

A Strong Focus
Building Core Strength
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I would like to do a little movie trivia with you. Are you up for it? Are you ready? There is a character I have in mind in an animated film that I think many of you will know. It is a pretty recent film from a company called Pixar and I think many of you will know it. So I am the character. And if I am having a conversation with you and right in the middle of my conversation with you I say, "Squirrel." Who am I and what movie am I from?

If you guessed Doug from the movie *Up*, you are correct. Doug is a great character. He is loyal, affectionate, but really easily distracted by squirrels. I mean, he is a dog, after all. I mean, come on. But do you ever feel like Doug the dog at a squirrel farm? I mean just distracted, distracted, distracted. I am telling you that some of that is exactly how I feel. I this like, bring. There is a new text message or, oh, an email popped up on my screen or this paper work right here I have to turn it in or there is somebody I know, or is that a Facebook update? Software needs to download to my computer. Oh, my goodness. There is a call coming in. I have got to take this. I mean, do you ever feel like that, just like something distracting you? Constantly.

There is lots of distractions in our lives or squirrels, if you will. At the end of the day, do you feel like you chased a lot of squirrels, but you weren't focused on what was most important? As we think of our yearly theme of core strength, building core strength, it doesn't take long to recognize that you don't focus and minimize distractions, it is really hard to develop core strength. Now that has been our theme this year and, by God's grace, we have wanted to develop strength in our soul in the important areas of life.

We have also focused on quiet strength this holiday season, the quiet strength of our Savior and how we want to personify that. We have talked about the strong promises regarding the lion of the tribe of Judah and how he is worthy of our allegiance. We have studied the strong prediction of our Messiah by Isaiah and also how the testimonies of Mary and Elizabeth help us to develop a strong faith as we reflect on the evidences and the predictions and the authority of Christ.

As we finish up our series quiet strength, I want to bring one more item to the table, that is that strong focus. Quiet strength is manifested in a strong focus. You see, as we focus on the predictions and the promises and the faithfulness of our Lord and our Savior, we

will grow stronger. The adverse is also true. If we allow things in life to distract us, we will grow weaker. And all this talk of growing stronger and working on the core, it makes me think of something that inevitably happens this time of year. You know what I am talking about, new years. New years is right around the corner and new years brings with it resolutions. Does it not? I mean the Christmas cookies begin to run out. How many of you have an empty plate of cookies on your table and where did they go? They are gone. I want some more. But they are running out or the leftovers are almost gone. You are like: What am I going to eat? This thing called new years is upon us and with the emptying of the cookie plate the lack of leftovers, the resolution is come into full view. And it ranges all the way from a fleeting thought and something maybe I should do to a full on commitment and plan for the upcoming new year to start right.

And, you know, don't most of our new year's resolutions revolve around fitness to some degree? And that is great. I mean, I know of a place to work out if you are interested, but often time that is that focus. But here is my concern. If we are going to be strengthened in our souls, we need to not be distracted by the focus, but we also need to focus on the right things. You see, a person could devote themselves to fitness this year and there is no doubt that would be beneficial. You could focus your attention on fixing up the house and that would be wonderful, I am sure. Or you could focus on getting some extra training to progress in your company and that is an excellent initiative, of course. But I want to look at a text this morning that should help us place focusing on the Word of God at the top of our priorities. And ironically, that will impact every other aspect of our lives from stewardship, relationships, work ethic and ultimately the way we find our joy and satisfaction. The goal, then, is that we could go into the new year with a strong focus.

So we are going to be studying from the book of Ezra chapter seven this morning. So I invite you to open your Bibles and turn to Ezra. If you need a Bible, there is one underneath the chair in front of you and on page 349 in the front section, the Old Testament, is where we are going to be starting today.

