

# The Hand of God At Work in Everyday Life

*Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

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**Bible Text:** Ezra 7-8  
**Preached on:** Sunday, November 10, 2019

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Amen. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Ezra 7. We're going to be looking at the seventh chapter and the eighth chapter together, actually. We won't read all of it. We'll read the first 10 verses of chapter 7 and then all of chapter 8. The title of the message is "The Hand of God At Work in Our Everyday Lives." The hand of God at work in our everyday lives. I've chosen that title because of the key phrase in these two chapters, or key clause actually. It's an important refrain that we see throughout these two chapters and that is, "the hand of his God was upon him." Three times in chapter 7, and three times in chapter 8, "the hand of his God was upon him. The hand of my God was upon me." It actually occurs again twice in Nehemiah 2. We mentioned these two books are really one book. Nehemiah says the same thing, "the hand of my God was upon me." And so we want to look at this important concept, the fact that the hand of God, the power of God, the miraculous working power of God at work in everyday life. How does that happen? How do we have the hand of God at work in and through our lives? This is something that I think we find a great deal of instruction as we consider these chapters, particularly as we look at what Ezra does in chapter 8, and we learn some important things, to have the hand of God upon you, to know that the mighty power of God is at work through you to impact others for his kingdom, to further his purposes in the lives of those we care about. That's what we're looking at this morning, the hand of God at work in our everyday lives.

Before we want to look at that, I do want to mention one, make one correction to something I said last time in the sermon two weeks ago. I appreciate Jess preaching last week for me and preaching long, too. I heard he preached like 74 minutes, which I heard wonderful things about the message and I haven't had a chance to listen to it. Patti's listened to it which since it was, "Husbands, love your wives," I'm glad she listened to it first before I did. So she's definitely encouraging me to listen to it and I will, but thank the Lord for his faithfulness to minister to us through Jess, and I appreciate him taking extra time. I always say if you really preach a fantastic message, that's great, but don't do it in 40 minutes because then it looks like, "Why does Ty always preach an hour to do a mediocre message?" Anyway, so thank you for taking 74 minutes, Jess.

No, but it was a blessing to be able to preach the word of God and one of the things that we're encouraged to do in the Scriptures is to examine what is said, you know, to be a

good Berean, to make sure that what you're hearing from the word is what is true to the Scriptures, and one of you came to me a couple of weeks ago after the sermon and made a helpful correction because I made a statement in the sermon that was not fully formed and it was inaccurate. I was talking about the fact that in God's house Christ is the Lord of his house and he comes in and he beautifies his house through us, remember, and so he has us speak the truth to each other and that's how we submit to him is we listen to him speaking to us through others, and that very often they're gonna say things that are offensive to us. I mean, we don't want to be corrected and when we get corrected, it naturally at first we find it not pleasant as discipline comes to us, but if we're wise we're going to receive it. And I shared about a time where I was talking to someone and they were telling me that the Lord wants me to be happy and I said, "No, God wants you to be holy." And I left it a little bit undeveloped because in reality the biblical, the fuller biblical picture is this, that the only way to true happiness is through the path of holiness. So you're not really choosing to be happy or not, you're not choosing happiness or holiness, you're choosing worldly, temporal happiness which is gonna evaporate anyway and not real happiness, not real joy, you're choosing that or you're choosing to be holy which is going to lead to true and lasting happiness in God, what we're made to experience. And I appreciate that correction and I want to just make that clear to you. So when the Lord presses upon you and you're thinking that this is the path toward happiness and his word says something different, know that God is calling you to holiness and through holiness to true and lasting happiness, real happiness. The other is a mirage. It's not happiness at all, it's death. It just tastes good initially but it will not satisfy the soul of man.

So anyway with that said, let's move back into the text this morning and we're going to be reading the first 10 verses of chapter 7 and then we're gonna read chapter 8, and what I want you to tune in here for a second really clearly because I want you to understand what I'm trying to point out. And basically what got me really thinking about this was that chapter 7, 1-10, Ezra recounts for us the success of the return from Babylon to Jerusalem and he tells the whole story. He basically says, the Lord God called Ezra and he tells about his qualifications, and then the Lord's hand was upon him and so he led back a large host of the Israelites, the people, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, and because God's hand was upon him, they got back in four months. And then in chapter 7, verse 11 through chapter 8, he recounts the whole story. He tells it again in more vivid detail. It's kind of like a slow-motion instant replay or a blow-by-blow recounting of what actually happened. And it's significant because what he says in verses, chapter 7, 1-10, we're gonna see as we read in a moment, is God's hand was upon me, I mean, this in third person here. He goes to the first person later because Ezra's writing this, but he starts out here in the third person. The hand of God was upon Ezra so that he was able to lead back this host of Israelites in the second return and they got back to Jerusalem kind of like in record time with all they needed because the hand of God was upon him. And then he retells the story, and what I want to submit to you is he retells the story to, I mean, to give more glory to God but also to show us that that truncated, short version which is wonderful in itself, look at God working, he then shows us what God's work looks like in everyday life, in the midst of the mundane circumstances and difficulties of everyday life. It's not glamorous and glitzy like we would like it to be. No, the hand of God at work in

the lives of his people is often in the midst of just difficult, mundane, gut-it-out obedience. This is what it looks like to have the hand of God at work in your life. Not ease and, you know, just floating through life. No, it's gut-it-out obedience. Active, decisive obedience to God.

