

Laying Hold of The Hand of God

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ezra. We are looking again at the 7th and 8th chapter of Ezra and we're gonna look again at the concept of the hand of God which we began to look at last week, an important phrase in this book, the hand of God. We noted that it occurs six times in two chapters in the book of Ezra which is really something because it's unprecedented in any other book in this kind of concentration. We're told that the hand of God was at work in the life of the man, Ezra. When you look at the concept of the hand of God as it's used throughout the Bible, the hand of God speaks of the power of God. An example, there are many examples but one will suffice, 1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that in due time He may exalt you." The hand of God is mighty, so the hand of God speaks of the power of God, the accomplishing power of God, the sovereign power of God. And so Ezra was a man who had the power of God at work in his life. The mighty power of God was at work in him and through him to make a difference in his life and the lives of those around him, and isn't that something that we should all hope for, long for, seek, to have God's hand at work in our lives, and truly we can have God's hand at work in our lives in the same way that Ezra did and that's what I want us to look at is laying hold of the hand of God. That's the title of the message today and we're gonna look at this in two weeks, Lord willing, today and next Sunday, laying hold of the hand of God. That is, how can I lay hold of the hand of God and have God's hand at work mightily in my life and through my life?

We're gonna read a section of these chapters in just a moment but I want to remind you, I said that it occurs six times, three times in chapter 7, three times in chapter 8, and what's interesting when you compare each of the occurrences of the phrase "the hand of God" or "the hand of the Lord," what you see is that in the three times it occurs in chapter 7, it's the hand of the Lord upon Ezra, the hand of the Lord his God upon him, the hand of the Lord was upon me, speaking of Ezra as an individual. The hand of God was upon the man. In chapter 8, it occurs three times but all three uses are plural, that is, the hand of God on us, the hand of God upon them, the hand of God upon us. So as the hand of God is at work in the life of the individual man, the individual follower of God, the hand of God upon Ezra, it comes through him to bless the people.

So we will see, I think, Ezra is a model for us in this section of Scripture and we can, if we can lay hold of the hand of God as he does, it's going to impact greatly our life, the

mighty hand of God is going to impact our lives but also it's going to impact the lives of those around us. So you look at your life and think about the struggles, the difficulties in your own personal life. It may be a battle with anxiety or fear or lust and these things are at times overwhelming and it feels that there's no progress being made in your life, what you need is to have the power of God brought to bear in your heart and in your life. You need God's hand to begin doing a work in you. His work tends to be progressive, not all at once, but you can lay hold of the hand of God to access the power of the risen Christ, it can become real in your life to help you overcome and become an overcomer to walk in the train of his triumph.

How do we do that? Think about the ways you would like to see the hand of God at work in the lives of those around you, the life of your family, people you love, believers who you see struggling and you don't know how to help them, you wish you could help them. You've been praying for them, you've been longing for something to happen, but I think we can find in Ezra a pattern of how we can see God work through us for them. Unbelievers in your life that you want to see come to Jesus, to really come to understand the wonder of who Jesus Christ is, the same thing. By learning how to see God's hand at work in our lives, then the Lord can touch others through us so that the hand of God upon me becomes the hand of God upon us.

Let me show you this in the passage. We're gonna read Ezra 7:6-10, a key part of the book, and then you're gonna see two of these occurrences of the phrase "the hand of God." I mentioned three in chapter 7, three in chapter 8, we're gonna look at all six of them as our Scripture reading starting with Ezra 7:6. After he's introduced Ezra and told us that it's during the reign of Artaxerxes, that is, during the reign of a king who reigned in the 5th century BC, this Ezra is going up at 458 BC from Babylon to Jerusalem, bringing a group of exiles, Jews who had been exiled more than 100 years before, he's bringing them back to Jerusalem, and so we pick up the story in verse 6,

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.

So there's the first two instances of the hand of God, and then you next have it pick up in verse 25 of chapter 7. After he tells us of this amazing decree given by King Artaxerxes, a Persian, pagan king who does not worship Yahweh, the true God, but who gives this amazing decree affirming Ezra's ability to reform worship, after he recounts the decree in

verses 12 to 26, then verse 27 and 28, he summarizes his response. In verse 28, we're gonna see the third occurrence of the hand of the Lord my God. He says in verse 27,

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.