Now I want to give a little bit of background and context before jumping into chapter seven. And the chapters leading up to chapter seven discuss the return from exile from the Israelites and the rebuilding of the temple. You see, God's people for years had sought after other gods. They have neglected the Word of the Lord and they have not represented God to all the nations around them. In other words, they have lost focus big time. And there were serious consequences. The nation of Israel was finally conquered and taken away into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians around 587 BC. And Jerusalem is destroyed. Then the Persians take over the Babylonians and all the events in the book of Ezra take place during the Persian rule over the Israelites. And there are multiple kings that reign over the Israelites during their exile. And many of God's people are in exile for over 50 years and finally the Lord moves a king, King Cyrus of Persia to not only release the Israelites, but to proclaim throughout the whole Persian empire the project of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and also making a collection to pay for it. God's hand is on this whole process both humbling his people and rescuing his people.

So in the beginning of the book of Ezra it says 42,360 people assembled to return and they arrive at Jerusalem. And the first thing they do is build an altar to sacrifice, because that is what is written in the law of the Lord, the law of Moses. They are reading it and they are actually doing it, but they are afraid, because there is people around them. They just... and the new kid on the block, new in the town and they start sacrificing to their God and they are scared of all those around them, but they seek to follow the Word of the Lord nonetheless. And that is a strong focus. They seek the Lord first even when scared.

And then they begin singing and thanking the Lord saying, "He is good. His loving kindness is upon Israel forever." And then they begin to build the temple. And then in the middle of building they encounter opposition. Basically the neighbors didn't like the fence that they were building. And so what happens then? The neighbors call the home owner's association and get them in trouble. Well, they actually, if the home owner's association is King Artaxerxes of Persia they write him a letter, talk about how rebellious the city is and the king puts a squash to it because he wasn't King Cyrus, the original king who issued the decree.

So building stops until the next king of Persia, Darius. But God restarts the building process by having the prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesy and the people began to build again. And the next king of Persia, Darius, finds out about this. And you are like oh, no. He is going to shut it down as well. But God's hand is upon them and the new king searches the records and he finds King Cyrus' original decree to rebuild the temple and pay for it. So Darius decrees that the rebuilding project should continue and the neighbors should not hinder it and, in fact, pay for it. God's hand is upon them.

So the building continues. More and more Israelites are returning to Jerusalem and Ezra, the person we are going to be reading about is among them. And the bottom line to this whole process, the good hand or the Lord is upon his people protecting them and moving the hearts of foreign kings as God people were released from captivity to return to him to worship.

So throughout the whole book you see the phrase, "The hand of the Lord his God was on him," repeated over and over.

So the question we need to ask as we read this in chapter seven is: What kind of focus leads the Lord's hand being upon you? So with that in mind, let's read from Ezra chapter seven beginning at verse one. We have got a few names to get through and the meat of it is really in verse 10. So read with me as I read chapter seven in Ezra, verse one.

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, son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest. 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. 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. He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 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. 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.¹

So if we want to head into the new year with a strong focus, with our time remaining let's look at three characteristics of a person with a strong focus. A person with a strong focus studies the law of the Lord. You know, there are plenty of things that we do with spontaneity. But normally a person studies God's Word because he has set his heart on it. We study the law of the Lord because we have set our heart on it. That is what Ezra did. He set his heart to study the law of the Lord to practice it and to teach it.

The beginning of Ezra's focus was to study. He was seeking his mission about God and carefully searching the Scriptures. It wasn't simply a hobby for Ezra or a to do list. This was important. This is something he set his heart on. He desired it. In other words, in advance, he desired to know God's Word and was focused on it. It is not simply because he was a scribe and it was his job. It was because God was with him and it was a close, intimate relationship with his god that manifested in a close, intimate relationship with God's Word.

Now consider there was a lot going on. Ezra is on a trip to travel over 900 miles with about 5000 people. This is not a jump on the internet, grab my toothbrush, get an airline ticket and go somewhere because I feel like it. This is a we are traveling across the desert with people, animals, possessions, a lot of people, a lot of animals, a lot of possessions and it is going to be a dangerous trip to where we are going.

