

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
July 21, 2013

God's Hand Was On Him

Read Ezra 7:6-10 & Ezra 8:21-23

Key verses: “On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him” (Ezra 7:9).

Eugene Peterson wrote: “At age 35 I bought running shoes and began enjoying the smooth rhythms of long-distance running. Soon I was competing in 10K races every month or so, and then a marathon once a year. By then I was subscribing to and reading three running magazines! Then I pulled a muscle and couldn't run for a couple of months. Those magazines were still all over the house, but I never opened one. The moment I resumed running, though, I started reading again.

“That's when I realized that my reading was an extension of something I was a part of. I was reading for companionship and affirmation of the experience of running. I learned a few things along the way, but mostly it was to deepen my world of running. If I wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen.

“The parallel with reading Scripture is striking. If I'm not living in active response to the living God, reading about his creation/salvation/holiness won't hold my interest for long. The most important question isn't 'What does this mean,' but 'What can I obey?' Simple obedience will open up our lives to a [Biblical] text more quickly than any number of Bible studies, dictionaries, and concordances” (from Peterson's *Eat This Book*).

It was written of Ezra that he “had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances of Israel” (Ezra 7:10). If we were to identify insights into the godly character of Ezra, one characteristic would surely be that Ezra was willing not only to study God's Word but also “to do it.”

This was one of the godly character qualities that enabled Ezra to lead the difficult return of Jewish exiles from Babylon back to Jerusalem. The first return had followed the edict of King Cyrus. Then, some 80 years later, Ezra led a second return. This journey from Babylon to Jerusalem took four months and involved many dangers. But “the gracious hand of his God was

upon” Ezra (Ezra 7:9), and God used Ezra to lead the exiles safely to Jerusalem.

These two brief passages from Ezra (7:6-10 & 8:21-23) reveal insights into the character of this man Ezra, character qualities that God wants to grow in us as well. The first character quality we have already mentioned: *Ezra was willing not only to study God’s Word but also to do it.* We see two other godly character qualities in 8:21-23:

“Then I [Ezra] proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him. So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.”

Ezra demonstrated the godly character quality of dependence upon God. Ezra was a man of many gifts and strengths, but he did not rely on them. He relied on God. So, even before leaving Babylon, Ezra led the people in fasting and praying for a safe journey to Jerusalem.

Ezra also demonstrated a keen desire to please and honor God. Ezra wanted God to be honored in the king’s eyes. Ezra did not ask the king for soldiers and cavalry to protect his group on their journey. Instead, Ezra wanted the king to see “that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him.” So Ezra and the people fasted and prayed for divine protection.

How strongly do we want our lives to please God and bring God honor?

I am reminded of the 1981 movie, “Chariots of Fire,” which tells the true story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. One of them, Eric Liddell, is a devout Christian. Eric is also a world-class runner.

Eric’s sister, Jennie, wants him to quit competitive running in order to join other family members on the mission field in China. Jennie believes that Eric is putting running ahead of serving God, and she questions his commitment.

In one scene, Eric tries to explain his position to his sister. Smiling, he says to her: “I’ve decided I’m going back to China. The missionary service has accepted.”

“Oh, Eric, I’m so pleased,” Jennie says.

Eric adds, “But I’ve got a lot of running to do first. Jennie, you’ve got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China. He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt. It’s not just fun. To win is to honor Him.”

Lord, like Ezra, may our lives demonstrate a willingness not only to study your Word, but to do it. May our lives demonstrate our dependence, not on

our own abilities and strengths, but our dependence on you. And give us hearts that are more anxious to please and honor you than to please and honor ourselves.

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