I say this because I think it's something that we in Reformed circles, we're a church that we call ourselves a Reformed Baptist congregation, Reformed Southern Baptist congregation. We believe in Reformed theology and Reformed theology, we believe is biblical understanding of the Scriptures. We have a high view of God. We see that the Bible teaches his absolute sovereignty over everything that comes to pass; that God is sovereign over every molecule in the universe, God is sovereign over every being in the universe. And yet there's a tendency sometimes among people who have a high view of the sovereignty of God toward complacency and inaction. The competence and the sovereignty of the God, well, the Lord is sovereign, we say, and so if he wanted it different, it would be different. But what you see in the Scriptures is the affirmation of absolute sovereignty is unmistakable in the Bible. You can't read the Bible honestly and come to any other conclusion. I'm serious. Every other, it's all over the Bible. God's sovereign over everything but at the same time, the Bible also teaches human responsibility with equal vigor, and at first glance these things are incompatible. It appears to be a contradiction but it's not. These things are apparent contradictions, one of the antinomies of Scripture. Anti-nomos, against law. The antinomy it seems humanly speaking to be contradictory. To say that God is sovereign over everything, that he's determined the end from the beginning, and yet at the same time you are responsible for your actions and your actions make a difference in your outcome.

The Bible says things like you have not because you ask not. The reason you don't have is because you haven't prayed. Wait a minute, God, you're sovereign and you're supposed to give me whatever you want. You've laid out good works for me and so I'm just resting, I'm letting go and letting God. And God says, don't let go and let me, let God, just actively seek me. Pray. Obey.

I think there's a tendency to sort of a Reformed fatalism in our midst. I mean, listen, the fatalism is the misunderstanding of this biblical teaching. It's not just, it's all over different cultures, many religions are fatalistic, but fatalism is the belief that all events are predetermined and therefore inevitable and therefore your actions don't matter. It's kind of a little bit of the *que sera, sera* approach to life, which that means whatever will be, will be. It's actually some phrase from French, Italian or Spanish. It's not actually grammatically accurate in any one of those languages but it means whatever will be, will be.

Now in some sense there's a grain of truth to that because God has foreordained everything that will come to pass, but there can be the *que sera, sera* attitude that says, "Hey, it doesn't matter what I do because whatever will be, will be." And that is a completely unbiblical mindset. The Bible affirms the absolute sovereignty of God and at the same time the responsibility of man and it doesn't see these things as contradictory. It sees these things as perfectly compatible. Charles Spurgeon was once asked, "Dr.

Spurgeon," he was a Reformed Baptist pastor from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "Dr. Spurgeon, how do you reconcile divine sovereignty and human freedom?" And Spurgeon laughed and said, "I don't need to reconcile them. What do you mean reconcile them? Divine sovereignty and human freedom are friends. You don't need to reconcile, you reconcile enemies, not friends. These things are friends. They're both in the pages of Scripture." It's only an antinomy because we are finite and cannot measure the things of God.

I mean, to give you an example of this. Romans 9 is the passage that convinced me to become Reformed in my understanding of the doctrine of salvation. I had studied under Reformed theologians but I was not yet convinced of Reformed understanding of salvation, that that is the principle of divine election being unconditional. And in reading Romans 9, I came to the unmistakable conclusion what Paul is saying in Romans 9 is that God is absolutely sovereign over those who are saved; that it does not depend upon the man who runs or the man who wills, but upon God who chooses sovereignly. Romans 9:16 and following. The whole chapter. I tried to argue with it through as I read that passage and I kept running into a dead end and seeing that God is clearly saying this.

Well, he does say that but the next chapter, Romans 10, verse 13 he says, "For all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," and then Paul launches into this astonishing thing. It's almost as if we looking at it humanly speaking say, "Paul, did you forget what you wrote in Romans 9?" Because he says this, "all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How will they call upon Him in whom they have not heard? How will they hear unless someone preaches? How will they preach unless they are sent?" He's making an argument for world evangelism and missions. We have to go tell them or they won't know. Now wait a minute, you just said that God predetermines everything. Yes, he does and you must go. Yes, that's right. Apparent contradiction but not contradiction at all. In fact, it's more glorious. God's sovereign reign is much more glorious than we tend to think.

