

Laying Hold of The Hand of God Part 3

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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This morning I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles again to Ezra, chapters 7 and 8. The title of the message this morning is actually the same title as the last two weeks. Lord willing, I really promise I think this is the last one. I always hate doing messages with the same title because it's confusing if you go back to listen to them. But anyway, I feel like this is just the best way to title it. "Laying Hold of The Hand of God Part 3" is the title and we looked at this the last two Sundays. Laying hold of the hand of God, and we've seen if you haven't been with us, the reason we've chosen this title is because that's a key phrase in the book of Ezra, actually and Nehemiah but particularly Ezra, that you have this repeated refrain "the hand of God was upon him." We've noted that in Ezra 7 it occurs three times. We're told that the hand of God was upon Ezra himself and because of the hand of God upon him, he was able to accomplish great things for God. Three times in chapter 7, though, the hand of God upon Ezra. Then in three times in chapter 8 it's the hand of God upon the people of God, the people to whom he ministers. So in chapter 7 three times the hand of God upon Ezra, chapter 8 three times the hand of God is upon the people. You'll see that when we read in a moment, we'll read and see those last three times in chapter 8.

We've talked about the hand of God is the power of God, the miracle-working amazing power of God that we need to help us to become all that he wants us to be, to be obedient to him, to build his kingdom, to overcome sin, to share the Gospel, all the ways we would like to see the power of God at work in our lives. It's another way of saying we want the hand of God to be at work in our life, through our life. You think about the needs in your own soul, areas where you need God to work supernaturally and powerfully, needs of people that you love, the people that you care about. You need God to work in their lives. You long for God to work in their lives. How does that happen? Well, I think we have in Ezra a paradigm or an example, a model that we can follow. I think the Scripture presents him in that way. He is someone we should emulate, all of us, because God wants to work in all of our lives in dramatic ways. Not always visible but very often, most often not visibly in some sort of spectacular glorious way but quietly and steadily over time doing that which is actually more glorious and more wonderful by his power.

So we looked at Ezra. What was it about Ezra that enabled him to have the power of God at work in his life, and we've essentially said the last two weeks, a review now for the last

two Sundays to kind of put it in context, we've said that Ezra, he got his life and ordered it according to God's priorities. He made God's agenda, whatever God's agenda is, he made that his agenda, Ezra's agenda. He didn't try to get God to get on his plan, he got himself on God's plan and that's essentially what we looked at the last two weeks, that he realized that God's purpose, that God's kingdom is extended, that God's glory is manifested as his people put him at the center of their lives and worship at the center, and he saw that the importance of the temple and that temple worship needed to be restored, it was in disarray, and so he saw that that was what God wanted was to see his temple and his people worshipping at his temple rightly. So he made temple worship the central focus of his life and as we put worship at the center of our lives, then we are getting on God's agenda and we are making ourselves lined up with his purposes and we can expect that he will work in our lives.

The second thing that he did, the second priority that he put into his life was that he put the word of God at the center. We saw that in chapter 7, that he had set his heart, he had fixed his heart to study the law of the Lord, to practice it and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. He had set his heart, the direction of his life was about worshipping God and it was about the word of God and living out the word of God. Not just knowing it, but living it, and then sharing that with others.

So he put the worship at the center of his life, he put the word at the center of his life, and because he had these two priorities, then the Lord's hand was able to be upon him because he was lined up, moving where God was moving. But there's something else in the passage that just kind of jumps off the page that I think we need to consider. Touched on it several weeks back lightly but I think we need to look at it in a more direct and clear way this morning. So this is laying hold of the hand of God. If you think about the three weeks, the first week was laying hold of the hand of God by putting worship at the center of your life; then last week was laying hold of the hand of God by putting the word of God at the center of your life; this week is laying hold of the hand of God by taking wise action. By taking wise action. I almost named this by just doing something. I decided against it but I think that's essentially a lot of what I'm trying to say. Ezra was a man of action. He just did something.

Now he didn't just do anything, he did what was wise and right biblically. But he did something. He was a man of action. We're gonna see as we read the passage, I want you to look for, we're reading a section of Ezra, the only chapter and a half of the book where it's first person autobiographical. You see the first person pronouns where it's him talking. You know, earlier he has a letter and Artaxerxes is using first person "I." That's Artaxerxes, that's not Ezra. Here at the end of chapter 7 and through chapter 8, he's speaking in the first person. There's some in chapter 9 as well. "I," and so I want you to look when you see, when you hear the word "I" come up in this passage, look what follows it. What you're gonna see is verbs, that he's doing things, and what I want to share with you as we unpack this this morning, is Ezra was a man who was lined up with God's purposes, he was committed to God's agenda, and then the way that he lived was to see what was around him that was not in line with the will of God and he moved to address that, and this is essentially a model of how he wants us to live, that you walk with

God, you love God so much that as you grow in your understanding of him, you love what he loves, you begin to hate what he hates, you're moved by what moves his heart, you learn to think his thoughts after him. Do you see how this comes from putting worship at the center and the word at the center? So you see what he sees, you're moved by what moves him. You see things that aren't in line with his will and it grieves you in your own life first, and so you're trying to live out the word, put the word to work in your life to be more like Christ, to be more obedient. But then also you're willing to move out and seek to minister his word in other places where his will's not being followed. This is what Ezra did. This is how he lived.