So there again, the hand of the Lord God. Now he says in the first person, Ezra's talking, "upon me." Verse 6, verse 9, the hand of the Lord God upon him in the third person. Then chapter 8, we see it again in verse 18. Ezra runs into a problem, there are no Levites, he needs Levites, that is, descendants of the tribe of Levi that are only allowed to work in the temple courts. You must have Levites if the temple worship's gonna be restored and no Levites, none of that tribe of Israel have shown up, no male Levites are there ready to go back to Jerusalem and so he has to recruit those Levites. And so we pick it up verse 15 of chapter 8,

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,

So the good hand of God is now upon us and that means him and the people he sent to get to recruit Levites. Then he speaks about what he told the king in verse 22, when he explains that he didn't want to ask the king for a guard to go with them. Remember there's 5,000 people basically that are going with Ezra back to Jerusalem and I mentioned that when you look at the details of how much silver and gold he was taking, he was taking probably 25-30 wagon loads of silver and gold, 28.5 tons of precious metal. That's 57,000 pounds of precious metal, silver and gold. The lion's share of it is in silver but there's, I think it was 25 tons of silver and 3.5 tons of gold and that's, like I said, it's probably closer to 30 wagons filled with that. Well, he's got this amazing amount of money but he's got nobody to guard it and he's ashamed, he says, verse 22, "For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way," clearly we need protection. If anybody knows what we're carrying, we are dead meat. But he says, "But I was ashamed to ask," he's convicted not to ask the king for troops and horsemen 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 anger against all those who forsake Him." So Ezra chooses not to ask for help. They instead fast and pray and the Lord protects

them and it is amazing that they get there with all that loot, sorry, all that money, silver and gold, a thousand-mile journey with no protection. He's not able to even train his people, again, train these 5,000 people he's got, you know, in weapons, because it looks like now they're gonna start some kind of insurrection, just got to trust that God's going to protect them. But the hand of God is upon him and he testified this to the king.

Then the final time is when they finally do arrive in verse 31 of chapter 8,

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.

So the hand of God upon Ezra and because it's upon Ezra, it's upon those with whom he is ministering, and the mighty power of God, how is it unleashed in our lives? How can we have the hand of God work in our lives? That's what we want to consider.

Let's pray together and ask the Lord's blessing on his word.

Our Father, we pray that You would help us now, that truly Your hand would be upon us even as we study, that Your Spirit would work in our hearts, that You would open the eyes of our hearts and grant that in Your word we might see light and that You might grant repentance and faith to those who do not know You, for the first time salvation, and for those who do, deeper repentance and deeper faith that we might be more pleasing to You. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So the question I want us to consider today and next time is how do you see God's hand at work in your life? How do we follow the example of Ezra in seeing God's hand at work in our life? I mentioned a couple of things last week that I want to remind you of and then I'm gonna get to the outline.

Last time we noted that Ezra had set his heart in chapter 7, verse 10, to study the law of the Lord and to practice it and teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel. Part of having the hand of God upon you is setting your heart to put yourself under the word of God. If you want God's hand at work in your life, you must submit to the word of God. This is how, this is the people in whom he works. It's exactly what that phrase is saying. He was able in verse 9 of chapter 7, he was able to bring them up on the first month to the fifth month, a four-month journey. It happened because the good hand of his God was upon him. Why? For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it and to teach it, not just to study it to understand it but to practice it, to live it out and then to share it with others.

Then he told us another key in verse, what he's told the king actually. He told the king the secret of having the hand of God upon you. We saw that in chapter 8, verse 22 when he said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him." Literally, the hand of our God is for good to all those who seek him. The hand of God

will bring good and blessing to all who seek him, but the hand of God will also bring power and wrath against all who forsake him. So the hand of God for good is toward those who seek him, so we must seek him and that's another way of saying we must submit to his word.

Now what I want to focus on today is kind of the extension of that, because Ezra had those commitments we see that the reality of his submission to the word of God and his seeking of God in two ways that I think we can try to model, we can try to follow his example. If you want the hand of God at work in your life the way it was at work in Ezra's life, we need to do two things and this is going to be our outline this week and, Lord willing, next week too because we're gonna look at one example of these two points applied this week and one example of these two points applied next week in Ezra's life. Here are the points, though, or the first point: to see God's hand at work in your life, you need to realign your priorities. Realign your priorities. The priority that Ezra models, the first priority, we're gonna look at another one next week, like I said, today the first priority that Ezra models for us that he had adopted himself, that he had realigned his life was the priority of putting worship at the center of his life, to put the worship of the living God above everything else in his life. This is how Ezra had realigned his priorities. He had sought to put temple worship above everything else in his life.

