

# KINGDOM WORK

Week Three | May 12, 2019 | Kingdom Workers Set Their Hearts on God

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's texts, Ezra 7:10, 14–16, 27–28; and Ephesians 4:16. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

## THIS WEEK

### KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The hand of the Lord is on His people.

### THEOLOGY APPLIED

We live out our gratitude for God's grace in our lives through our devotion to Him and His work.

### MEDITATE

*"For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10).*

## GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Devotion is a word reserved for our loyalty to someone. It springs from love. The more we love someone, the more devoted to them we are. This is a word that should describe our actions toward God. Unfortunately, many of us

struggle to rightly apply our loyalty and love to anyone other than ourselves. The love of self is a great temptation. Our flesh seeks to establish our own greatness, and the world feeds our flesh with its ideology of self. We teach our children that they can do anything they put their minds to. We believe the lie that if we just work hard enough, success will follow. The celebrity culture we've created tempts us to search for stardom. Instead of beholding the glory of the Lord, we behold our own glory. And we like what we see.

We often fail to acknowledge the hand of the Lord in our lives. We boast in ourselves instead of in our God. We eagerly claim credit for our successes. Our enemy easily convinces us of our own greatness. But Satan is a liar. God says that apart from Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). He makes His grace abound to us so that we might abound in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8). Everything we have is a gift of grace from our good Father. "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). In her book, *Courage, Dear Heart*, Rebecca Reynolds writes, "A Christian's confidence doesn't reside in 'I'm great' but in 'Greatness lives in me.'" Our God is great. He has done great things for us. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). How could we not devote ourselves to Him?

Today's lesson is a refreshing look at a man who understood who gave him success and serves as a sharp contrast to our sinful tendency to boast in our abilities. Ezra enters the story as a priest who did not return from Babylon with the original group of exiles. Sixty years have passed since our story left off with the completion of the temple. The events of the book of Esther took place in the period between chapters six and seven. "Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him" (Ezra 7:6).

We serve the same God whose hand was on Ezra in blessing. God advanced Ezra's work because it was His own work. Ezra's success came from the Lord and he acknowledged it every step along the way. O that we would be a people who do likewise. The hand of the Lord is on His people. He advances our work in His name and for His glory. This special grace is reserved for His sons and daughters. Our response to His grace in our lives is gratitude. We live out our gratitude through our devotion to Him and His work in all the earth. We work for Him and by His power. And He gives us favor to do so. Let's devote ourselves to do His work.

🗣️: *Do you try to steal God's glory in your work? What would it look like to give God*

*glory in all that you do?*

**Q:** *What evidence exists in your life to prove your devotion to the Lord?*

## ▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In today's lesson we will discover how our gratitude for God's grace toward us results in our devotion to Him and His work.

1. KINGDOM WORKERS SET THEIR HEARTS ON THE LORD
2. KINGDOM WORKERS ARE CONFIDENT IN THE LORD
3. KINGDOM WORKERS GATHER OTHERS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE WORK OF THE LORD

## GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

## KINGDOM WORKERS SET THEIR HEARTS ON THE LORD

### ▣ EZRA 7:10

**Q:** *What was Ezra devoted to?*

Have you ever said something like, “I’ve got my heart set on a juicy steak for dinner!” Or maybe a friend asks where you plan to vacation this year and you say, “We want to go to the mountains, but our kids have their hearts set on going to the beach.” Often, we talk casually about the affections of our hearts, reducing our desires to whatever our grumbling stomachs may ache for in any given moment. But Ezra was a man who purposefully directed his affections toward the only thing truly worthy of them. Ezra set his heart to know God’s Word, to do it, and to teach it (Ezra 7:10). He aimed his affections at God and devoted himself to knowing Him and making Him known.

Ezra is sent by king Artaxerxes to make inquiries about the spiritual condition of the Israelites (Ezra 7:14). Ezra was basically commissioned by the king of Persia to make sure the returned exiles were obeying God’s law. God was not only rebuilding His temple, He was rebuilding a community. This community needed a spiritual leader, so He sent Ezra. He granted Ezra favor with the king. “And the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him” (Ezra 7:6). Ezra led a second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem. His purpose in returning to Jerusalem is revealed in the intentions of his heart. He was a devoted hearer and doer of God’s Word (James 1:22), and he desired to teach others to do the same. Ezra wanted the returned exiles to know and obey the Lord, so he went to teach them, as God directed.

