

God's hand for our good

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[0 : 00] Let's pray and ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, as our brother Randall just reminded us, we don't want the scriptures to be just words on a page, but we want the scriptures to be how we experience you.

And indeed, Lord, we just pray that as we come to your word, may your word feed us and grow us up in our salvation and help us to taste and see that you are good. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, have you ever experienced a failure of courage? Back in my primary school days, there was one time when everybody in class was supposed to do a public presentation of some sort.

And to my horror, I discovered that I was the first up. So my hands began to sweat. My face got paler and paler. And when I got up, I stumbled through the first two sentences of my presentation before I looked at my teacher and mumbling, I'm feeling sick.

I made excuses. My courage failed, so I opted out. Now, have you experienced that as well? If courage is the willingness to try to face up to a difficult challenge, despite the physical or emotional risks of doing so, when was the last time you had a failure of courage?

[1 : 25] Perhaps you lack the courage to discipline your child, correct your friend, or confront your spouse even when they were clearly out of line. Or perhaps you saw someone doing something clearly wrong in your workplace or in public, but you chose not to speak up.

Better not to get involved, you said to yourself. You opted out. And sometimes this lack of courage extends to the very cause of God as well.

We know we should put God first. We know we should pursue what is good and right and holy. We know we should love our neighbour, and yes, even our enemy.

We know we should let others know about Jesus where there is opportunity. But we lack courage. We play it safe. We opt out. We don't dare take risks for God.

Because if a risk is an action that exposes us to the potential loss of faith, loss of money, loss of relationship, or even the loss of life, then often we hesitate because we don't see how such an action can be for our good.

[2 : 41] And yet, as the writer Maya Angelou once insightfully said, courage is the most important of the virtues because without it, no other virtue can be practised consistently.

You can be kind, and true, and fair, and generous, and just, and even merciful occasionally. But to be that thing, time after time, you have to really have courage.

So, how do we gain the courage to get on board with God and His mission? Where does it come from? Well, it certainly can't come from ourselves.

Now, you might have heard it said, oh, just trust God. Face your giants, and overcome. But you can't generate courage just like that.

You see, true courage can only come from faith in God's nature, character, and promises. Or, as one devotional work on Ezra, I read this week, nicely put it, faith feeds on seeing God at work.

[3 : 54] And that is what Ezra chapter 8 is all about. You see, this morning, if you look down at verse 22 with me, you'll see that it says, the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to Him.

And let me suggest that that sums up this chapter well. Those who trust God can have confidence His gracious hand is upon them. And how will that affect us?

Well, look at Ezra. Now, last week, you might remember, we were told repeatedly that the Lord's gracious hand was on Ezra. And what impact did it have on him?

Now, I didn't have time to point it out last week, but come with me now to the end of chapter 7, verse 28. Ezra says, Because the hand of the Lord, my God, was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

Because Ezra knew that God's hand was on him, he had courage and he took action. And when we know God's hand is with us too, we too will have courage and take action.

[5 : 19] So this morning, let's feed ourselves by seeing God's hand at work in Ezra 8. And we're going to see God's hand at work in three ways. First of all, God's hand ensures faith will be passed on.

Faith will be passed on. That's in verses 1 to 14. Now from 7, verse 27 onwards until the end of chapter 9, we'll mostly get to hear Ezra's voice.

And what does he start with? You guessed it, it's yet another list. Ezra tells us who's making the journey with him to Jerusalem.

And we sigh, wondering whether this has relevance. But friends, let's have confidence that scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching and training. So what does this list have to teach us?

Well, let's start by noticing that the book of Ezra is divided into two sections, chapters 1 to 6 and 7 to 10. And if you look a little closer, you will soon realise the structure of both sections mirror one another.

[6 : 28] It should appear on the screen. In Ezra chapter 1, we have the decree of a Persian king enabling God's people to come back. And then in Ezra chapter 6, we have the decree of another Persian king enabling another generation of God's people to come back.