I mean, think about it, he is going to leave Babylon and move permanently to Jerusalem because the Lord has put on his heart the burden to go back and beautify the house of God, to adorn the house of God, and to reinfuse the worship according to the word of God, and he's going to take others with him, he's going to give himself to that and that is why the hand of God is upon him. Because what's happening when you realign your priorities, when my priority becomes God's priority – now let me say that correctly – when God's priority becomes my priority, then his hand will be favorably disposed to me. Our problem is, our fundamental problem is God's priorities are not our priorities. God tells us that worship is the most important thing in our lives. We think it's important, I mean, many people think it's important, some people think it's not important at all, but it's actually normal for even folks that really haven't been born again to think, "Yeah, worship's important. I'm willing to give some time to that." But God tells us in his word that worship is everything, that worship is fundamental, that we were actually made to worship. I mean, think about the greatest commandment, remember when Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment." This means that everything in our lives is to be lived out of love for God, that he's to be at the center of everything.

The Lord tried to teach them this in many ways in the Old Testament. This is one of the reasons, you know, the Old Testament what you have is as the Bible is being given, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, as God is inspiring his word to be given, you see the progress of revelation or the nature of Scripture is progressive revelation, more and more clarity over more and more time. In the beginning, there are images and types that become, are fulfilled later and the temple is a type, it's fulfilled later we're gonna see. But one of the interesting types that really helps us to see this, God wants us to put worship at the center,

he wants everything that we do to be lived in worship and one of the ways he was trying to teach that to the people of Israel was through the Jewish dietary laws. This is what makes sense out of the Jewish dietary laws. Now they were allowed, you read through Leviticus, they could eat certain things and they could not eat certain things. I mean, it was tough actually, it would have been tough for many of us in the South to have been, well, many people period, but we wouldn't have been able to eat pork. I mean, to me pork is one of the greatest foods that we have. I can give you a discourse on that sometime if you'd like. You know, it's the other white meat. Remember that a few years ago, that was one of the marketing campaigns? But, I mean, barbecued pork, where would we be without that? Well, we would be in ancient Israel and we would understand that it is more worthy to seek God and to be in communion with God than to have that.

But what's up with the dietary? No shrimp. I mean, we could really start feeling some real empathy and sympathy for those Jewish people, Of course, they didn't know what they were missing. If they were faithful they never tried it so it was easier not to fret over it, but what was with that? And then why when Jesus comes are the dietary laws done away with as Mark says in chapter 7 when Jesus says, "It's not what goes into the man that defiles a man but what comes out of the heart. That's what defiles a man. The issue is not what you take into your mouth, it's what comes out of your heart and that's where the problem is, the heart of man." And Mark adds, "Thus He declared all foods clean." The dietary laws, that was a temporary construct, a teaching object that the Lord used to teach his people something.

What was he teaching them? He was teaching them this: whether you eat or drink, do everything to the glory of God. Whatever you do. Think about it when it comes to putting something in your mouth, "Is this pleasing to God?" That's really a powerful image, isn't it? That's something that is helpful to meditate on when we're struggling with our weight. Whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God. Am I eating what I'm eating right now as an act of worship? If I am, I'm not gonna be a glutton right now. I'm going to enjoy it in his presence and praise him that he's given us taste buds, to praise him that now we can eat pork, to praise him that he's the one who created all of these wonderful things to be enjoyed, and to praise him that these are just glimpses, fleeting glimpses of the goodness of a God who made all of these things. I mean, think about that, a God who would put 10,000 taste buds in your mouth. It may be a little more than that, I can't remember. I know as you get older, you lose them. But isn't it interesting as you get older, sometimes it seems the food tastes better because your palate becomes more cultivated and you now recognize nuances and things. The Lord has given us this. It was his idea to do that. He could've created a world where eating was just like filling up at the gas station. Oh, time to fill up. You know, just throw it in, no taste, might smell like gasoline, even. It doesn't matter. I've gotta fill up. No, the Lord made it so that when you eat, you delight in his goodness. Like Jonathan Edwards said, that's like if the beam of the sun that touches your face, you feel the warmth of it, the glory of it, what must the glory of the sun from which it emanates be like? The blessing to the blesser.