I mentioned I almost named it just by just doing something and I was going to borrow the title and some of the stuff that I'll share with you today is from a very helpful book by Kevin DeYoung called "Just Do Something." It's a Christian author, a pastor in Charlotte, NC. He's written some good books. He's a really solid Reformed pastor. But he wrote this book "Just Do Something" and I want to share with you a little bit about it because I think it's not exactly what I'm talking about but it's like on a parallel track. Listen to this and I recommend it to you, and especially to some of our young people. Anyway, you'll hear what I'm talking about in a moment.

"Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will." A liberating approach to finding God's will or, then he has this "or" alternative title, or "How to Make a Decision Without Dreams." How to make a decision without visions, without fleeces, without fleeces, without impressions, without open doors, without random Bible verses, without casting lots, without liver shivers, without writing in the sky, without etc. He says that Christians, too often we want God to reveal his will with such clarity about particular decisions that we're paralyzed by fear and we're not able to take wise action. This is one of the reasons that we have singles who are single too long, particularly young men who are not taking wise action because they're afraid they're gonna find the wrong person. They've bought into the lie. He talks about this, it's one of his major issues he deals with is marriage. He talks about making decisions for jobs and how you're looking for something, you know, some kind of impression, some kind of feeling, and that's not the way God guides. I mean, generally the way God guides Christians is he wants us to center our lives around him, to make worship the center, to know that the word of God, we're building the word of God into our lives in such a way that we're thinking his thoughts, we're beginning to think like he thinks, to value what he values, and because of that when we see circumstances, we can apply wisdom to them.

So when it comes to making decisions, you know, you're a young man and you're a young man with the desires a young man has, you need to get a job and you need to get married. This is essentially, he talks about that, how Elizabeth Elliot, the great hero of the faith, wonderful missionary to South America, he said she was teaching one time a group of singles and she was really strongly, she wanted to stop and just tell there's a young single's group, she wanted to line up the men and the women on the wall and just say, "We're gonna pair up right now and you're gonna get married." Because there's not one person out there like the world says.

What do you do? You apply wisdom to that decision. You think biblically about marriage. What is marriage? Who is to be married? Who is a Christian to marry? Another believer, someone who's pulling the same direction, someone who loves Christ. You think wisely about it. Is there some level of, you know, natural affinity and enjoyment of some of the same things. Yeah, you think about that but you don't sit there and labor over it and labor over it. You finally just make a decision and the good news is no matter who you marry, it is going to be hard. That's just a fact because do you know why? You're a sinner marrying a sinner and so God's gonna use the sanctifying power of being united to another sinner to expose your sin and make you flee to Christ even with more intensity. That's one of the reasons he ordains marriage, and then you're gonna marvel at how wonderful it is. Yes, it's the grace of God, it's the most beautiful thing this side of heaven that we can experience, and yet it's work. So don't over-spiritualize it looking for some kind of magic thing to happen. Anyway, I didn't mean to get off on that so much but obviously the Lord knew somebody needed to hear that.

But he said the same thing about jobs. You just apply wisdom. So the point "just do something" means Ezra was a man like that. Ezra was a man who loved God, loved his word, abode in his word and then when he saw something that wasn't the way it needed to be, he sees a need that needs to be addressed, he doesn't just rush ahead and do something, he thinks biblically, he applies wisdom and he moves with wisdom in taking decisive action to do what he believes God would want done, and he's willing to take the risk.

Now I think this is something that the Lord wants us to see this morning and that has been challenging to me, myself, because I think I tend to be too cautious. And it's really not so much, we think, you know, it's just a spiritual desire to always do what God wants, "I just so want to do the will of God that I'm..." and we kind of over-spiritualize it and think we're really doing something holy when often that's a veil for we love comfort, we fear failure, we care too much about the approval of men, we're not willing to be humbled by God as we try to do what he wants us to do. If he wants us to fall on our faces, if it's to the glory of Christ, so be it. He must increase, I must decrease.

So we really need to think hard about this and I commend that book to you, "Just Do Something," but the title is laying hold of the hand of God by taking wise action. And so as we read the text, I want you to listen for the actions Ezra takes and then we're gonna unpack it a little bit and think about how that applies to us. I want to read a couple of verses from chapter 7, verses 27 and 28, skip down to verse 15 and read through the rest of chapter 8. We've read these passages, I know, several times in the last few weeks but I think we need to hear this again. So Ezra 7:27 and 28,

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.