In Ezra 3 to 6, we're told of a crisis facing the returnees, that is, opposition from outside. And then Ezra, in Ezra chapter 9 to 10, which we'll look at, in the next couple weeks, we'll learn of another crisis facing the returnees, this time of sin from inside.

So what about Ezra 2 and Ezra 8, our chapter today? Well, they mirror one another too because they both contain the names and numbers of the people who made their way back to Jerusalem.

So both Ezra 2 and Ezra 8 are concerned with who these people are. So that tells us that this Ezra 8 list is here to tell us something about their identity.

So, what do we discover? Well, let's look at this list of names. Now, notice verse 2 who it begins with. The first two family heads mentioned are Gershom and Daniel.

[7 : 50] And who are they? They're descendants of Phinehas and Itamar. Now, Phinehas and Itamar are from Aaron's family line.

And so these are descendants of Aaron the priest. And then after these two priestly figures, we get Hattush. Who is he? He's the descendant of King David.

And then in verses 3 to 14, we get another 12 families of Israel name. And by now, I'm sure you understand that all this is very deliberate.

12, we know, is the number of completeness. 12 tribes, 12 apostles, and here, 12 families. So what is Ezra signaling to us?

Once again, he's telling us that this second wave of returnees should also be regarded as true Israel. They are the real deal, the faithful ones.

[8 : 56] They too are the people of promise. They too have the promise of the Messiah from the line of David, and they too are the appointed worshippers of God, led by the priests.

And as they travel from Babylon to Jerusalem, they are also experiencing what the earlier generation of Ezra, chapter 2, did. And indeed, what the generation of Moses, even further back, experience?

They are leaving captivity for the promised land. They are experiencing a new exodus. You see, God wants every generation to know him.

And so, he doesn't say, oh, you guys, you missed the new exodus decades ago, back in Ezra, chapter 2? too bad for you. It's just a one-off.

No, every generation has an opportunity to come back to God, to be in his dwelling place. And this Ezra 8th generation sees that opportunity.

[10 : 04] They went back with Ezra. Now, why do you think that is the case? Well, if you look again at this list, you will soon notice something interesting.

You'll notice that most of them come from families that came back in the first wave, back in Ezra 2. They are their children, their nephews, and their nieces.

And so, what does that tell us? Well, we have to read between the lines a little, but it seems as if God's hand is enduring the faith is being passed on.

These people were more than willing to go with Ezra, and such willingness could only come about if they truly trusted in God's promises.

They must have had genuine faith of some sort. And given the family connections, that faith most likely came about through their moms and dads, or their uncles and aunts.

[11 : 12] families. This generation saw the earlier generation set an example by making a sacrificial move from Babylon to Jerusalem, and that had a positive impact on them.

This made them realize, God is real, I can have faith in him, I want to have faith in him. You see, God often works in families.

families. He loves to use parents and relatives to bring the next generation to come and know him. When I was in Sydney, I attended a Chinese church for a couple of years.

The parents and the grandparents were mostly first-generation immigrants from places like Hong Kong and Malaysia and Singapore. The children were Australian-born Chinese, growing up in a pretty different culture and time.

But what impressed me about that church was the high proportion of the second generation. Children whose parents had sacrificed much to move, who ended up not only being Christians, but who ended up as pastors or missionaries or lay people whose top priority was serving the Lord.

[12 : 35] You know, migrants often move to places like Australia in search of better life. But clearly, the people at this particular church never did that at the expense of sacrificing their children's faith.

And indeed, one or two of that second generation ended up going back to places that their parents had come from for the sake of the gospel.

Now, I don't think you would do that unless you're convinced that Jesus is more valuable than anything else. And that conviction was handed down to them by their parents.

I think Reynolds is probably a testimony to that as well. And so, if you are a parent, let that give you courage today to do the hard work of helping your kids know Jesus, even if that means you must sometimes deal with their tantrums tantrums, and their sulking, and their sour faces towards you.