It would have been really Ezra to set his heart on all sorts of things, logistics, security, a myriad of details about the trip and all those things are important, but the text indicate that Ezra set his heart on studying the law of the Lord. And this study helps lead him to lead people in a wise way. Later on you see him in chapter eight gathering his party together in the ... by the river before departing and they were fasting and humbling themselves before God that the Lord may provide safe journey.

So what Ezra studies affects how he lives his life. More on that in a bit. The second item I want to address in this portion of the text is the actual... the law of the Lord. A person with a strong focus studies the law of the Lord because of the nature of the law of the Lord. What is it exactly? You know we hear law and we think, you know, breaking the law. You know, we think about a bunch of lists of dos and don'ts or simply the 10 Commandments. In verse six he references the law of Moses. So what is in focus here is

¹ Ezra 7:1-10.

at least the first five books of the Pentateuch. However, scripture in the Psalms talks about the law of the Lord in very broad terms.

Look at Psalm one. It says:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his
delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and
night.²

So as we think about the nature of the law of the Lord, we see it. It is something to delight in. It is something that is supposed to be a part of our daily lives. It is something to be enjoyed.

You know, it causes us to ask: Ok, I hear that. But what about the nature of the law of the Lord is enjoyable? How can we start to think about God's Word in a level greater than obligation?

Psalm 19:7 helps us with that. It says:

“The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”³

Don't we love things that are perfect? When something goes just right you say, “Perfect.” And you usually smile. It is a good thing. When your car works that is perfect. That is how it is supposed to go. Or when something goes right according to plan or when you have just the right tools for the job, it is like perfect. This works just how it need it to.

You know, unless we are being sarcastic and say, “perfect,” we are usually saying perfect with delight because things are just as we need them to be. The law of the Lord is so perfect that it restores the soul. It is just what we need. We need to focus on God's Word because our souls need it.

What an amazing hope that when we are hurting in our inner most being there is a restoration process that is perfect.

You know, we can also rely on the sure testimony of the Lord. So there is something reliable to put our hope in. There are a lot of things in this world to be unsure of, Wikipedia articles, politicians' promises, advertisements for the latest whatever. Sure, it is going to do that. Like I am not sure. The law of the Lord stands apart as something sure.

But you know the one that really gets me jazzed about the Lord, about the Word of the Lord? It makes wise the simple. You know, I know how a few things work. I know how

² Psalm 1:1-2.

³ Psalm 19:7.

VCRs work and how basketballs work and how microwaves work and, you know, really complicated things. But there is nothing like life to make you feel simple really fast. I mean just consider relationships. Have you got them all figured out, every one of them? No way. Or about your own desires. You know, anywhere from like where you are going to eat to why are you angry. I mean it is complicated. It makes you feel simple. Or how to navigate the work place in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. Or how about parenting? Nothing like parenting to make you feel really simple. I can testify to that. The word simple comes to mind really fast. And God's love is able to impart wisdom to you and to me.

And I think that we would all agree that the nature of the law of the Lord is a compelling reason to study it. But there is more. There is much more. Above all else I need God to be with me. I need him to be with me like he was with Adam, like he was with Moses, like he was with Joseph, like he was with Ezra, like he was with Mary. I need the presence of the Lord in my life.

When you read the Bible and you think about people who are strong in the Bible the defining characteristic of strong people is not their ability. It is the presence of the Lord in their life. That is where strength comes from. So a person with a strong focus studies the law of the Lord because the result is that God's hand is upon him. The presence of God is active in their life.

Look at Ezra 7:9 and you see example of that.

“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.”⁴

He provided him a safe journey, a long journey that took a fairly quick amount of time given how far he had to go because the good hand of God was upon him. Or Ezra 7:28 talking about the Lord. The king:

“...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.”⁵

Ezra's strength came from the Lord being with him. If there is one thing you should take away from this message this morning it is that we need a focus on the presence of God in our lives. That is how we have true strength. We need him. And the way he brings about that intimacy, his presence in our lives is by revealing himself through his Word.