This is the end of his recounting in verses 26 previous to verse 11, 11 to 26 he recounted Artaxerxes' decree and here's Ezra responding and this is where he turns to the first person singular, "I," it turns to autobiographical at verse 27, and we heard one of the three times in chapter 7 he says, "the hand of the LORD was upon me."

Now skipping down to verse 15 of chapter 8, and remember, listen for the first person personal pronoun and what you hear after it. 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.

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask that You might by Your Spirit help us to understand and apply Your word. We pray that Your hand would be at work in the hearts and lives of Your people, that You would remove the obstacles, the unbelief, grant repentance and faith. We pray this for the glory of our glorious Savior Jesus. In His name. Amen.

So laying hold of the hand of God by taking wise action. You heard that 12 times, it said "I" and it was a verb. Ezra did things. "I assembled. I observed." When he observed there weren't enough guys there, he sent and when he sent, it said he sent for a group of guys to come to him and then he sent them, "I sent them to go to Iddo to the leading man at the place Casiphia and I told them what to say." Here's a man of action. "Listen, guys, we can't go without the Levites. You've gotta go." So we see that he was a man of action.

Now one of the things I want to point out, this is kind of a preliminary observation before we get into the two main points of the message. There's just two points and here's a preliminary observation before we get into those two points, okay? You know, how does Ezra know what to do? How does God speak to Ezra? This is a really interesting question. Think about that. It's interesting too when you compare this, Ezra was regarded by the Jewish people as something of a second Moses. Now think about that, why would he be regarded as a second Moses? What was it that Ezra did? He brought the law of God to the people of God after the exile. What did Moses do? He brought the law of God to the people of God. So Ezra was greatly revered in subsequent Jewish history and I think in Christian history we should look back to him as a great hero and that's what we are.

So he's a second Moses and I thought about this, you know how you read your Bible and sometimes you don't stop and ask the right questions. I was thinking about Moses and Ezra. You know, how did Moses hear from the Lord? Well, Moses heard directly from the Lord. I counted more than 60 times in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy that you read these words, "The Lord said to Moses," and then you have quotation marks and exactly what God said audibly to Moses. You know, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and I'm gonna, you know, tell him to let My people go.'" And God was

continually talking out loud to Moses. You had what God said to Moses, the Lord said to Moses, the Lord said to Moses, the Lord said to Moses. You can just page after page, especially through Exodus and Numbers, over and over and over again, "The Lord said to Moses."

Now I think for many of us, we have this tendency to glamorize that and kind of wish that were the way it is for us, especially when it comes to these tough decisions. Wouldn't it be nice that the Lord said to Ty exactly what to do in this circumstance? And this is what's behind a lot of the mistaken, misguided literature that's out there in Christian circles, and misguided preaching that's out there even among quasi-evangelicals, where people are wanting to have God speak to them directly. Is that God's will? Some people will tell you that it is. I think one of the great examples in fact that it's clearly not is to compare Ezra to Moses. If you struggle with that, if you maybe struggle with continuationism, the desire to have God speak in other ways outside of Scripture, consider this: Ezra, the second Moses, a man of God mightily used of God, the Scripture says over and over again the hand of the Lord is upon him, nowhere do you have him experiencing or recounting for us God saying directly to him anything. Very different than Moses. His call is not described. Moses' call was pretty amazing, wasn't it? Remember, the burning bush. The burning bush speaking to him. God speaking to him out of a burning bush. Astonishing. Then you have "the Lord said to Moses, the Lord said to Moses, the Lord said to Moses," over and over and over again.

So God's speaking directly to Moses but when it comes to Ezra, there's nothing like that. How did Ezra experience his calling? How did Ezra hear from God? The clear inference, the necessary inference from reading the book of Ezra is the way God spoke to Ezra was through his holy word. Ezra was a man who set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. He heard God speak through the word of God. Now if this was already happening in the Old Testament, we can understand this is what's gonna happen for us. Now what was the difference between Moses and Ezra? Moses didn't have any Scriptures. There was no Bible for him. He was the beginning of the Bible. God was speaking to him to give us the first five books of the Bible. So the sufficiency of Scripture even there comparing Moses and Ezra.

So now with that said, that's how God speaks to us today, let's look at the two points this morning. Laying hold of the hand of God by taking wise action. I want to look at this through two points and they're really two questions. The first is who, and the second is how. The first point is who, the second point is how. The first point really, who, to be more appropriate grammatically, whom. What is the kind of person through whom the hand of God works? Who does the hand of God work through, is the way we would say it, but it was really more appropriately whom. Are we the kind of people through whom God's hand works? What kind of person is that? We want to consider that, and then we want to look at how the hand of God works.

