

Preparation and Protection

Our culture loves and idolizes sports. Spectators by the millions watch professional and collegiate athletes; eager to see the next great pass reception, three-point shot, or booming homerun. Outstanding athletes make their performances appear almost effortless, but in reality years of preparation were required.

We understand that athletes have to prepare and practice for years to “win the big one,” but what about us? Do we need any special preparation to serve the Lord?

In this week’s lesson you will learn about a man named Ezra. Eighty years after Zerubbabel led the first group of Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, Ezra led another group. You are going to learn about Ezra’s preparation and God’s protection.

Ezra 7:1 **Cyrus** was the Persian king who freed the Jews. **Darius** was the king who gave Zerubbabel authority to complete the Temple. Next was King **Ahasuerus**, who chose Esther to be his queen. This chapter begins in the reign of the next king, **Artaxerxes**.

Ezra 7:2-5 In these verses Ezra traced his lineage all the way back to “_____ the chief priest.”

Ezra 7:6 How does this verse describe Ezra?

Why did the king grant his request?

Ezra 7:8 The date was late July or early August of 458 B.C.

Ezra 7:9 How long did the journey take?

Ezra 7:10 “For Ezra had _____ his heart.” Like a pro ball player, Ezra spent years preparing himself for the time he would go to Jerusalem. Specifically, he prepared himself for three things:

1. “To _____ the _____ of the LORD”
2. “And to _____ it”
3. “And to _____ in Israel statutes and judgments.”

What do you think Ezra might have done to prepare himself?

Verses 11-26 contain a copy of King Artaxerxes’ decree. Like the decree of Cyrus eighty years earlier, it is amazing proof of how God can work through a pagan ruler to accomplish His will.

Ezra 7:25 What did Artaxerxes order Ezra to do?

Ezra 7:26 How much power did the king give Ezra?

Ezra 7:27 “Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath _____ such a thing as this in the _____’s heart, to _____ the house of the LORD which is in _____.”

Ezra 7:28 For what else did Ezra praise God?

What effect did God’s activity have on Ezra?

Chapter 8 lists the heads of the families who accompanied Ezra. This group of several thousand gathered by a river in Babylon.

Ezra 8:21 What did Ezra do there?

Ezra 8:22 Why didn’t he want to ask the king for protection?

Ezra 8:23 What did they do?

They carried a huge amount of gold and silver with them. The priests were responsible for caring for these treasures.

Ezra 8:31 How did God answer their prayers?

Ezra 8:32-33 After resting three days, what did they do?

Ezra 8:34 Accurate records were kept.

Ezra 8:35 What did the Jews who had just returned from captivity in Babylon do next?

Concluding Thoughts: Ezra prepared his heart to serve the Lord. That preparation undoubtedly involved daily prayer and Bible study. Have you prepared yourself to serve God? We often procrastinate about spiritual things: “I’ll read the Bible tomorrow;” or “I’ll pray when I have more time;” or “I’ll get back to church when my schedule slows down;” or “I’ll tell that person about Jesus another time.” The only way to be ready to serve God in the future is to get busy doing the basics right now.

Ezra prepared his heart to **seek** the Word of God, to **do** what it says, and **teach** it to others. Are you **seeking** God’s Word? Are you **doing** what it says? Are you looking for opportunities to **teach** its truths to others?

Ezra and those with him sought God’s protection rather than asking the king for guards. God saw them safely through that four-month journey, carrying millions of dollars worth of silver and gold with them. Do you depend upon God or men for protection?

Ezra thanked God and the people brought offerings to the Lord. Have you given anything to the Lord lately?

Prepare your heart. Seek God's protection. Bring Him offerings.

Project: Start afresh today preparing your heart to serve the Lord. Memorize **Ezra 7:10**.