He superintends, in fact, I made a definition of providence to kind of reduce down some things from the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, and I said this is how I would define it. God upholds, directs, this is the definition of providence, that is God's sovereign rule over his creation. God upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all things in accordance with his own perfect and unchanging will. That's a very short definition. He directs, governs, upholds all creatures and all things in accordance with his own perfect unchanging will so that everything that comes to pass is what he has willed to happen, but he does this in such a way as to do no violence to the free will of man. He lets men make free choices and they choose in accordance with their nature, but they choose freely, and he superintends even their sinful choices to his greater glory.

I mean, it's mind-blowing stuff but it's just what the Bible teaches, and in doing this, he is in no way the author or approver of sin. That's putting all the Scripture teaches about this in a pretty tight package. Lamentations 3:37-38 says, "Who can speak and it come to pass unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Lord that both good and ill go forth?" Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar praising God at the end of the chapter basically says, "Who can resist His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" In other

words, we only do what God decrees us to do. Nebuchadnezzar is saying that, and at the same time you are responsible for your actions and your actions determine your eternal destiny. Jesus says this in Luke's Gospel as he looks at Jerusalem. Listen to this, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I long to call you to Myself as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling. The reason you are lost is because you would not have Me," Christ says. And this is why we call people to repent and believe. The Gospel always ends with a call to a response from the heart of the person who has heard it, and these things are not contradictory, they're complementary.

One of the great places you see this and I love how Genesis, the book of Genesis has every major doctrine in it, the first book of the Bible. Genesis 37-50 is the story of Joseph and the story of Joseph could be subtitled, "The wonder of God's providence." His providence, the fact that he's upholding, directing, governing all creatures and all things to his purposes and his end. Think about that story. It's a familiar story. Most of you even if you're new to the Bible, new to Christianity, you've probably seen Joseph, what was it? King of Egypt. Prince of Egypt or something like that, the cartoon version about 15 years ago, 20 years ago. It's a familiar story and Joseph, the 11<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob, has those dreams, remember, that he's going to be governing over his family. He's going to be ruling over his brothers. He's going to even be ruling in some way over his parents. He has two dreams in a row, remember? A dream about the corn and then the dream about the stars bowing or the stalks, the sheaves bow down to his sheaf and then later the sun, moon and the stars bow down to his star. And he tells his dream, he's so enthusiastic, I think it's because he really had a sense that this is from God. He just couldn't contain it, keep it to himself, because the second dream, if you read in the text you're like, "Joseph, don't tell them. Don't tell them. Just keep it to yourself. Not a good idea." He tells them the second dream and they despise him in their hearts and his brothers, his 10 brothers, 10 of his brothers determine they want to murder him, get rid of him, see what comes of his dreams. They don't end up murdering him for some reason. They cast him in a hole and then they sell him into slavery and they think, "Yeah, let's see what comes of his dreams now." And remember he's taken at 17 down into Egypt. He becomes a slave. He's faithful to God and there he's tempted by Potiphar's wife, his master's wife, who tries to seduce him. Joseph is faithful to God, flees from the room leaving his coat behind because she's grabbed onto it. Faithful to God and Potiphar doesn't believe him and has him imprisoned. Injustice again. A woman sinfully tries to seduce him, he's faithful, he flees, the man punishes him and casts him into the dungeon. In the dungeon he's there and God continues to bless him and prosper him as a prisoner. The prison warden basically makes him in charge of everything because he can see the hand of God upon him, that the Lord was with him.

Remember he has some cellmates down there who were in Pharaoh's court. The cup-bearer and the baker, and they have dreams, remember, and they can't interpret their dreams, they just know something serious about these dreams and Joseph interprets the dreams and one of them is gonna die, and one of them is gonna live, and he asks the guy who's gonna live, "Hey, please remember me when you get to Pharaoh because I've been imprisoned unjustly." In the text, I remember as you're reading that especially the first time, if you haven't read it in a long time, read it again this week and you get to that point

and it says, "And the cup-bearer forgot him for two years." I mean, wouldn't you think you would remember that? This guy had a dream and now I'm back in my position. Well, he forgot him for two years. How did that happen? Well, he's a lazy guy and wasn't very grateful. Yes, that's right. How did it happen that his brothers sold him into slavery? That they hated him and sold him into slavery? How did it happen that Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and got him put into the prison?

Well, we begin to see that something bigger is going on when Pharaoh has a dream and that's when the cup-bearer remembers about Joseph and the cup-bearer calls him out at exactly the moment to interpret the dream so that Joseph is then put in the position of second in command in all of Egypt. And then a couple of years later, his brothers come down. They don't recognize him. They weren't expecting to see him and here he's speaking through an interpreter, through Egyptian. He's now, you know, a grown man. It's been 15 years since they've seen him and they don't know that he's their brother until finally he reveals himself, and then they're terrified.