He was teaching them something. He was teaching that all of life should be about worship, that that's what we were created for and we've lost that because we were born in

sin, conceived in iniquity as King David said of himself, it's true of all of us. We come into the world loving ourselves and wanting what we want and not putting everything in submission to God. But we were made to live in a world where worship was what everything was about. You are the image of God according to Genesis 1:26. He made you in his image, that is, to be a replica and a reflector of his great glory and to reflect and to replicate his great glory, you were to live in submission to him and worship him and behold him as Adam and Eve, because before sin entered the world, they walked with God, God walked with them in the cool of the day. Literally walked with them in the cool of the day. What must that have been like?

We were made to walk with God, to see God, to savor his goodness and worship is gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of his worth. To see him as he is and to delight in who he is and to praise him for who he is, to reflect back to him the radiance of his great worth. That is what you as a human being were made to do and I can prove it to you whether you believe it or not. Everyone worships, it's the question is what do you worship. We're all made to worship. That's why people, this is why people go crazy over rock singers or athletes or whatever. I mean, yeah, it's impressive that a guy can throw a ball like he can or a guy can sing like he can, but why are you worshipping him? The reason you're worshipping him is because you're not worshipping the living God and the Lord Jesus Christ and you were made to worship. You will worship something. You will worship someone or something but you were made, you will find the greatest delight when you find the one you were created to worship, the living God. You will find like Augustine said, "Thou hast created us for thyself. Thou hast created us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

So we're to put worship at the center of our lives. This is what Ezra did and he made his whole life about restoring temple worship to what it needed to be, and this is something that you must do, this is what the essence of becoming a believer is, you choose to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and to bow the knee to him and to receive him as your Savior and your Lord and to place him at the first place of your life. That's salvation and then walking with God and growing in grace is continuing to put worship at the center of your life. In fact, we could say we have to continually realign our priorities. We have to continually reaffirm, "Wait, this is my priority."

In a fallen world, the second law of thermodynamics is a reality, things naturally move from order to chaos. Isn't that true? You know, we were doing some reorganizing of some drawers yesterday. I was cleaning out my side of the bathroom. I thought it was pretty good, actually. I thought I was in pretty good shape. I don't have a real discerning eye and so when I open my drawers and get stuff out that I need, you know, a toothbrush, whatever, I think it's pretty neat, but when I stop and really, my wife's like, "Hey, you need to reorganize your drawers," and I'm thinking, "It shouldn't be a big problem." And then I open it up and I really look at it differently and I'm like, "Wow! What is all this stuff in here?" I found things that like, you know, like a little cord for something that I've lost years ago. The cord's in there. We've been living in the house for 15 years, it's amazing how much you can accumulate and I've done it before, it's not the first time I've reorganized my drawers, please understand that. She does it a lot more than I do, though,

and I so I did it and I just was struck by how quickly and how deeply things go from order to chaos and I understood even as I was doing it, what? If it's gonna stay this way, it's gonna take a continual focus on that. I've got to put things back where they belong every time otherwise in a few months, she's gonna see a nasty set of drawers like she saw already, even though I didn't think it was that bad. Well, praise the Lord it's better today. If you want to come over and tour my drawers, you're welcome to. This is a good time to do it.

Okay, we have to continually do that and think about this, what's interesting is Ezra is going back leading 5,000 people to go back and just really reinvigorate worship but it's only been 58 years since they rebuilt the temple. The passage Jess read earlier from Haggai, Haggai wrote that in 520 BC they finished the temple in 516 BC and now 58 years later things have already fallen into some level of disrepair, some level of degradation in the types of sacrifices that are being offered, that somebody needs to go back and overhaul the whole system. I would have thought, man, with the work that Haggai and Zechariah did, that should have lasted longer than that, you would think. No, we live in a fallen world with sinners and things move from order to chaos and so you must continually recalibrate, refocus, realign your priorities to match God's priorities. This is the calling of the Christian life. You don't just get saved by repenting and believing in Jesus, you do that but it doesn't end there, now you're called to a life of following Jesus, continually trying to submit to his word.

So they put, he put worship at the center of his life and because of that, the hand of God was upon him because he was in sync with what God values most. He had made God's priority his priority and therefore the hand of God could be at work in his life. He had put worship at the center of his life, he had sought to put worship at the center of his life and kind of a second aspect of this is he had committed to see that appropriate sacrifices were offered.