The bottom line is that the law of the Lord is the Word of the Lord. It is his commands to instruct his people how to be in a relationship with him, their God. Reading his Word is about wanting his presence in your life. So let's just stop there and ask a question. Where would the study of God's Word be in your life? How many distractions in your

⁴ Ezra 7:9.

⁵ Ezra 7:28.

life are stopping you from growing stronger in your relationship with the Lord? If you created a list of priorities, where would the study of the word of God be and do you think that that is proportional to the degree that you experience the presence of the Lord in your life, his good hand upon you?

Think about it like this. When you talk to your spouse or a close friend or you talk about something difficult, about something interesting or something funny, doesn't that conversation stick with you throughout the day? Doesn't that relationship exist in part because there is communication? And then the flip side, the less you interact with someone the less you tend to focus on them during the day.

What squirrels, if you will, are weakening your focus on the Word, the communication from God to you? A couple of simple examples are I think of one really distracting thing is sleep. I mean, aren't you just like I want my sleep? I don't want to get up early in the morning and study the Word of God because I want to be sleeping. That is one simple one. What about hobbies? Aren't there a lot of things to be distracted by? If I spend a significant amount of time studying God's Word, I am not going to be able to do the things that I want to do, that I like to do. It is kind of like saying I know I should, but I really don't want to. And I think that view reveals a view of God's Word that is not accurate of how God describes his Word. It minimizes its beauty, its majesty, its worth and the effect it has on us. It doesn't recognize that the very God of heaven wants to reveal himself and his glory to you. He wants his presence in your life. The Word of the Lord is something to delight in because not only does it restore our soul and make us wise, it teaches us about the God who loves us and pursues us even in the midst of our sinfulness.

We get distracted and we believe that other things are more enjoyable than learning about God and we develop a taste for the inferior when true excitement and true joy are set before us.

You know, though, I know people are busy and you might say, "Well, if I am going to study the Word, it is complicated. I don't want to start because it is hard."

You know, studying the Word doesn't have to be complicated. It doesn't have to be something that ultimately we set up at this level that is just unattainable or unreachable. You know, here is something that has just blessed me that I want to share with you and I hope it blesses you. If you just seek to read at least a paragraph of the Word a day, just a paragraph and you seek to read and interact with that text, desiring change and you ask yourself four questions, I think you will be amazed at the result and the practicality of just this every day habit or wrestling with the Word of God.

Here are the four questions that I have been blessed by and I hope that you will be blessed by them as well. You read a paragraph of the Bible and you ask: What does this teach me about God? What do I learn about this nature, about his promises, about his deeds? What did I not know about him that now I know? What have I learned about the nature of God?

Secondly, what does this teach me about man? Mankind as a whole, but me particularly, about our weakness, about our desires, about our need? What does that teach me about God? What does it teach me about mankind? And then the natural flow is the next two questions, what I learn about God and I learn about man. Is there anything in my life that I need to repent of? Is there anything I need to look at and change, because of what I learned about God and what I learned about mankind?

And then the last question to ask would be: Is there something in this text that I need to rejoice in, that leads me into prayer, that leads me into thanksgiving that will be the grid by which I look at the rest of the circumstances of my day?

Those four questions, I think, if you ask those consistently and read just a portion of the Bible and applied it, you would be amazed at the results. And you will delight in it.

A person with a strong focus studies the Word of the Lord.

You know, I think also one of the reasons we don't study the Word is because we approach it as suggestive instead of authoritative. It leads me to my next point. A person with a strong focus practices the law of the Lord. Well, because there is a connection between study and practice. The Bible connects the study of God's Word with the doing of God's Word. There is an expectation that learning about God will lead to living in a way that honors God.