It's worth it. I'm sure it will come as no surprise to you, but according to research published in 2021, the single most significant cause of faith, humanly speaking, in teenagers, is the spiritual lives of their parents.

[13 : 53] Parents matter. More than church, more than Sunday school, more than their peer group, more than the cultural air they breathe, parents matter, especially fathers.

And these researchers say that when parents hand on the faith to their children, you can trace the effects throughout the child's life in their sense of security, in their relationships, and in their future family life.

It is the best investment we can make today in our children's lives. And to the teenagers listening, in today, I hope you realize that when you see your parents making that effort, it's because they love you and they want you to know God for themselves.

For yourselves, rather. But for those of us not in Christian families, you can have hope too. God is still enduring.

Faith is being passed on. Joab, in verse 9, is not mentioned in Ezra 2. too. And so he might be a first-generation believer.

[15 : 04] And think of Ezra himself. For whatever reason, his parents or grandparents had stayed behind in Babylon. Maybe they had good reasons, maybe they didn't.

But God's hand works such that even though Ezra might not have grown up in a godly environment, he's now being used by God to lead his people and to teach others.

So take courage. God's hand is ensuring the faith will pass on, so press on in putting all your energies in doing exactly that.

Second of all, God's hand raises people to serve and lead. God's hand raises people to serve and lead.

In verse 15, we find Ezra by the canal, taking stock of his delegation. This is where he spots a problem. They are no Levites.

[16 : 09] Now, why is that important? We know Levites assist the priests in the tabernacle, but they are also the ones tasked to transport all the temple items, of which there are a lot, as we will see later.

Now, you might think, why not just get some of the other guys to do it instead? But don't forget who Ezra is. This is the man, remember, we saw last week, who is utterly devoted to the study and observance of God's law.

He knows very well that the law prescribes that it is the Levites job to do that. And he intends to follow God completely in the way God has asked his people to.

So that's why having no Levites is an issue. And besides that, while it is true that there are already Levites back in Jerusalem, you might remember that there were not many of them to begin with in Ezra 2.

So they needed to be new blood, people who had both the right convictions and competence to continue on once the older Levites had passed on.

[17 : 29] There are none in Ezra's delegation. And we're not told why exactly, but it's not hard to make an educated guess. It's likely that many of them found life in Babylon much more attractive.

after all, according to Numbers 18, the Levites cannot own land. They depend on tithes for support. But in Babylon, they face no such restrictions.

They could own property. They might even have some very nice, well-paying jobs. And so they have security. And you could see why the prospect of returning home and serving in the temple did not appeal.

Back home, you're probably no one. But in Babylon, you could be someone. And I want to suggest that this is a position that many of us could find ourselves in today.

You see, many of us in this congregation are bright and talented and very capable. You're good at your job. You're respected in your fields and that is great.

[18 : 43] That's a blessing. But it also means that the pool of the world can be very strong, can't it? After all, compare what's on offer in the world to church life.

In church, who are you and I? We're just servants. And what we do in church might not seem very significant. And sometimes we have to face choices where we have to either choose between serving God's church or making further progress in the world.

And sometimes it can be very discouraging to see people choose the latter. It can be discouraging to see people invest so much money, time, and energy into their earthly projects but hardly lift a finger to even do something simple for the church.

But Ezra 8 tells us, don't get discouraged. God's hand is still at work raising people up to serve and to lead.

Look at verses 18 and 19. Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, there brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mali, son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 in all, and Heshebiah, together with Jeshiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 men in all.

[20 : 20] There are Levites who do respond and who do come. You see, God will raise the right people to serve and to lead.

He will raise people who are willing to give up what they have for the kingdom. I was just reminded of this at the recent KVBC Next Gen Conference that I was at. At one of the sessions, we had a panel on full-time paid gospel ministry.