It's interesting, this is something we saw more clearly last week when we read through or a couple of weeks ago when we read through the letter from Artaxerxes, and let's look at it again just for a moment. When you look back at chapter 7, verse 13, this is what Artaxerxes, the king, gave to Ezra, the priest, a letter, basically an authorization, this incredible decree of authority that gave Ezra just resources and access to do whatever he needed to do. But look what the king says is the purpose of Ezra's ministry and we're going to see it's about sacrifices and making sure the sacrifices are correct in the temple. In verse 13, "I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests," this is Ezra 7:13,

13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand, 15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold which you

find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem; 17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. 19 Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. 20 The rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.

Then he gives a decree that they can even raise more money. I mentioned that 25-30 wagons. It was actually the best estimate and this is a conservative estimate depending on how you, a talent was either like 67-70 pounds, a Babylonian talent, so I used 67 pounds as the number and I came up with the silver and gold that I mentioned, 28.5 tons, was actually because it was mostly silver was worth about \$175 million in today's money. So they're traveling with \$175 million worth of silver and gold and the king has sent it with them so that they can get things right in the temple and they can buy the right kinds of sacrifices for the temple. Apparently Ezra had become aware that they're not offering the appropriate sacrifices and the king wants to see that rectified and we see that God's hand is at work in this.

Now God works through means. I mentioned this last time and the interesting thing I didn't share with you, I meant to share it a couple of weeks ago, one of the things that we've noted is that the Persian kings had a different view of their vassal states than the Babylonians did. When the Persians took over from Babylon, the Babylonians when they would conquer a country, they would just take stuff from the temples of those kings, destroy the temples a lot of times, take the stuff and put it in the temple of their gods in Babylon. The Persian rulers had a different philosophy, that was basically leave the vassal states and their religion alone and that way the vassal states' gods won't be mad at us. This is what's motivating this Persian king. He's not really a follower of Yahweh, he's trying to protect himself and you see that when you read through this decree more carefully. But one of the things that was interesting that I read about at this time in history, 458 BC, two years before Ezra is sent back to Jerusalem, there was a big revolt in Egypt against Persia. Now Egypt, southwest of, you know, Jerusalem, there's a big revolt down there and a significant portion of territory is now lost to the Persians, and this Persian king is a little concerned that it's gonna spread throughout his reign and so he wants to get things squared away in Judah and Jerusalem. You see, he's motivated by the events that are happening. Who is decreeing the events that are happening? God is sovereignly ruling over the affairs of men to accomplish his purposes and even bending the will of a godless king to do his bidding.

But back to the realigning of priorities. So if you're gonna put worship at the center of your life, what we see, then, is appropriate sacrifices are a part of putting worship in its rightful place in your life, appropriate sacrifices. Ezra had requested this of the king and

the king gives it and the Lord provides so that now they're going to be able to make sure that appropriate sacrifices are offered. I mentioned earlier that revelation is progressive. One of the ways that God taught us, taught his people how horrible sin was, was through the sacrificial system. He taught us in a way that we could understand and see.

When you look at how much blood was shed on the altar of Jerusalem or on the tabernacle altar originally and when the tabernacle becomes a temple in Jerusalem, it's really quite astonishing. I shared one time not too long ago about a young lady in our church who had come to me, she was a brand new believer and she was concerned and she was kind of, she was a vegetarian, at this time she's no longer and I don't know if she eats barbecue pork but she definitely eats meat now, but I didn't really talk to her about barbecue pork back then. But anyway, she came to me, she's a teenage girl and she said, "I'd really like to talk to you, pastor." And so she came and she talked to me and she was really struggling with she's reading her Bible, seeing about the animal sacrifices and her heart was really tender, she had a really tender heart about... You know, there's legitimate abuses of animals that shouldn't happen and all of that. I mean, we should be humane in the way we treat animals. But anyway, she came and she had these concerns and I was trying to help her with that and I said, "You know, it really is something to consider." And I've had to say, "Let me tell you a little bit more about it." The way it worked basically and how important these sacrifices were is that every morning the first thing that would be done when the temple doors, before the temple doors were opened is a lamb would be sacrificed and the blood would be offered on the altar. The same thing would happen at the end of the day. This was the morning and evening sacrifice every single day. Then on the new moons, there would be extra sacrifices for the first day of a new moon. Then on the holidays, there would be lots more and every day during the day if somebody had offended, you know, someone else and they need to make it right, Jess mentioned that earlier, to make right our offenses before we come to the Lord's Table, right? Confess our sin. Well, to confess your sin and be made right with God at this point in history, the Lord ordered that you bring an animal sacrifice, that a lamb or a bull or a goat had to die in your place.

