're gonna see it's through the ministry of the word. I mean, one of the key things the Bible makes clear from the very first pages of Scripture, the most important thing in the world for God's people is God's word. God's word is everything to us because God's word is where he reveals himself truly to us, and that's what we see in the seventh chapter. We're gonna see as we look at this, it's all about the word of God.

The emphasis of this chapter is on the power of the word of God to bring beauty to the temple of God and it's illustrated through this man Ezra, the main character. You know, the book is written, named Ezra, but we don't meet him until chapter 7. We've been going through the book for six chapters and all those years, and now he finally comes on the scene. Ezra there in verse 1, and what we are gonna find is Ezra is an example for us. He is an example of how to build and beautify the temple of God. He's an example of how we ought to all be in building and beautifying the temple of God, and it's through the word of God.

Now in one sense you could say Ezra most directly, this applies to servants of the Lord who minister the Gospel, it applies to ministers in the most focused way. These are the characteristics of what make a godly minister. Ezra models that, exemplifies that for us. But it also applies to those who are elders who shepherd the flock, in almost that same kind of intense focused way. This tells us what should you look for in a pastor, what should you look for in an elder, but it's also for Bible teachers. We have many Bible studies in our church. Everyone who teaches the word ought to be like this, ought to be like Ezra. But it also speaks to what every Christian must be. We're all called to follow this example because we're all called to speak the truth in love. Every one of us, if you belong to Jesus Christ, you must build God's temple and you must beautify God's temple and you must build and beautify through the word of God through speaking the truth in love. So it applies to all of us.

So how do we build, how do we beautify, how do we beautify the temple of God? How do we beautify one another? How do we move toward one another in a way that brings beauty and a building up? There are two points that I want us to look at this morning and the first is to build up and to beautify one another, you must be spiritually qualified. You must be spiritually qualified. Now it's interesting as you read the Scripture, it's always important to note what God includes. We mentioned that he skipped over, you know, "Hey, why not tell us something about what happened? I mean, we know Esther, you could've at least given us an allusion to Esther." Hey, this is what happened? You know, this is what I would kind of like if I was doing this, right? But of course, the Lord knows better than I do. But he doesn't tell us what we might like to know but you know what he does, is he spends a lot of time telling me something I don't really care about in the first five verses. That was those names I had to go over again, the challenge of reading

Azariah, Hilkiyah, Shallum, Zadok, Maraioth, Zerayah, Uzzi, Bukki. Wouldn't be like Tom, Dick, Harry, it would be so much easier. But these are the Hebrew names.

Now why does he spend from the middle of verse 1 through verse 5 reciting for us a genealogy? That's what he's doing, it's a genealogy. It's the first thing he tells us about Ezra. There's a lot of great stuff about Ezra. He says a lot of wonderful things about Ezra, who he is, his character, and what he did. But the first thing he tells us is his genealogy. That is instructive. In fact, the Bible has a way of doing that often, doesn't it? As you read through the Bible, don't you find from time to time, you find yourself in genealogies. Genesis, the book of beginnings. Genesis, the Greek word that genesis comes from in the English, is related to the word genealogy. The same word, root word, g-e-n, beginning. And so genealogies are really the study of lineage or the beginnings of people, where they came from, and the book of Genesis has a number of genealogies. I mean, the genealogies are all throughout the Old Testament. We saw them even in Ruth, that little book Ruth. Remember there's a genealogy in Ruth. But Numbers, and when you get to Chronicles, chapter after chapter after chapter of genealogies.

Why is that? The Lord is wanting us to know that he is at work preserving his promise through his chosen line. In spite of all the various things that are happening in the world, he is preserving his promise through his chosen line and this is why, how does the New Testament begin? And we're gonna hear about Jesus Christ. You open the New Testament, the first chapter of Matthew, the first page of the New Testament and what do you find? You find a genealogy. In fact, you find two genealogies when you turn to Matthew, really if you're reading carefully you'll see this. In Matthew 1, the first words of the New Testament, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez..." It's all the way down through verse 16, "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." What is that about? That is showing us that Jesus is the son of Abraham and the son of David because God had prophesied that it would be a son of Abraham through whom the whole earth would be blessed, and that that blessing was narrowed down not just the son of Abraham but a son from the tribe of Judah, not just a son from the tribe of Judah, a son from the tribe of David, from the family of David. And Jesus meets the qualifications. Luke gives another separate genealogy that's apparently the mother's genealogy in Luke so that by his legal father, his step-dad Joseph, and his true mother Mary, he is of the tribe of Judah and the descendant of David because that was what God had promised.