Consider these texts that illustrate that point. Matthew 7:24.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.”⁶

Or John 13:17.

“If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”⁷

I didn't click on that one, sorry. Or James 1:22.

“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”⁸

One of the reasons we don't delight in the Word is because we don't practice the Word and see the results. We miss the blessing of reading God's Word and then being blessed by practicing it. You know, there is nothing inspiring about reading a book and taking a test, at least for me. There may be some of you who say, “I just love taking tests.” But do you know what? Knowledge transfer is rarely a delightful activity that we just engage

⁶ Matthew 7:24.

⁷ John 13:17.

⁸ James 1:22.

with. Oh, I want to read a book and take a test. Reading is not necessarily delightful in that way, but reading something and recognizing deep down inside of you there is something rebellious that needs to change is anything but boring. That is not boring. In fact, sometimes it is just flat out scary. It is not boring. It is a challenge to change. And it is humbling to see that we need to change.

This is one reason I believe that our adult Bible fellowships, our ABFs, as Titus mentioned, are so important. You know, we need each other to help each other live out and practice the law of the Lord. The Christian life was not meant to lived alone.

That brings me to a funny point that I think about often. Have you ever heard the term there is no such thing as a lone ranger Christian? I think of that term and I just laugh all the time, because even the lone ranger he wasn't a lone ranger. He had Tonto. So you think of the lone ranger. You think even he is not alone. And when you use that to define the Christian life, and more importantly, that Christians are meant to be purposefully connected to the body of Christ which is other Christians.

So every time you think of the lone ranger I hope you smile, but also I hope that it causes you to think that I am not supposed to try to live out the Word alone. I am supposed to be connected to the Bible.

So being together in ABF is not just about learning more about your Bible and getting puffed up with knowledge, but to bless each other and to help each other live it out because we can't do it alone. It is all about living it out because we want God's hand upon us. We want to obey him because his hand, his word is directing us.

Another reason a person with strong focus practices the law of the Lord is because God is worthy of obedience. The Lord wants his people to represent him. Part of that is believing what he says to the degree that it impacts our lives. We actually obey.

Look at Deuteronomy 30 and just consider what we read in Ezra and how encouraging this is but how also God knows our hearts. It says:

So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.⁹

Isn't that encouraging? And Ezra we read is experiencing that. The people are reading God's Word and obeying where the previous generations wanted nothing to do with the authority of God and his Word in their life. Now I believe a lot of people don't read the

⁹ Deuteronomy 30:1-3.

Bible because they know they will be held to a higher standard if they read it and they are not comfortable with that kind of authority working on them in their every day life.

You see, it is not simply enough to read it and say, "That is nice to know." Ezra set his heart on studying the Word of the Lord and practicing it. In other words, the study time is preparation for the battle time. The fight to obey the Lord rather than do what is right in your own eyes.

So are there any distractions of the furry tailed variety that we allow to distract us from living out the Word? Here is a few.

How about the distraction of the sinfulness of others. Don't we get really distracted by everybody else's sin and we have just got a bead on what everybody else is doing wrong. And we just say things like, "If they weren't so disrespectful, I would speak in a way that was pleasing to the Lord."

How about I want to speak in a loving way regardless of what someone else says because it honors the Lord? How about the destruction of our pride? If everyone was just as organized as I was, I would help them out. I mean, don't we just be like... it is your mess. You clean it up.

Our pride, how about saying: Lord, when I compare myself to you I don't have a leg to stand on and I am a mess. I want to obey you and give grace to others. How about the distraction of our laziness? You know, man, if I start growing in one area, that means like every area of my life is going to be open up under scrutiny of the Word of God and that just sounds exhausting. I don't want any part of that. It just sounds exhausting.

How about saying, "Lord, you are worthy of every aspect of my life lived for you glory even if it is hard and challenging and I get a little exhausted at times."