So I was gently kind of leading her to see this and this is really difficult and sometimes like on Passover, it was like the Lord's house was like a slaughterhouse. I mean, it was really like a slaughterhouse almost every day but especially on those days, so much blood was flowing. Why? And this is where we have to ask, you have to stop and ask why? Why would God do this? I know you're wondering and I'm sharing with you my own sense of indignation when I look at that. Why so many animals to die? Remember God, he's in a sense baby talking with us, with them that lived through that time. What's he saying? He's saying your sin and my sin is so incredibly offensive to God that for us to come into his presence, this horrible thing must happen. This animal must die. His blood must be shed. That's what he's saying.

You see, we don't see sin the way God does, do we? We don't see it's that big a deal. We think, you know, we think of God as very low, close to us. This is why people say things like "the man upstairs," speaking of God. They have no conception of the distance between a God who the angels in Isaiah who before him continually cry out, "Holy, holy,

holy is the Lord of Hosts." He's separate and distinct from our sin and to make us right with him, this incredible offensive thing has to happen.

I went on to say, listen now, that was just typical. You know there's no more animal sacrifices offered now. Do you realize that? When you sin, you don't have to offer a sacrifice. Do you know why? Because the offensiveness and, you know, it would have been offensive. You would go to the temple, imagine, I mean, we don't even know this because we live such hygienic is not the word I'm looking for, insulated lives. You know, in our day, if you want chicken, you go and you buy a chicken. It's already prepared. It's already defeathered. You know, the bad stuff's taken out. It's clean. There it is. It's just ready to throw in your pot and eat. Or you go to Chick-fil-A and it's already ready. I've got to tell, I heard a joke the other day. It just hit me as really funny. The guy said, "You know," talking about cage-free chickens, he said, "You know, at some point every chicken's gotta be in a cage because they don't just show up at Chick-fil-A on their own."

But we've been insulated from these things. We don't experience what it was like to go out and have to twist the chicken's neck to break it so you could have fried chicken. My grandparents, my parents, they understood that. Just slaughter a hog so that you could have bacon and pork, and the ugliness of that and to experience that and just have to get used to it because this is what you have to do, right? We are so far removed from that that it's even harder for us to relate to why God would do what he did, but it would have been offensive and when you went, you would have had, to the temple, you would have smelled the smells of death. In fact, in Malachi 2, it talks about the priests are disdainfully sniffing at the sacrifices. The Lord is angry with them. He says, "You disdainfully sniff as you go about your business." Like this is so offensive that we're doing this.

Now they were right to a point. It was offensive but the problem was they had a misplaced locus of offense. They were offended about the wrong thing because the reality was, what it was to teach us is this is how offensive our sins are to God and for us to be reconciled to God, something incredibly offensive must happen and this is where I took that young lady. I said, "This is why all of the animals that ever died, all of the animal sacrifices that have been offered, there's an element of pain and sorrow in that and yet that is nothing compared to what they typified. They typified the most disgraceful and offensive thing that has ever happened in history, the death of the eternal Son of God on the cross, cursed for our sins." The most offensive thing that has ever happened. It's also the most wonderful and glorious and loving thing in the same way that the animal sacrifices were actually the love of God because every time an animal was sacrificed, there was real transaction where God was bringing people back to himself through faith and the glory of what Jesus Christ accomplished when he became sin for us. This is why he had to be treated the way he was. He was accursed for us and the offensiveness of our sins was placed upon him and he was treated as if he had lived your sinful life, my sinful life. Every sin I've ever committed, thought, word or deed, was placed upon him and he suffered the agony that is truly due to that because God's justice is right. It is good that God is angry with sin.

What would it be like to live in a world where there was no justice? It might be like something if you lived in Mexico right now or Nicaragua or El Salvador, you might experience something of what that's like, a glimpse of it, where the law is not really the law, where they're bought and paid for and wicked people and anarchy runs wild. That's what it would be like to have no justice. Magnify that a billion times over and that's what it would be like to have an unjust God but we have a just God. Praise the Lord that he is a good God who punishes evil. He reigns and rules for the good of his people and not only that, though he is offended with sin and for us it brings an element of terror because we are sinners, but he's made a way by providing for our sins in giving his Son. He willingly took upon himself, God himself became sin for us. That's the Gospel.

