

EZRA'S DEVOTION TO THE LORD

Ezra 7:1-8:36
Key Verse: 7:10

September 18, 2010
Bonn UBF

For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

It is my joy to be here and see all of you today. I thank God for the invitation of Dr. Peter Chang to this blessed occasion. Dr. John Jun and Mother Sarah Barry and many leaders of UBF USA send their blessings to all of you. This is a wonderful occasion that celebrates the 30th year of Bonn UBF in Germany. Praise and thank God for his gracious work.

In this happy birthday let us consider God's message for us. It is based on Ezra 7 and 8. The key verse 7:10, is about Ezra's personal resolution. It is to study, obey and teach the Word of God. This is about Ezra's commitment, Ezra's communication and Ezra's collaboration. Yet, this involves his people as a whole. This is the reason to think about this passage. No matter who you are, wherever you are, and whatever you do, we explore the following questions through this message. In this message we find the answers to the three important questions in life. (1) What is it that changes our quality of life? (2) What is it that changes our circumstances for living? (3) What is it that changes our destiny? Through this message let us consider carefully to these answers from God's word.

First, Ezra's commitment (1-10). Ezra lived during the Persian King Artaxerxes (465 BC to 424 BC)(1). The story is about his travel from Susa to Jerusalem (PPT 5). It was a long journey—thousands of miles—with many people. Look at Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." NKJV says, "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." Ezra carefully considered the situation and prepared for the need of the nation. Ezra's devotion and preparation involved his heart. This is about Ezra's commitment.

Then what is commitment? Commitment is based on keen understanding about his own circumstances. The people of Israel have completed their 70 years of captivity in Babylon. They did not perish as a

nation but survived. Now many are free. Thus, Ezra's primary concern was how to build a nation of mission for God. Our context is similar. We are here in this modern world—in many parts of the world--Bonn, Germany, St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russia, Prague, Czech Republic, London, UK, Toledo, USA. We are a part of this worldwide ministry of God's word and prayer. The serious challenges ahead of us are how build and sustain as global mission communities for Christ and his kingdom.

What changes the quality of our life is our own commitment. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned when he was 48 years old. There he spent the next 24 years—until he was 72 years old—being locked up in a small prison cell. There he was almost gave up. What changed his quality of life is this simple poem. "...I am the captain of my soul and master of my destiny." Thus, he studied the law in the prison. He practiced boxing daily. He encouraged his fellow inmates to prepare for the future. No matter where we are, whatever we do, it is our commitment that changes the quality of this life. Think about Ezra's life. Ezra's family history—down through 800 years or so—all the way back to Aaron, Moses' brother in the time of Exodus(2). He was from the lineage of the high priests. His father Seraiah was the chief priest when Babylon was destroyed. Anyway, Ezra probably was born and grew up in Babylon and then educated in Persia. Ezra was an excellent Bible teacher (6). Ezra's commitment was based on what he could do. His commitment was to study and teach the Word of God to the people.

Look at Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." Ezra carefully considered his larger context, his role, and the real need of the nation. Ezra made specific commitment to devote to studying, obeying and teaching the Law of the Lord. This is his long-term commitment. This is about his Back to the Bible commitment. This commitment to study, obey and teach the Word of God is also the unique commitment of Christians throughout the generation. The risen Jesus commissioned his disciples and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in¹ the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." As Christians our task is for Christ and his kingdom.

In 1977 I came to Atlanta, GA as a student missionary. There my first job was a butcher assistant. In two years I was promoted to a prime rib cook. In 1979 I moved to Bowling Green, OH. One day I came back from my ten hours of work in an ice-cream factory. My body was weak. My left lung was infected with tuberculosis. There my two daughters, Sarah and Faith, were sleeping along my wife, Sarah. All of a sudden my eyes were filled with tears because (1) I felt my life was so weak, helpless and pitiful; (2) I was afraid that I would never make as a missionary. Instead I might die doing nothing worthwhile in this world. At that time the late Dr. Samuel Lee encouraged me to study the Bible. I made a small commitment. (1) I will not cry for my pitiful situation. Instead, I decided to work very hard for my two daughters, Sarah and Faith, so that they may not be ashamed of their father when they grow up; (2) Study the Bible very diligently for God's people.

Now thirty years passed then. In retrospect, what changed my life was the small commitment I made before God that night. 30 years ago, at that similar time, a young man, Peter Chang also made a commitment in the other part of the world—Bonn, Germany. 30 years ago, Peter Chang, a young missionary from Korea, also made a commitment to have faith in God. He certainly made a long-term commitment to study, obey and teach the Word of God. This changed the quality of his life. Now, as we celebrate the 30th birthday of Bonn UBF, what do we do? How can we change the quality of life around us? It all starts from our own commitment.

Last night after dinner people gathered to discuss on how to prepare next year's 50th Anniversary of UBF worldwide ministry. The challenges for us are everywhere. Hannah Shin from Czech Republic was shocked to learn that in Chicago UBF headquarters, only a handful of staff members are there to coordinate the entire UBF ministries worldwide. In fact, that is not true. Many leaders USA are working together to coordinate the global mission. Anyway, she made a very passionate speech that we should not depend on UBF headquarters. Rather, we should take care of ourselves and at least 120 people around us, no matter where we live. All people were very moved. So Pastor Abraham Lee recommended her to become the next General Director of UBF. Anyway, this is not the point of today's message. The point is the power of our individual commitment before God. Ultimately, who can help us? What can we do? Just as Ezra, Nelson Mandela and many of us here have experienced, each of us has the key for the quality of our life.