So first of all, this point who or whom. Through whom does the hand of God work? And there's three subpoints here under point 1, who or whom, and the first thing is clearly the hand of God, we see in Scripture and throughout and here especially, the hand of God

works through someone who belongs to God, someone who has come to know the living God. In other words, for the hand of God to work in your life, to see God mightily work to accomplish something in your life, you have to be a follower of Jesus Christ. You have to be a believer. You have to have experienced the new birth. It's not gonna work in your life, God's not gonna work in your life if you've not come to him and made peace with him through Jesus Christ, if you've not fled from the wrath to come, if you've not come to understand in a saving way who Jesus is and what he's done, that he came into the world to save sinners, to understand that you are a sinner who needs to be saved, that you have no hope in yourself, that you cannot reform yourself or make yourself acceptable to God, that your only hope is to flee to Christ, to see that his saving work, his perfect life, his glorious sacrifice, the giving of himself on the cross bearing our sins in his body on the cross, dying in our place, experiencing the wrath of God, the punishment that our sins deserved, and then that he did not remain in the tomb but on the third day he rose again from the dead which was a declaration from God the Father that he had accepted his offering, that his sacrifice was accepted and death could not hold him, it was impossible for him to be held in its power, Peter says. Why? Because he had never sinned. And that's so important because if he had sinned, he couldn't bear your sins or my sins. But he had never sinned and so he's able to bear our sins, and because he had never sinned himself, death had no power over him so he walked out of the grave. And if you place your faith in him, you repent and turn to him and surrender to him, then you have met the first qualification to have God's hand at work in your life. If you've not, you cannot expect God to work in your life to do anything good. I mean, he's kind and gracious to all, but to have his power at work to really do something dramatic, you must be a believer.

So that's the first thing, the first subpoint, who. Those who belong to Christ. That's point A. What kind of person through whom does God work? What kind of person does God work through? The second point, B, is one who has put him at the center, who's realigned their priorities which we talked about the last two weeks, putting worship at the center, putting the word at the center, and not just theoretically. Remember, we talked about this. It's not just believing that worship should be at the center in your head, it's making adjustments in your life to really do it. It's not just accepting that the word should be at the center of your life and that everything should be built on Scripture, it's actually now practically working to obey it.

I mentioned last week we should all be working on our character, like renovating a house. There should be areas in your house, your spiritual house, you're working on if you belong to Christ. And I told you I was gonna ask you in a couple, I gave you two weeks' notice so I'm not gonna ask you today. Somebody asked me last week. I thought that was pretty cool. After church they said or asked me, I should already be working on something. I said I was, so anyway. I appreciate that, but I may be asking you and you should be asking one another, "Hey, what are the areas in your life you're really trying to work on that you realize the Lord is not pleased with this area of my life and I'm trying to clean it up according to His word?" That's what it means to really put the word at the center of your life.

So the second qualification for someone who will, can expect God's hand to work in his life is not just a believer but a believer who's trying to get on God's agenda, actively doing that. To come to understand, you know, to love his word, to love his truth so that as I said earlier, you come to love what he loves and you think more and more like your Father thinks. You value what he values. And what's happening is you're gaining wisdom. That's wisdom in itself. Now you're gonna know what to do. You understand his will and his ways.

Now that's the second subpoint, the third subpoint I just want to emphasize, who does God work through? You have to be a believer, secondly, you have to be someone who is putting him at the center of your life, and thirdly, I just want to underscore the fact every Christian. There's no limit. If you're a brand new believer, if you were saved yesterday, you can have God's hand at work in your life today. It's not for later. You don't wait until later. "These are things that I'm gonna do later. I'm gonna let God work through me later, when I've been a believer longer, when I'm grown more, after I finish this Bible study that I'm in right now." No, the Lord wants to work in your life today. So through whom does the hand of God work? Someone who belongs to Christ, who's putting God at the center, and someone who's willing and available and making themselves available because they know every Christian is called to this.

I want to spend most of our time on the second question, how? How does God's hand work through his people? How does God, we said this several, six times in the passage, "the hand of God was at work." Three times Ezra directly speaks of it himself. He was granted all that the king requested him, it said in chapter 7, verse 6, "the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him." Then in chapter 8 we heard three times that the hand of God upon him, twice speaking directly of things that happened, that they were able to find Levites because the hand of his God was upon him. People they needed for temple service. They were able to make the journey of almost a thousand miles without a military escort because the hand of God was upon him.

So how is it that that actually happens? I think there's basically a three step thing that we need to just kind of try to operate and put into our lives that Ezra, I think, operated on that we see in this passage. It's similar somewhat to what DeYoung says in his book but slightly different. So anyway, there are three things that are a part of taking decisive action, wise action. How does God work? He works through people taking action in this way. The first thing is a believer who loves the Lord and who's trying to walk with the Lord as we described, sees a circumstance. This is the first subpoint, see the circumstance. You see a need, you see maybe what you'd call a problem, and you realize this is not in line with the will of God. There's a problem here. You know, in our lives we sense sometimes there might be a problem. We don't have perfect knowledge and so we think there might be a problem. Do you sense there might be a problem? You're not sure there's a problem, you think there might be.