Well, then things are kind of peaceful for a while. Then when finally his dad, they all come down. His dad dies in chapter 50 and Joseph, they're afraid he's gonna kill them now that Jacob is out of the way, he's gonna kill them. And Joseph says to them in Genesis 50:20 basically, "Why would you be afraid of me? Listen, you meant it for evil when you did what you did, but God meant it for good. You actually were sinning and seeking to murder me or seeking to destroy me, and yet God took your sinful action and meant it for good."

That's the doctrine of divine providence. God is always at work in everything that happens to accomplish his purposes, but now what we're gonna see in Ezra, we have to be clear on that but in Ezra what we're gonna see is the fact that God is always at work in everything to accomplish his purposes does not allow for inactivity or complacency on the part of his people. That's the message of this chapter, I believe. This is why he retells it because what we see is Ezra is a man of decisive action. He doesn't sit back and wait on God to do things. He is trusting and waiting on God in his heart but he knows that true trusting and waiting on God acts in obedience, steps out in faith. We're gonna see that.

Now let's look at chapter 7, 1-10. You're gonna see that summary and then we're gonna look at chapter 8 and I want you to watch the practical steps that Ezra takes. Think about that as we go through the chapter. Ezra 7:1,

1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest. 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him. 7 Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the

singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Basically in these verses the whole group is now in Jerusalem, but he steps back now and in verses 11, we're not gonna read this, we read this last time, verses 11 to 26 he tells about the decree the king gave. "This is the letter the king gave me." And we marvel at it. And he summarizes that in verses 27 and 28 which we will read, and then chapter 8, we're gonna see now he goes back and shows us this is how it actually happened. So chapter 7, verse 27, let's read there.

27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, 28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Chapter 8, verse 1. Now he's gonna get down to the details.

1 Now these are the heads of their fathers' households and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes: 2 of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush; 3 of the sons of Shecaniah who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah and with him 150 males who were in the genealogical list; 4 of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah and 200 males with him; 5 of the sons of Zattu, Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel and 300 males with him; 6 and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan and 50 males with him; 7 and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah and 70 males with him; 8 and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael and 80 males with him; 9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel and 218 males with him; 10 and of the sons of Bani, Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah and 160 males with him; 11 and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai and 28 males with him; 12 and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan and 110 males with him; 13 and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, these being their names, Eliphelet, Jeuel and Shemaiah, and 60 males with them; 14 and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud, and 70 males with them.

So many names to choose from when you name your children. We're gonna stop here and pray. I need to pray at this point just in the reading because I'm, well anyway, we're just gonna pray. Let's pray.

*Father, thank You for Your word. Thank You that it is profitable in every area of Your word and it's profitable to produce godliness in the lives of Your people, to produce repentance and faith in the hearts of Your children. So bless us, Lord, by Your Spirit. Help us to walk in truth. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Now I'm gonna stop here and explain a little bit and then we'll read some more in a moment and the point that I want you to think about is the practical nature of what Ezra is doing, and he's done one practical thing now. We're gonna look at some others in a moment and I just want to point something out, though, that is important and essentially what we're gonna see is Ezra was a man who had a heart for God and tended to his heart but he also was a man of action, and those two things are not mutually exclusive. They're actually, sometimes you can have one or the other in people, but if you really have it right, they should be together. It's something that upon more careful examination you notice.

We looked at the decree that the king sent with him, where the king, we didn't read it just now, we skipped over it but last week we talked about it. The king was basically concerned and writes this letter and it's all about the house of God and he's saying, "Go back, Ezra. Teach the law. Go back. Make sure everything's the way it should be in the house of God. Take all this money with you. Go back and if you need more money, get it from the treasury. I want worship to be right in the house of the God of Israel." Here's the king of Persia saying that. Wow!

Well, one of the practical things that we might miss if we're not watching carefully is how did that come to be in the king's heart in the first place? Well, God put it there. How did God put it there? How did God put in the heart of the king of Persia to adorn the house of God? That's the key phrase we looked at a few weeks ago when we started into this passage. In 7:27, Ezra says, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of our Fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart to adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." That is, to beautify the house of God. Why does the king of Persia have this in his heart? How did he come to have it in his heart?

Well, the answer, first of all, is in chapter 7, verse 6. How did the king have it in his heart? "This Ezra went up from Babylon," this is chapter 7, verse 6, "he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested." The reason the king had it in his heart was because Ezra was a bold enough man to go and request it. In fact, you see that echoed in the verses we read a moment ago, Ezra 7:27-28 when Ezra says, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem," look what he says next, "and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered



leading men." He's talking about the time he went before the king and the king's seven council members. We know that the Persian king had a council, a privy council of seven. It's actually mentioned in Esther as well. Seven key nobles that counseled him. Ezra made an appointment somehow and pleaded with the king and basically told him about his concerns about the people of God in Israel. That's how it got in the heart of the king.

