

## What's the Message – Lesson 83

This time we look at Ezra as the “father” of modern Judaism.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is that although this lesson focuses on the Law of God, almost to the exclusion of the Gospel message, there are times and places in our lives for the proper use of the Law. Even though we think of ourselves as Children of the Gospel, we cannot ignore God's Law, and must keep these two principles in balance. This, oh Lord, help us to do. Amen.

Last time we saw more of the detail of the early years of the reconstruction of Jerusalem – first, the opposition of the local governors and people, then the decree of Darius that these opponents must not only help the Jews, but also to pay the cost of doing so. Then we saw the arrival of Ezra, and the sudden impact he had on the Jews there. But, Teacher, you have entitled this lesson about Ezra being the “father” of modern Judaism. Would you explain that to us, please.

First, what is the message we have seen throughout our studies? To summarize it briefly, God had chosen them to be His people, and promised to be faithful to them and bless them in order that they might be a blessing to others. This required two things on their part: total trust in God, and complete obedience to His commands. Then, what was the message of the prophets from Samuel forward? Simply this, that God demands justice, and that if His commands are not obeyed, there will be punishment. Since Israel had been guilty of turning away from God time and time again, they would certainly be punished just like the pagan nations around them. By the time they had been freed from captivity in Babylon this “I told you so” message had been hammered into their lives.

In Babylon there was no temple for them to make the daily sacrifices, so synagogues developed to teach the people God's Law. During those days of exile, priests and scribes were busy collecting, codifying, and studying the Law to establish guidelines for the people to show themselves as the chosen ones of God. Then after they returned to Jerusalem and had restored the temple, every decline in

their national life was interpreted as being a punishment for not keeping God's Law completely.

It did not take rocket science to establish the conclusion here. There was cause, and there was a definite effect. It is only logical that a Law community would naturally develop. And overshadowing all others in the shaping of this Law community was Ezra. Dale, Professor Bright has a paragraph in his book, "The Kingdom of God," that makes this point well. Would you read it to us, please?

"Ezra was a towering figure. It is not incorrect to regard him as the father of Judaism. He did not, of course, invent the Law, but the full impact of the Law on the life of Jewish people dates from the movement in which he played a leading part. Judaism from now on is to be a Law community. He is a member of the true Israel who keeps the Law." And we can add: to do that in every detail is the first order of business for this community.

And they took this matter very seriously. The book of Nehemiah records in chapter eight that Ezra stood on a high platform and read the book of the law (presumably Deuteronomy) from dawn until noon everyday for a week. Then the Levites would explain to groups the meaning of each section so that they would understand. In contrast, brief lessons like "What's the Message" were unheard of and were not acceptable. Then on the occasion when the mixed marriages were dissolved, they stood before Ezra in the temple in a downpour of rain and listened to him for hours until he took pity and sent them away.

As Dr. Bright writes: "Let any who find Ezra and the Judaism he helped create narrow, and who surely will be at church next Sunday if the weather is fine, note well!"

Furthermore, in order to make sure that the Law would not be broken accidentally, the rabbis saw a need for additional rulings to give clarification. The result of this was to build a protective "fence" around God's Law, and then another layer of protection, and then another, until the people were buried under a mass of legislation that no ordinary person could learn. It would require a special class of scribes and teachers to master the total series of regulations. This, eventually, led to the establishment of the Pharisees, which helps us to understand why they rejected Jesus.

And this emphasis upon the keeping of God's Law continues today in varying degrees in the several forms of Judaism. And although even many Jews today may not recognize how important Ezra continues to be in their lives, we should not give this man less recognition than he deserves.

Lest we be too critical of the Law community for its cold, hard-shell appearing attitude, consider these words from Dr. Bright: "And it must be said that humanly speaking the Law did no less than save Israel's faith alive. It was an armor about that faith to preserve it from extinction.

Protected by it, the whole heritage of the prophets survived. Let us not forget that it was Judaism that preserved the writings of the prophets; without Judaism we should not have them. It preserved the fruits of the prophet preaching as well. The Law was stoutly monotheistic; it made no concessions to paganism. The Law was the snow-covered, frozen ground which protected the seed until the fullness of time."

And we conclude with these additional thoughts from Dr. Bright: "It is worth suggesting, also, that the Law community has a lesson to teach us which we have not wanted to learn. Now, we cannot as Christians ever go back to the Law (as our basis for salvation). . . . Yet, these doctors of the Law are, in one sense, an example to us which we ignore to our infinite hurt. Repelled by all legalism, we have come close to the point of apologizing for any duty religion seems to involve, nay, have offered a religion almost without the demand of duty at all. Can it be that in casting off all religious duty, we have ended up admitting no duty – save to ourselves? . . . Christianity does involve duty." As Jesus said (John 14:15) *If you love me, you will obey what I command.*

Next time we will learn about another faithful man who took God's words seriously – Nehemiah.