So you see the circumstance or you sense there may be a problem, that's the first thing. Secondly, the second thing Ezra does and that's what Ezra does in each, in several circumstances here, he has problems that he identifies, he sees the circumstance, and then

the second thing he does is he applies wisdom. He applies wisdom to the circumstance. He thinks biblically about the problem. Like there's a situation that needs to be addressed, he thinks, "What are the principles in Scripture that relate to this?" You know, we sometimes wish that we, as I said earlier, you try to make a decision and you wish that God would speak audibly out of heaven or you might turn to a Bible verse that says, "The Bible says, Jim marry Katie." You know, it would be really cool if that happened, right? "The Lord told me to marry this person." But you're not gonna find that. God doesn't speak that way. That's not the way he does his work in our lives. He's interested in a relationship where we seek him for himself and in knowing and loving him, we're transformed so that we think like he thinks and then we act like he acts. That's his agenda. It's much more wonderful and glorious than him telling you and me what to do. We would love that because it would be very convenient and it would be easy for us not to have to seek him that much. I mean, if he just gave you, "Here's a list of things I want you to do today." There it is, A, B, C, D. "Okay, do that." You and I, I would be, well, I'd just do them and I wouldn't think that much about talking to the Lord about it. "You gave me, I've got it. I'm gonna do it." But he doesn't do that. He wants us to walk with him and love him and then by becoming like him, respond to life by seeing circumstances, now apply wisdom.

Apply wisdom. A third point is take action. Once you think about it with wisdom, now do something, take action. Now I'm gonna illustrate this, those three little subpoints in maybe four different circumstances in Ezra that we see in this chapter, these chapters. The first is Ezra has this calling of the Lord, in chapter 8 he assembles the people. He sends out the word to gather, the decree goes out and a number of people show up, probably about 5,000, what we can tell from the numbers that we have in chapter 8 when you count women and children. Verse 15, he assembles them, "I assembled them," verse 15, chapter 8. "I observed the people and the priests." He takes time to look. He doesn't just say, "Okay, the Lord sent us this group of people. Okay, guys, we're leaving tomorrow morning. Get a good night's sleep. We're off." No, he takes time to observe. "Who's here?" And they do a roll and you saw that roll in verses 1 to 14, and in doing that he realizes there are no Levites. He observes there is a problem. That doesn't seem like a problem to us so much, "So there's no Levites, what does that mean?" The Levites were the one tribe that God had set apart for himself for his temple. They were the only people that could be involved in the maintenance and the workings, inner workings of the temple of God. No other tribe, no other descendant of any other of the 12 tribes of Israel could be involved in temple matters. The priests and the Levites are from the tribe of Levi. Basically the Levites are all the people of Levi and the priests were a subset of that group from Aaron. Aaron was a descendant of Levi just like Moses was, and Aaron's descendants among many other Levites were the priests.

So he gets there and he's got a bunch of priests, he's got a bunch of Levites from Aaron's line and that's great. He tells us about that in the first 14 verses, but he realizes that he doesn't have any just normal everyday Levites. He's got zero and he realizes, "God is sending me back to fix the temple worship, to get things back, the sacrifices are not happening like they ought to be, they're offering probably improper animals, they're not doing things properly, the word of God's not being followed, God's worship is in

shambles. I've got to have Levites." And this is where Ezra shows that he's not a complacent Calvinist or he's not a Reformed fatalist that we can sometimes be. We're so confident in the sovereignty of God that we don't really take action. We don't really think about things the way we should. I mean, Ezra's thinking, "Lord, You told me to do this. What an amazing thing, the king gave me this decree, the word has gone out and we've got 5,000 people. You didn't send any Levites, well, You must not want any Levites, so let's go." No. He doesn't take that as God's will. He compares what the Lord has sovereignly ordained at this point, there's no Levites. He compares it to the word of God and he says, "For me to make the temple worship work, I have to have Levites."

And so he takes action. He recruits some guys and he says, "Look, you go and I'm telling you where to go and I'm telling you what to say." And then he sends them and because the good hand of God was upon him, he gets about 250 new guys that come in, they're Levites. He does, he takes action. He takes decisive action. He doesn't sit back and in complacency think, "Well, the Lord's sovereign and if the Lord wanted it done, He would do it." That's a real trap that we can fall into where we think, "You know, I should probably talk to this person, but if the Lord really wanted them to be addressed, somebody else would do it, God would do it, and so I'm not gonna do it." That's completely unbiblical and we're more prone to it as people who have a high view of the sovereignty of God. You know, we believe God's sovereign, "Well, if He wanted it done, if He wants it done, it's gotta be done by Him." Well, that's true he has to do it, but you understand he does it through his people who look at the circumstance and act with wisdom and take bold and decisive action.