Now God did an amazing work. It doesn't change that. It's not either/or. It's not God has to do a miracle or we do something. No, God does a miracle through the things we do. We often don't realize how messed up we are in the way we think this way. You know, like when we pray for someone who's sick, we really want God to do a miracle, we, in a sense, don't want him to use the doctors and treatments and stuff. But if we're thinking biblically, we know that if the doctors or treatments work, it's only because God did it. I had a professor in seminary at Reformed Theological Seminary try to teach me this and I didn't get it very well, but he said everything is a miracle when you understand the providence of God. Everything, every moment is a miracle. God is at work in everything.

So God is at work through Ezra asking the king and the king then granting the request. And yeah, it was amazing the king granted the request and the king wrote what he wrote, but it wouldn't have happened if Ezra hadn't of asked. You have not because you ask not.

So we see that laid out there and now as we read the rest of chapter 8, we're gonna see a couple other problems that present themselves and how Ezra addresses them, and these are actually part of the summary statement. "This all happened, God got me there with all the people I needed because the good hand of God was upon me," that we read in chapter 7, 1-10. Look at the continued summary. Chapter 8, verse 15. Now he's told us who's there, the men that are there, and there are, of course, women and some children also in addition to this. Probably a group of about 5,000 people. The numbers in chapter 8, 1-14 when you add them all up, well, plus the ones we're gonna get in a few verses, are 1,772 men. So probably 5,000 people in this caravan that's gonna go back to Israel. But look what he says, verse 15,

15 Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days; and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there. 16 So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers. 17 I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia; and I told them what to say to Iddo and his brothers, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, that is, to bring ministers to us for the house of our God. 18 According to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men; 19 and Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men; 20 and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name. 21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to

seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. 22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him." 23 So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty. 24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers; 25 and I weighed out to them the silver, the gold and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes and all Israel present there had offered. 26 Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents, and 100 gold talents, 27 and 20 gold bowls worth 1,000 darics, and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold. 28 Then I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the utensils are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers. 29 Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leading priests, the Levites and the heads of the fathers' households of Israel at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD." 30 So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God. 31 Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way. 32 Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days. 33 On the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui. 34 Everything was numbered and weighed, and all the weight was recorded at that time. 35 The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, 12 male goats for a sin offering, all as a burnt offering to the LORD. 36 Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps and to the governors in the provinces beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.

Now all that recounting and retelling of the same story we've already gone over, what's that about? I think it's about Ezra encountering some real world, practical life, mundane problems and how he solves them. He gets there and he has the wisdom and foresight to arrange everybody meet at the river Ahava, probably a canal. There are many canals in Babylonia, in the time of Babylon and Persia. Let's everybody gather, now everybody's gonna go back with me. Gather at the canal. And so they gather and he takes stock and he finds out everybody that's there and he carefully enrolls everyone that's there because we know that's important in that time in redemptive history to keep the line of Christ pure and the line of the priesthood pure. But what does he find out? He finds out there's no Levites and he doesn't say at that time, "Well, que sera, sera. God is in control. If he

wanted us to have Levites, we'd have Levites. I guess he didn't want us to have Levites. Let's pack up and go." He doesn't say that, does he? He's thinking practically. "If we're going to beautify the house of God, if we're going to bring all these implements and really enhance the worship of God, we must have Levites."

Now worship required priests who were a subset of the tribe of Levi, and he has priests. That's great, he's got priests but he also has to have Levites. These are other people among the descendants of Levi who were not in the priestly order. They weren't of the sons of Aaron but they were descendants of Levi, and they were the only ones that could go work around the temple, do the work of, you know, like just setting up the temple facilities, moving things around, handling the holy implements of the temple. You had to be a Levite and he realizes, "If we don't have Levites, we cannot do what we've got to do."

So what does he do? He actually comes up with a really wise plan. He chooses 11 men who are persuasive, influential people that are there among the group that he has and he sends them to go recruit Levites, and not only that, he tells them what to say. Look at verse 17, "I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia; and I told them what to say to Iddo and his brothers." He doesn't leave it to chance. He doesn't just say, "Hey, you guys go recruit." He sits there and prays. I'm sure he's praying but he tells them what to say. He's very practical and he's like, "Listen, you need to go to Casiphia. I know there are some guys over there and there's some good men over there who need to be going."