And as I was listening to the panelists, two of them on my committee, I was reminded of what they gave up. One used to be a doctor earning Aussie dollars.

Another had a nice, comfortable job at MBank, and they gave those up to train for ministry. Another one of them, a single female Singaporean, was working as a physio or occupational therapist.

I can't remember which one. And she gave that up to come and do ministry in Malaysia. I mean, she exchanged Singapore for Malaysia.

[21 : 29] her parents thought she was crazy. And I dare say quite a few Malaysians would think the same. She was giving up more comfortable for less comfortable.

But she did it because she was fully convicted by the gospel that the best use of her life was to help people know Jesus more.

And so God's hand is at work raising people up. But that doesn't mean that if we just sit back and do nothing, God will send them coming. Notice what Ezra does.

He didn't stand still. In verses 16 and 17, we discover he had sent some of his leaders and men of learning to go recruit some Levites.

Now, these men of learning seem to be equivalent to our Bible teachers. And in verse 17, again, he even tells them what to say. Now, wouldn't it have been interesting to eavesdrop on those conversations?

[22 : 34] Perhaps they reminded the Levites that those who invest in the kingdom are making investments that will last for all eternity. Perhaps they challenged the Levites to choose whether they are really serving God or money because you can't serve both.

Well, we don't really know. But the point is, because Ezra was convinced God would raise people up. He took courage and he took action to gather these leaders.

He got his best people to try and persuade them. And let me follow his example. I've recently been thinking that over my time as a pastor here, I've hardly challenged anybody to think to serve full time in the way like Rennell has or maybe like I have.

And I think I should do that more than I have so far. So right now, let me try and do that. Could it be that in our audience today, there are a couple of people who seriously need to think about giving up what you have to answer God's call?

You need of course to be of sound character. You need of course to have the right giftings. Sherabiah here is described as a capable man. But could it be that is not the issue?

[24 : 01] The issue is that you have not yet found the courage to make the necessary sacrifices, to step into the unknown, and to embark on this great adventure.

But I want you to know that it will be a great privilege. You will be calling people from death to life in a way that doctors cannot do. You will be introducing people to an advocate better than any lawyer on earth.

You will be helping people secure an inheritance that no financial advisor can match. You will be stretched. You will be strained. You will suffer.

And at the end of it, you can still have joy. Now is there someone here who needs to step up in that way this morning? The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

And even if you don't end up serving in the same capacity or role as Renaud and I this morning, now could it be that God is asking you to give yourselves more to the work of building up his living temple?

[25 : 07] That's what Levites do, right? They attend to God's temple. And that's what we all do. We attend to God's living temple, our fellow Christians. God will raise up who he needs for his work.

And if that is true, shall we pray and get on board? Heard of God's hand brings safety for the journey.

Safety for the journey. Having successfully recruited more Levites and temple servants, God's people are all set to go. But Ezra pauses one more time.

We're beginning to see that he is a very thoughtful and farsighted planner. You see, this journey is going to take four months. And verse 26 shows us that this group of people are going to be carrying plenty of valuables.

They are carrying the equivalent of over 25 tons of silver and over 8 kilograms of gold. But they have no protection.

[26 : 39] They are going to be vulnerable. to all sorts of robbers and bandits and political messineries as they make their way to Jerusalem. So what should they do?

Verse 21 tells us, Ezra proclaims a time of fasting and praying. He proclaims a time to intentionally humble themselves before God and ask him for their protection.

And he does this also, verse 22, because he doesn't want to ask the human king for protection. Now, it appears he could have made this request.

After all, last week, we can see that he very much enjoys the favour of the Persian king. But here he doesn't, because it seems as if he's already told the king that God will make sure they are fine.

you can see that in verse 22. And so by praying and fasting and then trusting God to offer his protection, Ezra is now living out what he believes.

[27 : 51] He's putting his money where his mouth is. Now, he's humble enough not to presume on God. Why else would he make sure to pray and fast otherwise?