That's how he does it and the very fact that you notice the problem, is a very good indication that he wants you to be a part of the solution, and if you sit back and say, "Well, God's sovereign," then you're completely contradicting the will and ways of God revealed in Scripture. In fact, I like, DeYoung is, he's a Reformed guy, he's a Calvinist, and he points out, he says, I like the way he said this, I think this is basically how he said it, he said because God is sovereign, essentially the sovereignty of God should free us up to take action rather than the sovereignty of God somehow making us so scared to take action or just trust that God's gonna do it apart from us. No, if we understand the sovereignty of God, you will take action. He says this, he says we can take risks because God never does. Think about that. You can take a risk because God never does. So the Lord lets the circumstance come up where you see a need and you're thinking about it biblically best you can, you see this doesn't line up and you're gonna move toward it and it's a risk you're taking. I mean, you don't know what's gonna happen and you step forward but the very fact that God has allowed the circumstance to be there, the very fact that God has allowed you to have the understanding that you have at this point is all a part of God's plan. So you can take the risk because God is able to deal with whatever happens because he's sovereign over the whole thing. That's how he wants us to live. Sovereignty motivates confident, should motivate confident action by his people and it did for Ezra. He took confident action. He didn't accept the status quo. Whatever happened que sera sera, whatever will be will be. That was not a song that Ezra was humming, I don't believe.

So no Levites. The second thing, there was no military escort. Verses 21 and 22 tell us he was concerned about the safe journey "for us, our little ones, and all our possessions." I mentioned before he had \$190 million worth of gold and silver, \$175-190 million depending on how you work out the math. Basically 28.5 tons of precious metals, 25-30 wagon loads, and they're traveling a thousand miles through the desert and past who knows who, and they don't have a military escort. And Ezra thinks about this and in wisdom normally would say, "We need a military escort," but he felt convicted because he had told the king that God's hand sovereignly works, he felt convicted not to ask for that. He tells us in verse 22, "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.'" He thinks because he made this testimony, that the Lord's name is at stake and so he makes a decision, interestingly enough, it will be a decision that would contradict Nehemiah's decision in the next book. Nehemiah gets a military escort. Ezra doesn't. They're both following God. Sometimes you're in a gray area and what are you to do? You're to apply wisdom and to take the risk and to step out there and like William Carey said, attempt great things for God, expect great things from God, and you just trust. And if he lets this all fall apart, well, we applied, "Lord, I applied the best wisdom I can. Show me where I'm wrong. If I need to repent, I'll repent." But there's such freedom in that. We're free to jump out and take these steps.

So no military escort was the second thing. The third thing was this enormous amount of gold and silver I just told you about, 28.5 tons, 57,000 pounds, 25-30 wagon loads. And did you notice how much Scripture is given to this? Verse 25, well, verse 24, "I set apart twelve of the leading priests." He sets apart some of the leading priests and he says, "Listen, guys, you get over here. I've gotta tell you something. I'm about to weigh out to you a lot of money and you're gonna be responsible before God to see that it gets to Jerusalem." This essentially, this is reading between the lines. That's what he's basically saying and he weighs it all out. On the front end and the back end, we're told in verse 25, "I weighed out to them the silver, the gold and the utensils." Verse 26, "Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents, and 100 gold talents, and 20 gold bowls worth 1,000 darics, and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold. 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 God. It belongs to the Lord. You guys watch it and you make sure you're ready to weigh it out when we come back.'" That's practical wisdom.

Now I thought about this. I think it took them at least, at least 10-12 hours straight to weigh that material. I think more likely two full days because they had, you know, they're using a balance. If it was like a 20 pound balance or a 50 pound balance, that's how you determine how long it took, and there are these guys weighing it out, they writing it all down, they're coming up with the fact that it is 57,000 pounds of silver and gold. And when they get to Jerusalem, he tells us, he told us right away on the fourth day, the first thing he tells them, "We came to Jerusalem and remained there three days. 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," etc. Everything was numbered and weighed and all the weight was recorded at that time. Exactly the same. The balance came up exactly like it was supposed to.

Now what's the significance of that? Listen, Ezra was a wise man. He knew that you don't put \$190 million in wagons and just without counting it. "Well, you're with the people of God. These are people God has sent to you." Yes. Count the money. Why? Because I know what's in the heart of man. You don't put people in that position, that's foolishness. That is unbiblical, ungodly thinking. That's not wisdom. Wisdom says trust the Lord and count the money and that's what they did. He took decisive action on that.