And it's also interesting in verse 18 when he says, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows," literally you could read that as the genealogy of Jesus Christ was as follows, and then he tells you that this genealogy is he's the Son of God. The son of David according to the flesh but Son of God according to the Spirit. He is qualified to be the Messiah, that's the idea. He had to be qualified by birth to be the Messiah. In the plan of salvation, God's qualification, it shows us that it is by birth actually, even the physical birth it must also happen to be qualified to be Messiah, and this same thing is true in Ezra 7. Ezra is a direct descendant of Aaron. That's where we end up in the genealogy, "the

son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest." The high priest. Ezra is a direct descendant of Aaron. Ezra has been born into the priesthood.

Now you remember the tribe of Levi, Levi was one of the 12 tribes taken by God to be the people who would be about his worship and his temple and caring for all the things associated with it, but among the people of Levi, only the descendants of Aaron were qualified for the priesthood. You were not qualified to be a priest if you weren't a descendant of Aaron biblically, and the author here is showing us Ezra is qualified for the priesthood.

Now think about this. The Levites can help out but they can't go into the building. Remember the temple is actually, it's a gated area, walled off area where a lot of it is outside. It's a courtyard area where the altar is and where sacrifices happened, and much happens in the uncovered courtyard. But it's walled off and you can only enter there if you're a Jew, but within that area there is the temple proper, the building, and the building has two parts, the holy place and the most holy place, sometimes the most holy place is called the Holy of Holies. So the holy place and the Holy of Holies. No one can go into the holy place even unless they're a descendant of Aaron at this time in history. This was the only way you could get into the temple, you have to be a descendant of Aaron. So what's all this about? He's saying, "Listen, I want you to know right up front that Ezra is qualified to go anywhere in God's house he needs to." He could only go in once a year if he's the high priest into the Holy of Holies, but he's saying he is qualified by birth.

Now how does that relate to us? You know, where were you born? What's your lineage? No, it's not about that anymore. Again, this is typological. God is showing us something us something, he's baby-talking with us, he's using something we can understand to teach us something much more wonderful spiritually. What is he saying? He's saying that if you're going to build, if you're gonna be the person to beautify God's house, if you're gonna be the person to really make a difference in helping others, you must be qualified by birth. You must be born into the priesthood. That's what he's saying. You must be truly born again and be spiritually a child of God. That's the application.

Now let me show you this, another passage that speaks about the temple is 1 Peter 2. I mentioned this idea of the priesthood of the believer, that all true believers are priests. Clearly taught in the Scriptures. 1 Peter 2:9, Peter is writing there to believers and he says this, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." You are four things: a chosen race; a royal priesthood; a holy nation; a people belonging to God. So when a person becomes a Christian, they are part of a chosen race. They are now part of the race that is in Christ. They are part of a holy nation. Israel is the true, the true Israel is the people of God. The people for God's own possession are those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ and those who come to faith in Jesus Christ are also a royal priesthood.

Now look, he says this right after, look back a few verses with me to verse 4 of chapter 2. 1 Peter 2:4 and see the resonance with what we read earlier from Ephesians 2. Peter in

writing to the believers says this, "And coming to Him," that is, Christ, "And coming to Him as to a living stone," that is, Jesus a living stone, "which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You're being built, he says, "You are the temple and you are the priesthood. The true temple is the people of God and the true priesthood is the people of God." So the question then is: have you been born into the priesthood? If you want to beautify God's house and build God's house, have you been born into the priesthood? Are you qualified by birth?

Now while you have your Bible open to 1 Peter, Peter is building on something he's already said in chapter 1, verse 3. What does it mean to be born into the priesthood? In 1 Peter 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." It means to have been born again. Just like Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God. You must be born from above, born by the Spirit." So you must be spiritually born to be a priest in God's house. You must be spiritually born to be a child of God, to see God. If you're not born again, you will not see God, you will not see eternal life.