Now one of the things that was probably going on here is it was difficult to pick up and leave Persia and Babylon and go back to Jerusalem, and particularly for Levites and priests. One of the commentators, Derek Kidner, says it was doubly daunting for them. Why? Because they probably had developed a good lifestyle, they're making their life work, they're trying to serve God where they are, you know, faithfully to the Lord but they're in a strange land but they've got things working. Now they're gonna have to uproot, that's bad enough to uproot and go replant in the land, but what makes it doubly daunting is as a Levite or a priest, you have the rigorous requirements of temple worship that you're gonna now have to be a part of your life. The ritual washings and all the requirements of service that you've got to be away from your fields and stuff because you're serving in the temple. So it's understandable that a number of these people didn't want to do that but understandable but not acceptable.

So he sends guys out there, he picks guys wisely and says, "I want you to go and I want you to go to this guy and I want you to say this." And then when it happens, he says it was the good hand of God upon us. Look at verse 18, "According to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah." He said, "Because the hand of God was upon us, they brought us Sherebiah." Man, that was a big gain for the people in this moment. In fact, you're gonna see Sherebiah a lot all the way through Ezra and Nehemiah, an important leader. He wouldn't be there if Ezra hadn't stopped and done this. Do you see how our actions make a difference?

Now why did Ezra do it? Well, because God decreed that he would. Yes, that's right, but Ezra doesn't, we don't know what God's decreed, we just know we're supposed to obey so that's what he does. Now the second problem he encounters is that as he gets ready to leave, after he gets everybody there, now he's got the Levites, he's got 220 temple servants, he feels really good about this now, but now he realizes with 5,000 people we're about to go on a journey of almost 1,000 miles and we are taking a lot of wealth with us, and we have no military escort, we don't have weapons ourselves, 5,000 people including our little ones. I shared last time, when you add up the talents, silver and gold, the value today basically the commentaries say between \$150-190 million this group is carrying, 30 tons, more than 30 tons of precious metals. That probably means a wagon, you're really pushing a wagon if you make it carry a whole ton. They probably had like 40 or 45 wagon loads of precious metals and they're going on this journey of almost 1,000 miles with no military escort. Ezra is a man, he's not a Pollyanna kind of Reformed Christian. He's Reformed but he's not Pollyanna. He's realistic. "Man, this is gonna be something!" He even kind of, you can hear almost the regret in his heart as he says, "I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way because we had said to the king the hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him." I mean, it's like he wished, "I wish I hadn't said that."

Now interesting point here, Nehemiah when he comes back, he does have a military escort and Nehemiah is not an ungodly man. What it says is there are places for practical wisdom and sometimes Christians come to different decisions about those things. In fact, what I want to do now is give you the two points. I've given you, that's a lot of material and now I want the two application points. You know, how do you see the hand of God at work in your life? Cultivate, number 1, keep cultivating a heart of obedience. Keep cultivating your heart. This is how you have the hand of God upon you, you keep cultivating your heart.

It's interesting when we looked at those, I mentioned there are three times it says in chapter 7 and three times in chapter 8, the hand of his God was upon him. In chapter 7, verse 9, he talks about he went up on the first of the first month and he got there on the first of the fifth month because the good hand of his God was upon him, that's Ezra 7:9, then he gives us, I think, one of the keys to having the good hand of God upon you right after that. He says, "because the good hand of his God was upon him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." The reason it worked out was because God's hand was upon him and the reason God's hand was upon him was because he had a heart to seek the Lord in this way. He had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, to obey it and to teach it.

So he was cultivating his heart. He kept cultivating his heart in making it obedient to the word of God. A second area that we see this same kind of idea is in chapter 8, verse 22, another one of the times the hand of our God being upon us. When they testified to the king, like I said he might have regretted saying this in one sense, practically speaking, didn't really of course, but he probably had some thoughts about that. "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him." The hand of God is on for good, literally in the Hebrew, for good to those who seek him. If you are seeking God truly

from the heart, his hand will be on your life. If you are cultivating a heart to be obedient to his word and you're seeking him for who he is, to know him and to love him and to draw near to him, if that's your heart's desire, God's hand will be upon you. That's one of the things about Ezra that we learn. How do you get God's hand upon you? You keep cultivating your heart to love and serve the Lord.

But the second thing, the second way you keep God's hand upon you, you don't just keep cultivating your heart, keep taking biblical action. Keep taking biblical action. This is what he does. He actually acts decisively but biblically in all of these circumstances and that's what we should do. And one of the reasons God's hand is not upon us is because we've focused on the heart but we're not focused on acting and obeying and doing what God has called us to do. We're not willing to take risks and to get out there and I would submit to you that Ezra is making some, he's making some determinations that, you know, is it the best way to send those guys? Maybe, maybe not but it comported with biblical wisdom. You see, if you're cultivating your heart and you're trying to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, to walk in it, to study it, to walk in it, to teach it, you're making the law of the Lord the fountain of your life, the foundation of your life, what's happening is your thinking is becoming more biblical. You're thinking God's thoughts after him and therefore you're able as you look at circumstances to apply wisdom to the circumstances, the questions. God has a way of confronting us with questions that we just will not have clear like black and white, nailed down answers a lot of times, exactly how to do it. Sometimes we'll know what we're supposed to do, but we don't know how to do it. How do you say it? I don't know. What do you do? Do the best you can to apply wisdom prayerfully, dependent upon the Lord but acting on what you see before you to do.