Ezra’s desires matched God’s desires for His people. This is what happens when we set our hearts on God. To set our hearts on the Lord means to intensely pursue Him with a determination to please and obey Him. It demands intentionality. The image is not of stumbling into an affection for God the way you might happen upon a deer in the woods. Rather, it is a picture of purposefully aiming our affections at God. It’s placing our hearts on His path. It’s deliberately studying the Bible, putting to death the deeds of the flesh (Romans 8:13), praying, repenting, serving, teaching, and trusting. It’s living deliberately for the God we love. It’s desiring what He desires and doing what He commands. And the motivation for all this doing is love. Ezra loved his God and wanted others to love Him, so he invested his energy into teaching God’s Word.

Kingdom workers labor for the King. But we do not do so begrudgingly. We work for the King who is also our Father, who welcomed us into His family when we were His enemies. He loves us with an unimaginable love, and we respond to that love by setting our affections on Him. It’s out of our love and gratitude that we labor. As recipients of His great grace of salvation, we naturally desire for others to receive the same grace. So, we teach them. We live and work in such a way as to draw others to behold our God. The good hand of the Lord is on us just as it was on Ezra. And like Ezra, we set our hearts on the Lord as we do kingdom work.

Q: *What things compete for your heart's affections? What would a heart set on the Lord look like?*

Q: *How has God given you favor with others to do kingdom work?*

## KINGDOM WORKERS ARE CONFIDENT IN THE LORD

### ❏ EZRA 7:27-28

Q: *What did God put into the heart of the king?*

Q: *Why did Ezra take courage?*

Confidence is the belief that you can rely on someone. It is rooted in trust. You can't fake it. You are either confident someone will come through for you or you're not. Ezra, the kingdom worker devoted to studying God's Word, doing it, and teaching it to others, is confident in the Lord. Upon being sent by king Artaxerxes to do the Lord's work, he said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me" (Ezra 7:27-28).

Ezra acknowledges that God controls the heart of the king. He knows he is incapable of exercising that level of influence over the Persian king, but God can and does. "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1). Ezra's confidence isn't in himself, but in the mighty hand of the Lord. He is also confident in God's everlasting goodness to him based on God's covenantal loyalty to His people. He blesses God for extending His steadfast love to him, a love that is based in God's faithfulness to His own covenant

with His children. Ezra has unshakeable confidence in the character of God to honor His covenant, which births bravery in his actions. He takes courage because God is in control and blesses him with favor for kingdom work.

It is no coincidence that this priest who devoted himself to the Scriptures is so confident in the Lord. We can't know the living Word without knowing the written Word. Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He is our way to the Father. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Ezra's devotion to God's Word grew his confidence in God. The more he knew the Scriptures, the more he knew the Author of them. Ezra trusted God because Ezra knew God. As we grow in our relationship with God, our confidence in Him likewise grows.

If you find yourself struggling for confidence in the Lord, perhaps it's because you don't know Him, or don't know Him well. We don't meet someone in the morning and throw our complete trust their way by nighttime. No, we trust people we know. The more we know our Father, the more we will trust Him. Trusting someone is scary. It's giving up control and placing our successes and failures in the hands of another. But Ezra knew what all God's children instinctively know. His hands are good, and they are on us in favor. Therefore, we can be confident in Him. Perhaps you are out of practice with trusting in God. Our confidence in Him is like a muscle that needs to be used for it to work optimally. Exercise that trust muscle. It may be out of shape, but it can be toned and restored to health. Practice confidence in the Lord.

Our God is trustworthy. We know that intellectually but struggle to believe it when the stakes are high. We become secret doubters of His ability to come through for us. What if we go all in and He doesn't show up? What if we look like a fool? What if we walk into that fire and get burned, not delivered? Saints, behold your God. Know Him. Know His steadfast love for you. Know His covenantal loyalty to His people. Know His desires for His work to be accomplished and do your work because of who He is. Be thankful for Him and confident in Him. Have a high view of your good Father. His hand is on you. Take courage and work.