He says the same thing in verse 23, he reminds them, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God." He's speaking to believers and he says, "You guys have been born again by the power of the word of God. You've been given spiritual birth and therefore I can tell you," the very next few verses after that, "you are a part of God's spiritual temple and you are a priest in his priesthood. So get to work building his house and offering praise to Him."

So that shows us how this applies to us and so the question then is: are you a priest? Have you been born again? Are you now trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation? Are you believing in him? Are you repenting and turning from sin? Have you? That's the most urgent and fundamental question and you will not be able to be used by God to benefit others unless you have. I mean, whatever benefit comes will come in spite of us. We must know the Lord.

So Ezra is one who has been born into the priesthood, is spiritually qualified, and we must be qualified and if that is the case, this is the encouragement, if that is the case, if you were born again yesterday, you're only one day old spiritually, if you were born again yesterday, you are qualified to build and to beautify the temple. You're qualified because you have the Spirit. You've been made a priest. This means, this is helpful for us who have been believers longer to remember that every new believer has the opportunity to build you up and to beautify you, and that is we need to learn to listen to one another. It's not like, "Well, you're just a new believer. I don't need to listen to you. You don't know anything yet." No, he has the Spirit of the living God inside of him. She has the Spirit of the living God inside of her. She can be used of the Lord.

So don't despise that. Don't look down upon that. Rejoice in that, and it's amazing how the Lord sometimes will use somebody who in many ways you might think, they just don't have a clue yet in this area, in this area and that area, and then suddenly there's just, the Lord just speaks something through them and it's like out of the mouth of babes. Wow, it hit me right between the eyes exactly what I needed to hear. God loves to do that to keep us all humble, to keep us knowing how much we need one another, how much we need his grace. We never grow beyond the need, the 100% need of grace.

So if you are a child of God, you then are called to be about building up and beautifying. You can't say, "I'm not yet ready. I'm still too young." No, you can't say that. You have been born into the priesthood and that means you are to get to work. So are you doing that? How do you do this? You have to have relationships with people. You have to spend time with people if you're going to build up and beautify. It's not going to happen accidentally as you walk by each other in the hallway, or as you say, "Hello, how are you? I'm fine. How are you?" That kind of spiritual interchange doesn't happen like iPhones or whatever where you put them beside each other and they transfer a file. I just learned about that recently. Kind of scary to me, isn't it? It's too weird. But anyway, spiritual life-building doesn't happen like that. It doesn't happen in some kind of mystical weird way. It happens through people moving toward one another, engaging one another in true fellowship, asking questions about someone's life, caring about the fact that they don't seem to be themselves today and speaking with them, and trusting that somehow though I don't know what I'm talking about, somehow God might use me to bless them because I have the Spirit of God and I have the calling of God to be about building up and beautifying my brothers and sisters. And don't despise what God has done. God has made you able to do anything he wants you to do because his Spirit lives inside of you. What can the Holy Spirit not do? Nothing's too hard for him.

So move toward others. Interesting side point before we move on to the second main point. It's really interesting that Ezra's name, it's emphasized in the text quite a bit. It occurs seven times in the chapter we read, the name Ezra, and you know, obviously it needs to be there a few times but I think it seems to be a little bit emphatic in the sense of, you know, even like in verse 6. Verse 1, the sentence hasn't finished really. He says, "After these things in the reign of Artaxerxes, Ezra." And then you have this long parenthesis. You have a subject, Ezra, you have this long parenthesis about his genealogy, and the sentence isn't finished. There's not a period all the way through, there shouldn't be one even at verse 5 if you're really being grammatically correct. It's just that in English we don't speak like this. I don't say, "You know, I who is the son of John, the son of Wayman, the son of the entire city, the son of whatever, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, want to go see a movie today." But in reality the sentence is not finished. It's actually Ezra son of, son of, son of, son of all the way down, went up from Babylon and he was a scribe, and it still wasn't finished then, he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given.

So he's going to tell us, this is what Ezra, who Ezra is before he tells us but he uses that name, "This Ezra." In fact, in the text it's emphatic. He uses the name again, he didn't really have to. It made sense, though, didn't it after all that to remind us again Ezra went

up. But he says, "This Ezra." I mean, why do you have to say, "This Ezra"? I wasn't gonna think it was another Ezra. Because he wants us to see. It's this guy. Look at this guy.