That's what he does in each of these cases. He applies practical wisdom and he takes decisive action. There are kind of two subpoints. How do you keep taking action biblically? Well, you apply practical wisdom and then you just act. You think about it and you try to bring the Scripture to bear on the situation and then you launch. Like let's look back at these circumstances. He has no Levites. What does he do? He thinks for temple worship to be what it has to be, we have to have Levites. There's no choice. It's not a time for us to say, like I said earlier, "Well, God's sovereign and we have no Levites, therefore we don't need Levites." No, he says, "For some reason the Lord hasn't brought us Levites but we've got to have Levites because you can't do temple worship without Levites. So the Lord wants Levites, the Levites aren't here, what do we do? I'm the man God has put in charge of this thing. I'm gonna have to take action. I'm gonna recruit some people to go recruit some people." And he does it, and like I said he does it, he thinks all the way down to the details. "Hey guys, come. Let me tell you what, I want you to go to this guy in this place, and this is what I want you to say."

And his action is successful but he didn't just have a fatalistic kind of Christianity, did he? He acted. He acted as if his actions made a difference and that's exactly what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to trust that God has foreordained everything that's going to come to pass and give him praise for everything that he does. This is why we can give thanks in all things. In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus

concerning you. You can always be thankful because God is in control of whatever's happening in your life. In some measure, you can be thankful. You don't have to be thankful for the suffering itself, but you can be thankful that God has brought you into the suffering for good, that he's gonna do something wonderful through this.

So we're to apply this kind of wisdom to our circumstance. So we understand that the Lord has put us in this circumstance and now I've gotta act, so what makes sense to do? And we just use sanctified reason. Humble sanctified reason. What makes sense? And that's what he did and it worked. Now God may not make it work all the time either. Sometimes you do it and you have to try again.

The second thing when it comes to, "Hey, we're gonna make a journey of 1,000 miles." We're like a Fort Knox, it's like, you know, the wagon train from Fort Knox coming out with all this gold and silver and you just know there are bandits all over the place. It's not like today where they've got, you know, cellphones where they can tell you what's happening over here and you can fly in, you know, some police response people or SWAT team or whatever. No, what we encounter, we encounter.

But what does he do? He fasts and prays. He calls a fast and they fast and they pray. That's all we can do. We can't go ask the king. I'm convinced in my heart that it would not be right to. He's acting on practical wisdom though Nehemiah, I mean, yeah, Nehemiah said, "Hey, let's go ask the king. I've got a good 'in' with the king." He might have. Christians come to different convictions about certain things like that and those are areas where you do as each one is convinced in his own mind, his own heart before the Lord, do it. When the Scripture is not clear on something. If Scripture is clear on something, you do what the Scripture says, but in these areas, and there are gray areas, act with best you can wisdom but act boldly.

So he says, "Let's pray. We can fast and pray." And so they fast and pray and their fasting and prayer made the difference. Maybe we don't have because we don't ask. Maybe we don't have because we don't ask fervently enough, which is what fasting does, it adds intensity and fervency to our prayers. Maybe you need to fast and pray about some things in your life.

So he takes decisive action, practical action from a heart that is seeking God and that's how God works with his mighty hand to do this great work of beautifying the house of God. So when things are not right in our lives, when we see issues, what are we to do? We're not just to sit there and say, "Well, the Lord knows that this problem over here is there, and if He wants it fixed, He'll fix it." Are there things in your life where you're doing that right now? Well, that's not biblical. You say, "I have a high view of the sovereignty of God." Well, you may have a high view of the sovereignty of God but you don't understand God well enough because he doesn't want you to use his sovereignty as an excuse for disobedience. You see, he lets you see a need. So often we see the need because he's calling us to go and address the need and so what we need to do is we need to move toward that, not in timidity and fear but knowing, "Hey, God's sovereign. He's a God who works in circumstances like this. I'm gonna go and apply wisdom and do the

best I can to address this situation. I'm gonna have the conversation with this sister or this brother that I need to have."

And if you're like Ezra, what you want to do is you pray about it and think about what you're gonna say. I don't think Ezra went into the king's presence without a well-scripted plan of what he was gonna say. It wasn't like he just prayed and he let go and let God. Just fly off the handle, whatever comes. I'm talking to the king of Persia, you know, like some crazy Christians today would, you know? No, he understands that God's sovereign over the king, the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord but he comes humbly and he comes, but he comes confidently and boldly and he knows that the God of heaven is the one true God. He comes unapologetically but he comes respectfully. So he planned what he was gonna say and he said it and he trusted God to work through it, and he trusted God that if the Lord had him go and say that and the king executes me, so be it.