How about the distraction of our preference? You know, we say, I will live in a way that please the Lord when it suits me. But when I agree with everything that is going on, how about saying, "Lord, I trust your plan over my preference."

You see, the Lord isn't interested in lip service. He expects real change. That doesn't mean that you pretend that you are better than you are or more godly than you are. It means you are going not set your heart and your focus to studying the Word of the Lord and part of really studying the Word of the Lord is looking at areas of your life where you need to change because of what you learned, one at a time step by step, little by little with help.

As you study the law or the Lord and you put it into practice, the next step is to teach others. Ezra 7:10 says:

“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.”¹⁰

People have said, you know, if you really want to understand something, try teaching it to others. Nothing hones your focus like trying to communicate something you think you know to someone else. So that is why a person with a strong focus teaches the law of the Lord.

Now you might say, “Wait a second. I am not a teacher and I know in the Bible it says that he gave some as teachers. And that means he gave some that are not teachers. I am pretty sure that I am in that category.”

You know, that is fair and it is true that there is a distinction of taking leadership roles as it relates to teaching and the way God has gifted you, but teaching usually doesn't come before learning. And God can give us more gifts so that the more that you learn and the more that you practice, the more you may be in a position to teach others. Another important reason is because the Scriptures teach you about Christ and help you communicate or teach the gospel message more accurately. A person with a strong focus teaches the law of the Lord because the Scripture points us to Christ. You want to teach others about Christ.

You think about John 5:39 that says:

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me.”¹¹

At the end of the day, if we can recite some verses and turn to places and click on our Bible, then we haven't learned about the depth and majesty and provision of Christ. We have missed the boat just like the scribes and Pharisees. We will not be strong. We would not be able to have a good focus for very long.

When I think of Scripture that points to Christ I think of Philippians 3:7 that says:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.¹²

Or Colossians 1:17 says:

“He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”¹³

¹⁰ Ezra 7:10.

¹¹ John 5:39.

¹² Philippians 3:7-8.

¹³ Colossians 1:17.

Or Hebrews 12:2 that says in talking about laying aside our sin and running the race set before us it says:

“...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.”¹⁴

Our focus is to be on Jesus. And there is race set before us and we need to teach each other truths about God’s Word so that we keep going on this race. If the race is becoming more like Christ, we are not there yet. We are not complete. So a person with a strong focus teaches the law of the Lord because we are not complete.

Colossians 1:28 says:

“We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.”¹⁵

Note the comprehensive nature of those verses. We all need to be in a position to proclaim Christ accurately based on what God has said in his Word. We also need to be presented complete in Christ.

Whether your primary gift is teaching or you recognize that there are teachable moments where you may impart wisdom that you have learned from the Word to another person and help them to grow closer in relationship to Christ, we need to teach one another. We want to develop a strong focus because God has entrusted them to our care.

Think about your kids, your nephews, your siblings, your friends, your coworkers. Do you impart things that you know to them? Absolutely. And God might give you some particular relationship where you have a greater influence and you want to have a strong focus when those opportunities present themselves. We want to be ready to teach.

You know, there are people in your lives who need to be trained in righteousness. 2 Timothy 3:16 says:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”¹⁶

It would profit you to know it and it would be profitable for you to learn to teach it if God gives you that opportunity because there are those who need to be trained in righteousness. It doesn’t happen automatically. And I can say by way of testimony that there are a number of godly men in this church, some in formal teaching environments, some in informal ways, corrected me, reprovved me, taught me and trained me. And I am blessed to say that that is continuing because of the Church family God has placed me in and the faithful people who are committed to set their hearts on studying the Word,

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:2.

¹⁵ Colossians 1:28.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16.

practicing the Word and teaching the Word. I pray that would be your testimony as well, that you would be like Ezra and set your heart to a strong focus on God's Word as we enter the new year to study it, to practice it and to teach others so that the good hand of the Lord may be upon you.

Let's pray.