**Q:** *What prohibits you from taking courage in Him? How can you develop an instinct to have confidence in God?*

**Q:** *What encouragement can we find in Scripture to be confident in the Lord?*

# KINGDOM WORKERS GATHER OTHERS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE WORK OF THE LORD

## ■ EZRA 7:28B AND EPHESIANS 4:16

Q: *What did Ezra do with the community leaders?*

Q: *What is the result of each part of the body working properly?*

Our faith is not individualistic; it's communal. We are a family. We are not a person; we are a people. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We are co-laborers. God designed the body to work together. Kingdom workers are a part of a beautiful mosaic. When we were saved, we developed an instinct for dependency. We not only recognize our need for Christ, we feel our need for each other. We've been given different gifts according to the grace given to us to build up the body of Christ. And we are a body "joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

Our Father doesn't intend for us to be overburdened and overworked. He grows our need for Him and each other for His glory. He is glorified when His children humbly depend on Him for strength to work. He is exalted when His children labor together to accomplish His purposes on earth. Kingdom workers are gatherers. We gather others to participate in the work of the Lord. Ezra knew what he had to do, so he gathered leading men from Israel to go with him to do it (Ezra 7:28).

Ezra returned to Jerusalem to spiritually look after the Israelites. When he gathered his wave of returning exiles, he noticed they included none "of the sons of Levi" (Ezra 8:15), the appointed clergymen for God's people. Ezra needed more priests to serve in the new temple, so he sent out "leading men," "men of insight" to persuade some Levites to join them in their work. "And by the good hand of our God on us," they successfully convinced a group of priests to return with them (Ezra 8:18).

Ezra was devoted to God and God kept His hand on His people for their good as they worked. When Ezra feared for their safety as they traveled back to Jerusalem, he thought about asking the Persian king to provide them

with protection. However, his confidence in the Lord prevented him from doing so because he had already told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek Him” (Ezra 8:22). Ezra gathered the people for prayer and fasting to seek God’s protection for their journey (Ezra 8:21). Their confidence in God was not unfounded. “The hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way” (Ezra 8:31).

We can imitate Ezra’s intentionality in setting his heart on the Lord despite the many distractions that clamor for our attention. Ezra’s confidence in the Lord is inspiring in our culture of self-dependency. Like Ezra, we can gather others to join us in our kingdom work. We learn much from studying the book of Ezra. We learn from his example of devotion to the Lord. Ezra saw God’s hand on him for good, and it propelled him to devote himself to his King. Should we not do likewise? Dear saint, behold your God. See His good hand upon you. Live out your gratitude for such grace by devoting yourself to your King and His kingdom work!

**Q:** *Do you prefer to work alone? How might your kingdom work improve if it were done in collaboration with God’s people?*

**Q:** *Consider your faith family’s kingdom work. Think of ways to gather others to join you in it.*

## NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

**Q:** *How does knowing that the good hand of the Lord is on you increase your devotion to Him? What impact does this have on your kingdom work?*



**Q:** *Discuss examples of people both from Scripture and your own church body who model what it looks like to be devoted to the Lord.*

## PRAY

+ *Use this prayer point to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

*Father, bless Your name! We are unworthy, but Your good hand is on us, nonetheless. Give us grateful hearts for this great grace You've shown us. Teach us to live out our gratitude by being devoted to You and Your kingdom work. Set our hearts on You, Lord. Make us confident in You. Forgive our doubting and divided hearts. Thank you for the work You allow us to participate in. Help us to gather others to join us as we labor for You. Give us strength, Father. Your name is great, and we pray for it to be glorified in all the earth!*

## COMMENTARY

**EZRA 7:14** – The commission to “make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God” no doubt reflects Ezra’s own priority, and perhaps his belief that the law is not being properly kept.

**EZRA 7:15–16** – The king and his counselors give money for the temple and permit Ezra to gather further resources in the whole province of Babylonia, perhaps from non-Jews as well as Jews.

*\*All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes.*