So when things are not right, we've got to take action but, of course, the first thing we have to remember is to set our hearts. Our hearts have to be seeking the Lord. We need to be seeking the Lord even now and before we go, make sure you're seeking God. Put yourself under his word. Put yourself on the course of seeking him. Seek him in prayer earnestly but don't let that delay you. Do that and go.

When we become people like that, that act, God is gonna do so much more in our lives, and I confess this is an area where I struggle with this myself, where it's a subtle thing to become a little complacent because, "Hey, God is sovereign." He is and there are truths that we can take comfort in. I mean, like say you're witnessing to someone or you feel the need to witness to someone, you're burdened about them, and you don't. Well, ultimately if God intended them to be saved, they would be saved. Yes, that's true, but at the same time God says in Ezekiel 33, that if a sinner, we have the opportunity as a watchmen to warn someone of impending judgment and we don't warn them, God will require their sin from them but he will hold their blood on our hands, in some sense. That's human responsibility.

In reality when we understand the providence of God and the sovereign rule of God, it ought to embolden action. J. I. Packer makes this argument in one, I think one of his best books, "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God." J. I. Packer wrote some great books in his early ministry. He's gotten a little off later but that book is an outstanding book, "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God," and what he basically, he's arguing against people who say that if you have a high view of the sovereignty of God, you won't do evangelism because you know God's in control, like a fatalistic approach. And he says if we really understand who God is, you'll be motivated to do evangelism because you understand that he is going to do the work. You don't have to do it. I mean, you have to do it but you don't do the work of changing the heart. You can't change the heart, you just speak the truth. You pray. You speak the truth and God does the work.

He gives the example of how the first great modern missionary to the heathen is a man named William Carey who left England in 1792 or 93 to go to India to preach the Gospel. Carey was a Calvinist. He believed in the sovereignty of God in salvation, but he's the

first one to go to the heathen, not an Arminian, a guy who didn't believe in the sovereignty of God and salvation. It was a Calvinist, Carey. He was in India for seven years without a single convert. Seven years. So some people would say, "Well, he must have been a pretty bad evangelist." They don't have a very biblical view of what evangelism is. After seven years, the Lord broke through and people were saved, in the area of India that he was, the culture dramatically changed. I mean, things like they had the practice, Hinduism leads to this kind of thinking that when a man dies, you burn his wife to death on his funeral pyre because she has no reason to live anymore since he died. It's a very fatalistic religion. Individual actions don't matter. But the Gospel just beginning to make inroads into the lives of people, the light began to shine and the culture changed.

But how did he, this is what Packer says, how did Carey have the confidence to stay after seven years of no converts? Because he knew what God told Paul in Acts about the folks in Corinth. Paul says, I mean God said to Paul, "I have many in this city." Paul had been persecuted and driven out of the Jewish synagogue and the Lord basically tells him, "Stay here because I have many in this city." What does he mean? Many elect in this city. Your ministry is going to bring fruit because of the sovereignty of God.

So we can act because we know God is sovereign. We can take the step of having difficult conversations with people that we feel like are never gonna change because we know the sovereign power of God and that he's put us there to speak the truth, and we go boldly and just lovingly speak the truth and see what he does. And if he changes lives, he gets all the glory, and if he doesn't, he's still honored by our faithfulness and people are blessed by us speaking the truth. So the Lord wants us to be Christians who have a high view of the sovereignty of God, who believe in the providence of God, but who are decisive in acting for the Lord.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, we thank You that You do use every event that happens in the universe for Your glory and our good. We thank You that the most evil event that ever occurred, the most wicked occurrence that has ever happened in history, the crucifixion of the Son of God was also the most glorious display of glory and love and Your mighty hand that the world has ever seen. We give You praise and honor. You work in all circumstances to fulfill the counsel of Your perfect will but, Lord, we know that we have a responsibility as Your people to be obedient, to personally respond to the Gospel. For those that are here that need to repent and believe and place their faith in Jesus Christ, His death paying for our sins, accepting our judgment in our place so that we could then receive His righteousness and His reward, eternal life, grant repentance and faith, grant courage to act and to run to Christ. And Father, for all of us who belong to Jesus, that we would be more disciplined, more faithful in the details of life to obey, to trust and to act and to take risks because there really are no risks when we understand that You are gonna use even our failings, even our weaknesses, You're going to use to further Your kingdom and to redound to Your greater glory and to the good of everyone who loves You. So we can act*



*boldly and know that You will do above and beyond all we ask or imagine according to Your power that's at work in us. Help us, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*