But he also wholeheartedly believes that he is honouring God by his choice here because he is showcasing God's faithfulness.

And he is vindicated, verse 23, in a very understated way. Ezra simply says, God answered our prayer. Now, it's amazing, isn't it?

Ezra was prepared to take great risks for God because of his confidence that God will do what is best for his people. And he was sure that in this particular case, it meant rejecting the Persian king's soldiers.

Now, at this point, it is helpful to know that God works through all kinds of ways. Later on in Nehemiah chapter 2, Nehemiah is also offered the king's protection.

[28 : 59] protection, and he accepts it. He takes that as the way that God is offering him protection. And so we're not meant to over-spiritualize Ezra 8 here and take it to mean that we must always put human means and divine means in opposition to one another.

God can heal miraculously. God can heal through ordinary means such as doctors and medicine. God can offer protection supernaturally. God can also offer protection via the ordinary means of locking your doors and being wise about your surroundings.

The key question here is really where do you place your trust? what or who do you depend on to make it through certain situations?

And in Ezra 8, the answer is clear. They trusted God, unlike their forefathers, who often trusted in foreign powers instead of God.

And in Nehemiah 2, the answer is also clear. Nehemiah also trusted God. Both of them knew where their confidence lay. They reasoned from their knowledge of biblical principles and they applied their conclusion to their circumstances, even if it ended up not looking the same.

[30 : 28] But the key thing is they were placing their trust in God. And Ezra here is right to have confidence because as we said already, verse 31, God's hand indeed did protect them.

In verse 34, everything they carried was accounted for. Nothing was lost. And that is the confidence we can have as well.

God's hand brings safety for the journey. Now let us be clear what that does and does not mean. It does not mean that no harm will ever come your way.

It does not mean that there is no sickness, no poverty, no opposition. Ezra 4 has already shown us that and I believe the whole Bible makes that very clear. But there is safety in the Romans 8, 38 to 39 sense.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[31 : 41] That is what God promises. We might face all kinds of malicious forces in this life. We might even die. But in Christ, that cannot tear us away from God.

And that is how safe we are when we trust in Jesus. No spiritual blessing that we have in Christ, redemption, forgiveness, adoption into God's family can be lost.

That's what God promises. When we trust him, we will experience the good hand of the Lord in our lives, even if it might not turn out in the exact same way as Ezra's.

And so let's pray for this kind of confidence. Let's pray to display this kind of courage. Let's pray to know this kind of safety. Let us seek the Lord fervently.

And while we don't have to fast as a means of getting close to God, we can fast if we decide that it's the best way to take repentance seriously and seek him earnestly.

[32 : 49] And as we seek him, as we trust him, we will walk carefully and attentively. Look at verse 28. Notice how Ezra motivates his leaders.

He says to them, you as well as the articles are consecrated to the Lord. In other words, Ezra says, don't forget, God is holy and you belong to him.

So be holy and look after what belongs to God well. God is to God is to keep careful and maintain integrity for all of God's things.

So on this journey, walk carefully and attentively. As you do, remember that the hand of our gracious Lord is on everyone who looks to him.

Remember that this is the hand of the Lord that chose to give his only son for our sake. Let your faith feed from seeing God at work and then take courage from that.

[34 : 03] Take courage to become whom God has called us to be, a people who worship him. I mean, that's how this passage ends in verses 35 and 36, doesn't it?

It ends in worship. So, don't opt out. Opt in and take risks for God. Opt in and live courageously to participate in God's reformation.

Opt in and experience God's good hand on you. Shall we pray? Father, we thank you for your word again in Ezra chapter 8 and we pray that this word indeed will give us courage, will lend us encouragement to continue to live for you, knowing that your hand is on everything that we do to fulfill your purposes.

So, help us to keep walking in your ways, to keep living according to your purposes so that we might experience your good hand and we can know the safety that you offer us.

we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.