So now on this side, we don't have to offer animal sacrifices because Jesus has offered once-for-all a sacrifice for our sins. Now what does it mean to offer appropriate sacrifices for us today, then? We are supposed to offer appropriate sacrifices. The New Testament speaks of spiritual sacrifices in 1 Peter 1:5. He says, "You are being built up a spiritual house." The body of Christ is now the spiritual temple. We're not really about buildings anymore. We have to have buildings to meet because we like it not to rain on us when we're meeting. We like to be pleasantly comfortable when we're meeting and so we can concentrate. We have buildings but we don't, it's not the buildings that matter, the people of God are the building.

He says, "You are a spiritual house," 1 Peter 1:5, "a priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God." What are those spiritual sacrifices? Well, there's a number of verses I'll mention to you. We don't have time, we'll deal with them a little more carefully next time, but Hebrews 13:15-16 help us to understand this some. "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." We now offer sacrifices of praise to God and we offer sacrifices of praise that are in doing good and sharing with others.

Romans 12:1 speaks of us offering our bodies as living sacrifices, that the sacrifice we offer is not, we now out of gratitude for what Jesus Christ has done for us, we give to God ourselves and we spend ourselves in doing good for others. So if you want to make worship the center of your life, then you have to put worship at the center and then you have to commit to making appropriate sacrifices, it means you have to commit to giving yourself up for others, for God and for others. We're not to neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased, Hebrews 13:16.

So you have to realign your priorities. These are the priorities God wants us to have, worship, and this is what a true worship looks like. Worship is the center and we commit to offer these kind of sacrifices. Now the second point we're gonna hit quickly and we'll cover this in much more detail next time and that is you realign your priorities and you redefine your practice. The second point is you redefine your practice.

What we see about Ezra is he not only had the right priorities, he was a very practically oriented man of God. I mean, he's really challenging me as I look at this, the Lord is just

showing me how here is a man of action. He's not a guy who sat around and said, "The Lord's in control and I'm just gonna wait on what God's gonna do. No, the Lord's in control therefore I'm gonna act. I'm gonna look at what the circumstance is, I'm gonna look at what needs to be done and I'm gonna act and I'm gonna take action." I mean, God would not have, I mean think about it, if Ezra hadn't of gone to the king, the king wouldn't have decreed what he decreed. He went to the king and he asked for all these things. He didn't just have a prayer vigil outside the king's palace or circle around it praying. He prayed and then he went and he asked. Then when he didn't have any Levites, he didn't say, "Well, the Lord didn't give us any Levites." He said, "We've gotta have Levites. The Lord must want us to have Levites, therefore I'm gonna recruit some Levites." And so he did.

So for us, putting it into practice, how do you make worship the center of your life? You've got to take practical action to make worship at the center of your life. It's not gonna just happen. You don't just pray, "Lord, help me be more centered on You." What will you do about it? God has already told you this is to be the center, how are you going to adapt your life to fit with God's priorities? How are we gonna do that? What is God calling me to do in light of what his word says? I mean, to make worship at the center of our lives, we have to make worship with the body of Christ central. This means that in your life no matter where you move or live, you should always be looking for a Bible teaching church where you can gather with people of God to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and hear his word. This is something, you know, when you think about when you move somewhere, you think about what school district, location to work, what kind of drive am I gonna have. You should always be thinking is there a Bible teaching, faithful church close by? That should be one of the key ingredients. Because why? Because you're created for worship and if you're created for worship, this has to be a priority, and if we have to drive two hours to worship in a good Bible teaching church or the only things around are people that aren't teaching the Bible, we can't fulfill what God's called us to do. Therefore we're gonna make adjustments to make sure we can do what God has called us to do.

It's to seek to work to learn how to whether we eat or drink, whatever we do, to do all to the glory of God, to capture everything and make it a part of worship, to do your job for the glory of God whatever your job is. To do it as a part of giving honor to him. To do it as a Christian. To do it in a distinctive way. But now let's talk about for a moment about offering sacrifices, appropriate sacrifices. You know, that means giving ourselves up. That means dying to sin. It means putting off sin, fighting against your sin. Yes, and taking action to do that. It's not just gonna happen that you overcome. We talked about, you know, if you're struggling with some life-controlling sins right now and you want the hand of God at work in your life. Well, you want to make worship a priority but what does that look like practically? It doesn't just mean philosophically. Yes, you have to accept it conceptually but you've got to do it practically. Are you making worship the kind of priority that it should? Are you going to church first?