And of course, the biggest one is actually the one from chapter 7 where he saw the problem, the state of Jerusalem and temple worship, and he took action. He applied wisdom and he took action. Now think about this. He gets word, he's over in Babylon, he's studying, maybe just finished seminary and he's been studying, I think he's been out of seminary a while, he's too wise to just be a new seminary graduate. So he is a man of God probably sharing the word, ministering the word, and he gets word about what's going on in Jerusalem. We're not told this but we can read between the lines and see it's what had to happen. And he hears about the deplorable state of the temple and here's a man who loves God, who has been building his life around the word of God. He loves what God loves. He hates what God hates. His heart is grieved by what he hears and he's motivated to want to deal with it and he applies wisdom.

Now what does the Bible say, what does God say about his temple? God says his temple, the people that can clean up his temple at this point in history must be from the tribe of Levi. Ezra is a member of the tribe of Levi. Furthermore, the people that can really do the most good are from the descendants of Aaron. Ezra, we're told at the beginning of chapter 7, is a descendant of Aaron, a descendant of the priests. He thinks, "I'm qualified according to that." Then he thinks, "I'm a man skilled in the law of the Lord and I'm a man who has seen the problem. God has made it known to me." And he doesn't sit there and pray for, we don't know, I don't know, he might have prayed for a little while. I don't want to overstate it. But he's not paralyzed by inaction and spent his life and die as an old man praying for the temple to get restored. He obviously prays but he takes action. He sees a need, he trusts the Lord and takes action.

What does he do? He continues to think biblically. What could he have done? He could have tried to get up a secret mission to go back to Babylon. Raise money. "We're gonna go back to Babylon." I mean, "No, we're gonna go back from Babylon to Jerusalem. Pass the word. We need an offering." No, he applies things. "We are under the dominion of the Persians," because there would be an argument, "Why would you deal with a Persian king?" There would be some people who would have thought that, well-meaning Jewish people. But he thinks biblically, "Wait a minute. Isaiah 45:1-7, the Lord said, 'Cyrus is My servant.'" God prophesied that in Isaiah 150 years before the birth of Cyrus that a man named Cyrus would be his servant to deliver his people. Here's a man who knows the word of God. God said Cyrus was his servant and then, Ezra 1:1-4, he has the Cyrus edict where Cyrus released the people to go back and rebuild the temple. Then Ezra 6, he

has how, remember how the work got stopped, we talked about this, and they had to start the work up again because Haggai, Zechariah told them, "You've gotta start building." And when they did, the opposition grew up again and they sent word to Darius. Remember, Darius sends an edict, the hand of God upon Darius in chapter 6, verse 6-16, and he says, "Let them build the temple. Get out of their way, anybody that's gonna oppose it, and if you don't, you're dead meat because I'm the Persian King and I'm decreeing this." He knows that's happened and he knows here's the Persian king, "I need to go to the Persian King and ask him." He applies wisdom and he does it, and I'm sure he worked on what he was gonna say. He had it prepared and he goes and in chapter 7, 27-28, he says, "The Lord extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the mighty princes, thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me and I was able to gather leading men from Israel to go up with me." He applied wisdom and he acted. He didn't just rush ahead without thinking. He was a man of the word and because he was a man of the word, he then trusted that God was showing him something that he wanted him to take action about.

Now let's think about how this applies in our lives. I said see the circumstance, apply wisdom, take action. He did that basically in all four of those circumstances we talked about. See the circumstance, apply wisdom, take action. So the Lord wants us to be building up one another. He wants us to be building up our own lives to be more and more holy, right? So we're supposed to start with being like Ezra, study the law of the Lord to practice it, and we're working on our own lives, we're renovating our own souls, we're trying to see where the will of God is here and my life is here. I'm gonna work on this to get my life here and I'm going to work diligently at that by God's grace and power with other believers helping me, but I'm gonna try to bring my life into line with his word.

So if that's who you are, then you're going through life with other Christians and you run into people and you're gonna constantly see things that, hey, the will of God doesn't seem to be, something's not right here. Now remembering wisdom says you don't know everything, you don't know everything that's going on in the circumstance, but it doesn't mean that you can then avoid responsibility for what you think might be there. That's what we do, ignorance is bliss a lot of times. We just look the other way, but what wisdom would do, wisdom, applying God's wisdom in the situation would say, "Look, I know that that person's a person just like me and that if there seems to be smoke in their life, I know that when my life has seemed like smoke, there was fire. Where there's smoke, there's fire. Probably there's some need there. I don't know for sure. I'm gonna go and I'm gonna go and I'm gonna ask some questions." And you move toward them but this is taking bold action. This is taking wise action. You say, "Look, let's talk about this. Hey, I have a question for you, you know, the way you responded here a moment ago, um, that seemed a little bit out of, you were overreacting, I think. Don't you think? Well, tell me about that. What was going on? Maybe I misunderstood but it seemed like you were..." And so you ask a question. It's kind of a tentative question but it's not a tentative attitude. The tentative question means, "I don't know your heart," but the attitude is, "I'm confidently, I'm not tentative in coming to you. I'm confidently coming toward you."