This life of faith is to believe two seemingly contradictory truths. (1) We believe that we can do nothing for our own salvation. God does everything through Christ Jesus. We depend totally on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ alone. By faith alone we are saved. (2) At the same time we live as if this life is determined solely on what we do for ourselves. Each of us must live by saying, "I am God's workmanship. I am the captain of my soul and the master of my destiny."

What is the message of Jesus Christ to his disciples? The secret of fruitful life anytime and anywhere in this world. "I tell you the truth. Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed,. But if it dies, it produced many seeds"(Jn 12:24). Ultimately, what determines the quality of fruit in this life is commitment to death to our selves and to the life for God. If we want to change this life, the key is our own commitment to the Word of God. Jesus' promise to us is this: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, it will be given to you"(Jn 15:7). As Christians, our serious commitment is to studying, obeying and teaching the Word of God. This is what determines the quality of this life.

Second, Ezra's communication (7:11-28). Communication is a very practical way to implement the commitment. From 7:11-28, Ezra communicates through the letter of the king Artaxerses. Ezra prayed to God first. Ezra communicated to God first. Then, Ezra certainly communicated to the king on numerous occasions. He served the king with all his heart, soul and strength over the years. The king was pleased with the great contribution that Ezra and the Jewish people made for him and his kingdom. Now the king was happy to support Ezra's goals.

Did the king write this letter? Ezra probably drafted the letter. The king addressed to Ezra because Ezra had also directly communicated to the king (11-12). The king allowed Ezra to take any of the Israelites in his kingdom (13-14). The king also allowed Ezra to take all the gold and silver or any materials that Ezra needed for the important tasks (15-16). With all the money Ezra was allowed to buy animals for offerings to God (17-18). Ezra also was able to purchase the articles for the temple in Jerusalem (19-20). The king even ordered all the governors and magistrates to support the needs of Ezra and his people for whatever they needed (21-23). The king also strictly instructed them not to collect

any taxes from Ezra and all the people that work for God with stern warning (24-25). The king concluded his letter by saying, “Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.”(26)

God is our Rock. He is our Savior. He is our Lord. At the same time in this world we also communicate through our king in this world. Communication is the process through which important and larger goals are clarified, accepted and implemented. How can anyone carry out the small and larger purpose effectively? It is through communication. Communication is in a sense clarification of goals with details. Over the years Dr. Peter Chang communicated tirelessly—more e-mails and pictures than anyone else. He communicated what he and his leaders were about to do to many leaders. He provided many details. Last year he prepared 2009 European Conference through much communication. This is the same for this blessed 30th anniversary. Now, the goal for the next 30 years is being communicated. As I consider all the prayer topics of Bonn UBF, it can be summarized as “building global mission communities for Christ and his kingdom”. This is quite ambitious and challenging goals. How can this be done?

Third, Ezra’s collaboration (8:1-36). Chapter 8 is Ezra’s collaboration in detail. Ezra proclaimed a fast by the Ahava Canal. It was to humble before God and ask his protection for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions (21). Ezra valued his people. Ezra sought God’s help and his protection. In Psalm 121:1-2, we read, “I lift up my eyes to the hill—where does my help come from? In the eyes of unbelievers, things happen by random chances. However, God’s people trust God. There is the invisible power of God at work in this world.

Then, how did God answer their prayers? God protected them from enemies and bandits along the way. So they arrived in Jerusalem safely. Then the people offered to God the burnt offerings. It was thanksgiving offerings to God. Today, in view of all his grace we offer our thanksgiving to God. As we seek help and protection from our God, we also seek help from people as well. In the remaining portion of this chapter, Ezra’s main work is to seek people and fellow co-workers for God (15-20).

Bonn UBF is a ministry where Korean missionaries and German leaders have gathered and worked together for the ministry of God's word and prayer. Some people might ask, "Why should any German young people make commitment to God through this UBF ministry? There are many other churches in Germany. Why UBF? What is here in UBF that is so special?" This is true with other UBF ministries in the world. Why should Russian young people join Russian UBF? We have serious questions on how to pass our baton to the next generation.

How can we maintain common identity as global mission communities? Ultimately, what unites us together is the common commitment to Christ Jesus and love for one another. If UBF ministries, no matter where they are, commit to Christ and his kingdom and faithfully present Christ and his words, then people will join. If we value one lost sheep with the love of Christ, then people will commit. If we value our suffering co-workers as much as our own family members, then UBF ministries will maintain the spiritual unity as global mission communities.

In brief, the quality of this life changes with our commitment. Our circumstances changes with our communication. Our destiny changes with our collaboration. This is to love deeply one another in Christ Jesus. Then, we can build anything in this world. Even in the desert land, we can build a small kingdom of God. The needs of the world—Europe in particular—are quite complex and great. This is my humble assessment. The greatest challenge for Christians in Europe is to build mission communities for Christ and his kingdom. First and foremost we must reflect Christ Jesus through our life and mission together. This is possible as we practice commitment to God, communication with God and collaboration for God. May God bless all of you as you set the direction, Back to the Bible—study, obey and teach the Bible as of the first importance.

In Bonn UBF. September 19, 2010.
(Dr, Paul Hong, European Mission Coordinator).