His name, Ezer, means "help; aid." In fact, Ebenezer, "rock of help; stone of help." Eleazar, the name just before Aaron, Aaron's son Eleazar, that means "my God is my help or my God is a help." Eli, means "my God." Azer, "help." "My God helps." And this word Ezer is a very rich word in the Scripture. It's first used in Genesis 2:18 when it says, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper." It's used throughout the Psalms and you'll have it like this, "The Lord is a help and a shield," Psalm 115 several times in a row. "The Lord is a help and a shield," and the word "help, ezer," is used exclusively of help sent by God. So when he says a helper suitable, he's saying to the husband, "This is your help sent by God to you." This is how we should see our wives. Help we needed sent by God to help us who makes no mistakes.

So when he says his name is Ezra, Ezra, this is God's help sent from Babylon back to Jerusalem because the temple and the people of God there need desperately need help. As we said in the first point, the help is, praise the Lord, spiritually qualified. Now the second point. If you're gonna be a help, you must be spiritually qualified. If you're going to be a help, you need to be biblically skilled. I changed from "must" to "need" because you can be a help even though you're not biblically skilled. That's the whole point of the spiritual qualification, but it's interesting the balance of Scripture, the tension of Scripture. Yes, you are qualified when you become a believer to help other people, but as a believer you ought to not just say, "I've got enough knowledge now and I'm just skating or coasting until heaven." No, as a believer you and I are called to grow in knowledge and to grow in skill so that we can be more effective helpers. That's what we see in this second point.

The first point was you must be spiritually qualified by being born into the priesthood. This is you need to be biblically skilled by working hard in the Scriptures. If you really want to help and you want your helpfulness to grow, your helpfulness will be generally speaking your helpfulness will be proportionate to your skillfulness in the Scriptures. Now God can work in spite of that and please don't, it doesn't negate what we said in the first point but the Lord has a way of saying these kind of things that almost seem contradictory but they're not, they come together beautifully. The reality is the Spirit of God can do anything he wants to with anybody he wants to at any time he wants to, but normally he works through means and he's gonna work most mightily and most powerfully through people who are studying studiously and diligently to learn his word and we see that in Ezra. The reason he's such a great help to them is because he is a man of the Scriptures.

Verse 6, "This Ezra went up from Babylon," he's told us now, he's spiritually qualified. What does he want to tell us next? "And he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses." I love that phrase, skilled in the law of Moses. Actually, the word means "quick; prompt; or ready." He was quick in the law of Moses. He was ready. He was a scribe who was ready in the law of Moses. Derek Kidner in his commentary on Ezra says this, "This

word connotes quickness of grasp and ease of movement," quickness of grasp and ease of movement, "through otherwise complex doctrine and issues.

So Ezra was a man who had learned by staying in the word of God to have a quick grasp and easy movement throughout the pages of Scripture. That doesn't come accidentally. That's not something you're just spiritually, poof, you're given that. You know, this is something that's really amazing. Jesus himself, when we get to heaven we can ask him about this, but it's clear because Luke 2:52 says Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature. Now think about that a little bit. The eternal Son of God who is omniscient grew in wisdom and stature. What he's saying is as a man, living as true man, Jesus himself studied the Scriptures. He's the author of the word yet he studied the Scriptures. In his deity he's the author of the word but in his humanity he's learning, he's memorizing his Bible.

That's amazing and Ezra was a man like that, and because of that, he was quick, skilled in the law of Moses. In fact, he goes on to say in verse 11, this is now the introduction to the letter from Artaxerxes, "Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel." Learned in the words of the commandments. It's actually an interesting phrase there. In the Hebrew it literally says that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a scribe in the words of the commandments. The word "scribe" is repeated twice. The word "scribe" itself in Hebrew, it's not originally so much about writing. It does have that element but it was originally about counting, and it's a word for marking. Like you know how if you're playing some kind of game and you're like, you're keeping score and you do the stick things, you know, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, like that, remember? It's that kind of thing. It started with that, you're marking. So it means "to count; to account; to take inventory." And then it became to mean taking the words of Scripture and then copying them carefully so that everything, every jot and tittle are accounted for. But Ezra when it says he's a scribe, he's the scribe, a scribe, it's basically saying he's an awesome scribe because he knows, he understands how, he knows how to count these things, he knows how they fit together, and because of that he's skilled in the law of Moses. So when he meets someone who's in need, he's able to cut right to the heart of what needs to be dealt with.