That's what we have to balance and we move toward them with confidence and love because we care about them and we know, "I would want somebody else to do the, I would want this person to do the same thing for me if roles were reversed," because we need that, and so we ask the question and as we keep asking questions and we keep understanding, we come to understand what the real need is and then we can minister the word.

We were talking about this in our elder/deacon meeting we had a few weeks ago. I was sharing how this is something I'm learning as longer in ministry that's really slow to get is that too often we don't really get to understand what the need is before we try to speak and give the answer and the Bible has a word for that kind of person that I have been so many times, that is a fool. A fool speaks before he knows, before he hears. This is how it looks like in my life, somebody tells me they have a problem, they're starting to open up and say and so they're telling me about their problem, and then I discern that what they need is this, and I kind of give them, this is kind of a pitfall of preachers, I kind of, you may have experienced this and if you're still here, thank you for staying, I kind of preach a sermon. I mean, not like point 1, point 2, point 3. No, but I mean, you know, I give them, "This is what I think you need." But if I haven't really listened to their heart, I don't really know if that's what they need. Like maybe in a good message but it's just the wrong message for that person. And a fool does that. A wise person learns, "I don't know that person's heart but I need to ask questions to see what's really going on in their life. I need to love them enough just to keep moving toward them and they may be backing up away from me and I want to be kind and maybe they don't want to talk right now, but I'm not gonna leave it. Hey, I understand you don't want to talk right now but I really think we need to talk about this later." And I'm gonna follow-up with them later lovingly because I would want them to do the same thing for me. It's not kind of any kind of judgmental thing, negative thing. No, "Hey, I know we're all sinners, we all have issues in our life, we all need help. Every one of us. I need your help every bit as much as you need mine. And when the Lord lets me see a need in your life, I want to love you enough to move to take wise action in moving toward you, to hear what's going on in your heart and to see if God might have something that he wants to give you through me of his word." This is iron sharpening iron and so one man sharpens another.

And listen, take the risk. That's what we have to do. We can take risks because God never does. So you know about a need, you think there might be a need, you think there might be, well, God lets you think there might be so move and see if there is. And it may mean that someone gets angry with you. It may mean that they don't want to hang around you for a while. It may mean that you lose a friendship. But is that more important than being faithful to God? Of course not. Is that more, is that loving? That's what's really convicting is too often we think it's loving to just accept one another and the sins that are in each other's lives and just love each other in spite of them. We are supposed to love each other but loving each other doesn't mean continuing to allow someone to eat poison. Now think about that. If someone is sinning, they're doing something. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:13 that the lusts of the flesh war against the soul. So if someone is given to some lust of the flesh and it's warring against the soul, sin wars against the soul, it's destroying the soul. So is it loving to sit by and see that and not try to help? It would be like, you know, seeing

someone about to eat something and you know that the meat is tainted, you know, you saw somebody die over... This is really a bad illustration but I remember hearing sheep, this is true of sheep, that they, you know, that sheep will be eating something poisonous and one will die, and the other sheep will come and think, "That looks good," and they'll step over the dead body and eat it and they'll die. This is why sheep need shepherds always around them. Cattle are smarter than that. They don't look that smart but they're smarter than sheep but the reality is if someone is eating something that's poisonous, is it kind to say, "Have a nice day?" That's not loving. That's not kind. That's self-serving and evil.

Too often that's true of us. We have to get outside of our comfort zones to show true love. Love lays down its life for others and so the Lord wants us to be people who are willing to take that action, to see a circumstance, apply wisdom and then just take action and trust God with the risk. And we're gonna mess up. We're gonna have to go back and apologize and ask forgiveness from people. "You know, I said that but that's not right and I'm sorry. Please forgive me. But I did come because I love you." Those kind of circumstances actually draw us closer together. That's what we need to do. The Lord wants us to be people in whom the hand of God is at work, and the hand of God will be at work in you when you make his priorities your priorities, you put worship at the center, you put the word at the center, but then you must be willing to work out the word by moving toward others and taking risks. That's what we're all called to do. May God help us do that.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank You that, Lord, You do want us to be people who rest in the awareness of Your sovereign rule over the universe and yet we see in the Scriptures that You want us to be people who are diligent and active. So help us, Lord. Forgive us for our complacency. Forgive us for our fatalistic attitude that acts, even though we don't think we believe this, sometimes we act as if our action doesn't really matter and that's completely unbiblical. Forgive us, Lord. Help us to see that Your sovereignty should motivate us and give us confidence. And Lord, thank You most of all for Jesus Christ who is the One who is our life and who will enable and empower us, and as we love Him more and we seek Him more, we will become more like Him and our words will be more of a blessing and our actions will be more of a blessing, and all the while He gets more and more glory because He alone is worthy of the glory. Help us, Lord, to help one another. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.