And not that every Sunday, 52 out of 52. You may miss a few but you really, you know, a lot of times we just find it very easy to miss church. I've been amazed how, it's

obviously, I understand that it's easier for you to miss church than it is for me to miss church and I understand that. Seriously, I mean, I don't take that lightly because, I mean, it's my job. If I stopped showing up to church, it's not gonna be good for anybody and certainly not for me and I understand that. But putting that all aside, what is more important to me than worshipping God? I have to ask myself that. Am I doing it because I'm just supposed to show up or am I doing it because I want to worship the living God with God's people because I delight to be in God's house which is with you worshipping the Lord? We all have to ask ourselves hard questions and really see is this really a priority? When I don't feel good? When I feel like, I mean, when you're really sick you've gotta stay home, of course, but when you're just kind of down and depressed, why would you stay away from worshipping the living God with his people? This is where you come so you can be lifted up. You need to be here more than any other time when you're down and depressed.

So make worship a priority and then to say a word about making sacrifices a priority, if we're gonna make these kind of sacrifices a priority, we're gonna offer true sacrifices God wants us to, then that means we're going to do good to others as we saw in Hebrews 13. We're going to share with others and the idea, really, of sacrifices today, the connecting point between sacrifices in the Old Testament and today, is sacrifices were always about costly devotion to God. Costly devotion to God. It costs you something and it's expressed out of your devotion to God, your worship of God. So today what are you supposed to be? How do you express your costly devotion to God? You express your costly devotion to God by listening, by spending time with a friend who's hurting and listening to them and sacrificing your time for their soul. You do it by sacrificing your money to give to another brother or sister in need at a time where the Lord shows you a need. That's a sacrifice. That's a gift. That's an offering to God.

Paul in Philippians 4:18 speaking of what the Philippians had done for him, they sent him an offering, a tangible financial offering to help him. He's in prison. They're providing for his food. I mean, you don't, well, they didn't get it taken care of as well in Roman prisons as people do today. He needed sustenance. They sent him an offering and he says, "This is a fragrant aroma to God." Their tangible financial outlay was given as an act of costly devotion and that was a sacrifice with which God is pleased.

So when you sacrifice your time, and when you make intentional decisions to get around other Christians so that you can know what's going on in their lives so that you can then be able to sacrifice your time. If you never are getting around other Christians and really getting into their lives, you can go through life and not have to offer any offerings to God. So if you really want to apply this, this is the kind of questions: what am I doing to really relate to other Christians in the church? Maybe I should be in a home group not just because it's gonna meet my needs but because I want to give God offerings that are pleasing to him. I want to go to home group so that I can find out what's going on in other people's lives and minister to them and in doing that, to offer to God fragrant aromas. And if everybody in the church was thinking like that, think about that. We want to go be with the people of God so we can see what's going on in their lives, what burdens they're carrying, we want to jump underneath those burdens and shoulder them by God's grace

by his power, always pointing everybody to Jesus, look at Christ, keep hoping in him, let's keep fighting together. If everybody was doing that, that's the kind of oneness that would make the world say, "Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God." That's what Jesus prayed for in John 17 when he said, "that they may be one even as we are one," that there may be a oneness of connection among the people of God that is something like the connection between the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The hearts beat together and Jesus says, "that they may be one even as we are one and when that happens, that the world may know that thou didst send me."

That's what God's called us to and so when we realign our priorities and we make worship the priority it needs to be and offering sacrifices the priority it needs to be, and we redefine our practice so that that's actually happening, then we can count on the fact that God's hand will be at work in your life. You may not see it visibly. Of course, you never see it visibly. There will be times where it seems like not much is happening but if you're really doing this, there's never a time that something is not happening, you just can't see it. God works, his hand is favorably disposed to all who seek him. That is true. May the Lord help us be people like that.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank You for the privilege it is to be made right with You through Jesus Christ. What an awesome gift to give Your Son to bear our sins so that we might be brought back to You to do what we were created to do, to worship You and to love You, and then to share that love and the joy of that love with one another in serving others and by serving them and loving them, we're really loving You and serving You. Lord, make us, make us one. Help us, help us repent deeper, more deeply of our selfishness, of our desire for comfort and ease. Lord, help us remember this world is not our home, we're just passing through. The new heavens and the new earth are awaiting. We don't have much time. Let us set to work. By Your grace, let us work hard. We pray for those that are here that don't know Christ, that You would grant them grace for repentance and faith and they would know the joy of truly surrendering to Jesus, believing in His sacrifice on our part, believing in His resurrection from the dead, His reign over all things and submit to Him. And Lord, help us all to make Your priorities our priorities. We pray this in Your wonderful name. Amen.