We're gonna see next time, we'll look more at what made him skilled and verse 10 is the key to that. We're not gonna look at that today. I want to just wrap this up by suggesting a couple of things for us to think about related to this. If we want to help other believers, we need to understand, first of all, we have to be qualified spiritually, know that we are truly born again, that we belong to Christ. But secondly, we need to be diligently studying to show ourselves approved like 2 Timothy 2:15 says, study to show yourself approved, a workman who need not be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth, cutting it straight. Study the word of God to understand how it fits together.

It's amazing how much study. You know, God has made it this way that he's made his truths that really are life changing, he puts them in his word but he doesn't, he doesn't leave them like you open your Bible and treasure just falls out. That's not the way it is, is

it? You open your Bible and you have to dig and you've got to meditate and you've got to reflect and you've got to count and turn things around in your mind, and in that treasure comes. Spurgeon says this, he says think about just the natural world. He says God doesn't lay diamonds on top of the earth. Gold is not just laying around. What do you do? You dig for it. So he's teaching us if you would search for wisdom, ask for hidden treasure then you will come to know the Lord, you will know the mind of the Lord.

So we should be people like that and as we become committed to being more like that just from today going forward, you may have been lazy spiritually for a while now, today's the day to repent and to re-engage in becoming a student of the word of God. Not just hearing sermons but hearing sermons and then afterwards meditating on sermons, reflecting on them, trying to glean the truth so that you're able to apply it to your life. And then when you do that, what happens is you have the Holy Spirit and now you have the word of God, when you encounter someone and you sense need, you're going to find that the Spirit is going to quicken the word that you know and you're going to know how to minister to someone. Even when you, now listen it's this mystery because I find this is true, I often find myself praying thinking, "Lord, I don't know what to say or what to do right now." I often find, I don't think that's every going to change actually. The Lord has a way, we joke about this as elders, that once you figure some situation out really well, you don't get that one again. I'm like, "I'm ready. Send me the same circumstance. I'm ready. I know exactly what to do with it." And he's like, no, he sends a totally different one so that you have to keep realizing your dependence upon him, clinging to him through prayer and studying even more, and in doing that he's making us dig more so that we get more treasure and the treasure isn't just so that we can help people, the treasure is that we come to know the living God, who he is, what he's like, and he becomes our treasure. Then when we're meeting with someone who's life is in disarray, they're opening up the corners that are a mess, we have treasure to bring to that. We have the ability then to share what God has given to us and we comfort with the comfort which we've received from God and God's word goes forth and order comes and beauty is restored little by little, but it is every time we speak the word, his word does not return void. It accomplishes something mighty, and if we're faithful to do that, over time you will see then how we are changing. We're becoming more and more beautiful like God wants us to be. We're still always gonna be in process but together we work together to beautify one another by the power of the Spirit through the glory of his word. That's an awesome and wonderful calling but we have to commit to actually get into each other's lives so we can do it.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we praise and honor You and we thank You for the treasure it is to know You the living God through Jesus Christ Your Son. We pray for those that are here today who may not be sure of their salvation. We pray for those who know they're not saved. Lord, help them to look to Christ, help them to cling to Your word, the message of the Gospel of Jesus that He's taken our sins out of the way, He's taken the wrath of God for our sins in His body on the cross, and He's finished the payment through one sacrifice for all time and He rose again to prove that His sacrifice was accepted and there needs to be no more offering for sins and so You save any who will repent and place their faith in

Him. We pray that today You would do that, that You would help people in this room to truly repent and believe.

Father, we pray that You would forgive us for our unbelief and our slothfulness, laziness, apathy. Forgive us for our avoidance of difficulty and help us get back to work. Forgive us and give us the heart of Jesus and let us truly be about helping one another and being helped by others. Humble us, Lord, and help us realize the great and high calling that we have. We have a short amount of time and there's so much work to do, the work is overwhelming and yet our Savior is sufficient and His word is sufficient. So be glorified in Your people. Lord, make this body of believers more and more beautiful, more and more what You want it to be. May the beauty of holiness shine more and more through Your power. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.