

Preparing for Your Lifetime Calling

By Deron J. Biles

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read 1 Timothy 4:11–16. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: How did Paul instruct Timothy to prepare himself? How does this mirror the example of Ezra in Ezra 7:10?

Assignment Two

Read Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What do these verses suggest about God's blessing on Ezra's ministry?

Assignment Three

Read Ezra 8:21–23. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What were the dangers involved in the four-month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem?

Scripture to Memorize

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

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will recognize the value of preparing for the calling of God on their lives and will learn practical lessons concerning how to do that.

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Deron is the author of *After God's Heart: Becoming the Man God is Seeking* along with its companion volume, *After God's Heart: Becoming the Man God Is Seeking, a Forty-Day Bible Study*. He is the coauthor of *Seminary Education by Extension: Process, Principles, and Practices*. In addition, he has written or cowritten manuals on pastor search committees, making resumes, interim ministry, and associational ministry. Deron and his wife currently reside in North Richland Hills, Texas.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

English has a variety of uses for the word *ready*. Children use it on the starting line of a race to alert them to the “set” and “go” commands to come. The phrase *ready yourself* means to prepare for something that is coming. We often ask people if they are *ready* to go. A child’s baby teeth might be *ready* to come out. Students preparing for a test aim to be *ready* for the exam. Or someone in intense sadness may be *ready* to cry. Finally, someone who is always prepared might be described as ever *ready*. Here is an interesting question: What are you *ready* for spiritually?

You’re not ready to serve until you have the heart of a servant. In this lesson, we are going to see in Ezra a model for how to prepare for the lifetime calling of God on our lives. We will learn four keys to Ezra’s success in ministry.

Read Ezra 7:1–10, 27–28; 8:21–23 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Ezra 7 begins with the return from Babylon to Jerusalem led by Ezra. The purpose of his return was to supply the newly rebuilt temple (see Ezra 4:1; 6:22; 7:13–23) and to restore the worship of Israel (Ezra 7:10–11, 25–26). These verses describe Ezra’s family background and his four-month journey to Jerusalem.

When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he quickly went to work. Verse 10 suggests the first reason for Ezra’s effectiveness was the preparation of his heart.

Verse 10. set his heart. Whatever else the word *set* implies, it certainly means “to plan ahead and to prepare for something in advance.” Ezra determined to start first with his own heart. He prepared his heart for challenges ahead. The Hebrew for this word suggests both permanence and intentionality. He cooperated with God, so his heart would be firm, established and permanently fixed on these things.

The order in which Ezra worked is significant. He didn’t try to teach others until he first learned and applied those truths in his own life. This verse tells us the tasks he set his heart to do and the order in which he did them.

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week may now share answers to the following questions: How did Paul instruct Timothy to prepare himself? How does this mirror the example of Ezra in Ezra 7:10?

Studying the Passage

Verse 10. to study the law of the LORD. This phrase literally means “to pursue the law of the Lord.” This is the foundational task of any genuine servant of the Lord. We should never presume or pretend to give away what we do not have. We must be students of God’s Word, the first and lifelong pursuit of every God-called believer.

Paul instructed Timothy to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). We

must diligently study God's Word in order to understand it and accurately communicate it. Ezra was so diligent in his study of Scripture that he was described as "skilled" as a scribe (v. 6) and "learned in the matters of the commandments of the LORD" (v. 11). Is your heart prepared to study God's Word? Every faithful servant of the Lord is a student of His Word.

Verse 10. Ezra had set his heart . . . to do it. We have no right to tell people what to do if we are not doing it ourselves. We live in something of a "just do it" culture. Here, Ezra reminds us that what we have learned in God's Word, we have a responsibility to put into practice in our lives. James 1:22 tells us to "be doers of the word, and hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Are you obedient to God's Word? **Ezra had set his heart . . . to teach.** Finally, we learn that Ezra taught the people what he had learned and put into practice in his own life. Did you notice the order of Ezra's work? He prepared his heart to study, to practice, and only then to teach. That's the right order.

This is also the pattern Jesus followed. Luke wrote in Acts 1:1 that in his previous book (the book of Luke) he described "all that Jesus began to do and teach." That means Jesus practiced what He preached. Doing precedes teaching, just as teaching grows from our study.

Studying the Passage

Verse 6. the hand of the LORD. In addition to Ezra's character, the Bible tells us a second reason for his success. God's hand of blessing was upon his ministry. Read Ezra 7:9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31 for other indications of God's blessings. Ezra's giftedness was matched by God's favor on his ministry. As with Ezra, when our gifts meet God's favor, God can accomplish great things through us.

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week may now share an answer to the following question: What do Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31 suggest about God's blessing on Ezra's ministry?

Discussion Question

Would your life look any differently if the hand of the Lord were upon you?

On Your Own

In the space below, describe a time when you most clearly saw evidence of God's hand on your life.

Studying the Passage

Verse 28. leading men. The third reason for Ezra's success was his strategy. Ezra surrounded himself with capable people who could work with him. These people are further described in Ezra 8:15–20. They were described as "leading men" (7:28), "teachers" (8:16), "servants" (8:17), and men of "insight" (8:18).

Ezra surrounded himself with capable people who shared his heart to serve. Think about the people with whom you hang out. Are they the right kind of people who will strengthen your ministry?

Studying the Passage, Ezra 8:21–23

Ezra 8:21. to seek from Him a safe journey. Literally this phrase means “to seek from Him a straight path.” This is a fourth key to Ezra’s success. He sought the Lord. Ezra led the people to fast, humble themselves and their families before the Lord, and seek God for a safe journey.

The word used for “safe journey” is the same word used in Proverbs 3:6. There it is translated “straight.” Ezra was praying for God’s direction for the journey. He asked God for a straight path. The implication is a prayer for God’s guidance and protection along the way. Ezra sought the Lord because he knew of the potential dangers along the way. Ezra sought the Lord, and the Lord granted his request.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week may now share answers to the following question: What were the dangers involved in the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem?

Discussion Question

How do the keys to Ezra’s success apply to our lives and calling?

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

In this passage we've seen four keys to Ezra's success in ministry: his preparation, confirmation, strategy, and faith.

Ezra began with himself. He prepared his heart to study God's Word, to put it into practice in his life, and then to teach it. How are you preparing for God's call on your life?

Any area of ministry to which God has called you will require your preparation. We never will be perfect, but we can be ready.

Start with your heart. Get that right. Begin with gratitude for your salvation and then move toward a love for God.

Prepare your heart for a journey of discovery of God's Word, a lifetime of faithful practice of what God teaches you, and a careful plan to teach what He has shown you.

Are you ready? That's step one.

The next step of Ezra's success reminds us that whatever good happens in our ministry is only because of the blessing of God. You could be the most gifted person in the world, but without God's hand on your ministry, you will miss His best. All of us need His hand on our lives and on our work. When you see victories, make sure you don't take credit for what God has done.

The third key to Ezra's success was a good strategy. He had an intentional plan to surround himself with capable people who could complement his work. You need to surround yourself with the right kind of people who will strengthen the work of Christ in your ministry.

The final key to Ezra's success was prayer. He passionately and specifically sought the blessing of God on their journey. How powerful is your prayer life? His Majesty may be waiting for you to humbly seek Him before He empowers and directs your work.

Those are four steps that will lead all of us toward success in ministry.

Follow up Question

What do you believe are the keys to success in life? How has your faith influenced your success?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.