

THE HAND OF OUR GOD WAS UPON US

TEXT: EZRA 8:18-32

Introduction:

1. Ezra is the first of the six "post-captivity" or "post-exile" books. The other post-captivity books are Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.
2. Three of these books are historical, and three are prophetic – Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are historical. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are prophetic.
3. Ezra was a priest but he was not able to serve as a priest during the Babylonian Captivity because the temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army.
4. The book of Ezra records the return of the Jews to Palestine under Zerubbabel, by the decree of the Persian king Cyrus.
5. It was only a small remnant who returned and laid the temple foundations (B.C. 536).
6. Later (B.C. 458) Ezra himself came to Jerusalem and restored the law and ritual. But the majority of the people, including most of the princes, preferred to remain in Babylon, Assyria, and Persia where they were prospering.
7. The post-captivity books deal with the small remnant which alone had a heart for God.
8. Ezra, who is called "a ready scribe in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6), continues the narrative where II Chronicles leaves off (II Chron. 36:22, 23; cf. Ezra 1:1-3).
9. The last four chapters of Ezra (7-10) deal with Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem, and the great restoration he brought about, including his reforms, the names of his companions, his fast, and his travels.
10. In the book of Ezra, we see a great emphasis on the Word of God. Ezra 9:4 says, "Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel."
11. Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, and 31 says "the good hand of the LORD his God" was upon him.
12. This morning, I would like for us to consider that important statement. I was preaching recently from I Peter 5:6 -- "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." I looked up all the references to "the hand of God" and was greatly impressed by the many references to the hand of God throughout the Bible.

I. GOD'S HAND WAS UPON THEM AS THEY WALKED BY FAITH

1. Ezra 7:9 and 10 says, "the good hand of his God" was upon him, and, "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments."
2. The names of the men who gathered around Ezra and went up with him to Jerusalem are recorded in chapter 8 (8:1-14).
3. Considering the gracious decree and liberality of King Artaxerxes, the group was rather small. The majority preferred living in Babylon, and so they remained there.
4. It has always been this way, and it always will be.
5. Our Lord said to His disciples, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).
6. Our Lord said in Matthew 7:13, 14, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."
7. Though the king of Persia gave the decree, and the people were abundantly supplied with all necessary means, the undertaking was still one of faith. They came out of Babylon trusting the LORD. They went forward by faith.
8. Ezra gathered them together at "the river that runneth to Ahava," which was probably a branch of the great Euphrates River, near Babylon. There they dwelt in their tents for three days (8:15).
9. They were strangers and pilgrims, walking by faith. First Peter 2:11 says, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul."
10. Hebrews 11:13 says, they "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."
11. Second Corinthians 5:7 says, "We walk by faith, not by sight."
12. Like their father Abraham, they stepped out by faith.
13. When Ezra viewed the people, he noticed there were no Levites (8:15b). Earlier, a small number of Levites had gone up with Zerubbabel, but none had joined Ezra and his group.
14. A.C. Gaebelien said, "What indifference this reveals! They had settled down in the enemy's land and were satisfied to remain there. They were minding earthly things, and the things of God were forgotten by them. Still they were Levites in their holy calling. It is so today with many who are no doubt saved, but they are worldly-minded, and have

but little desire to live in the separation demanded by Him from His people. Ezra was not willing to leave the Levites behind, knowing how absolutely necessary they were for the house of God. How Ezra must have looked to God! Then he acted, and through the good hand of God, which he once more acknowledged, a number of Levites and Nethinim joined the party" (cf. 8:16-20).

II. GOD'S HAND WAS UPON THEM AS THEY FASTED AND PRAYED (8:21).

1. This is taught all throughout the Bible. First Samuel 7:4 says, "Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the LORD only." First Samuel 7:6 says, they fasted on that day and said, "We have sinned against the LORD."
2. After those valiant men buried the bones of Saul and the bones of his sons, the Bible says they "fasted seven days" (I Sam. 31:13).
3. Second Samuel 1:12 says David and his men "mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the LORD, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword."
4. You may recall that when King David repented after his horrible sin, Nathan the prophet told him, "Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die" (II Samuel 12:14).
5. Second Samuel 12:15 says, "And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick."
6. Then we are told, "David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth" (II Sam. 12:16).
7. This was such a heavy burden for King David that he could not eat. He besought the LORD and he fasted.
8. In Psalm 35:13, David says, "I humbled my soul with fasting."
9. In Psalm 69:10, David says he chastened his soul with fasting.
10. Even wicked King Ahab fasted. When Elijah the prophet confronted Ahab about his sin, I Kings 21:27 says, "And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly."
11. Ahab's repentance and fasting moved God. The LORD said to Elijah, "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (I Kings 21:29).

12. If wicked King Ahab had enough sense to fast, and his fasting touched God, I wonder why so many Christians do not fast.
13. But it is not just fasting that is becoming a thing of the past, modern-day Christians know little about importunate prayer, Scripture memorization, and the family altar.
14. Many young Christians are growing up today knowing none of the majestic old hymns. They are unfamiliar with our beautiful King James Bible.
15. When Esther learned of Haman's evil plan to destroy all the Jews, she encouraged all the Jews to fast for three days.
16. When Daniel understood that the seventy year captivity in Babylon was coming to an end, Daniel 9:3 says he prayed and fasted.
17. Joel 2:12, 13 says, "Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil."
18. Nehemiah 9:1 says, "Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them."
19. Matthew 9:14 says the disciples of John the Baptist fasted often. And our Lord said in Matthew 9:15 that after His departure His disciples would fast.
20. In Matthew 6:16, our Lord said, "Moreover when ye fast..." He did not say, "Moreover *if* ye fast..."
21. And in Matthew 17:21, our Lord said, "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."
22. Acts 14:23 says, "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."
23. Paul said in I Corinthians 7:5, "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer."
24. In Psalm 35:13, David says, "I humbled my soul with fasting."
25. In Psalm 69:10, David says he chastened his soul with fasting.
26. That is the idea here in Ezra 8:21 -- "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God..."
27. James 4:9 says, "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness."

28. In the Bible, the expression, "be afflicted" often refers to fasting (cf. Ezra 8:21).

29. Andrew Murray said, "Prayer is reaching out after the unseen; fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal. Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."

III. GOD'S HAND WAS UPON THEM AND HE PROTECTED THEM

1. Ezra was ashamed to ask the heathen king of Persia for soldiers and horsemen because he had already told the king that, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him" (8:22).
2. After making such a bold declaration it would be shameful to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen.
3. Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."
4. Oftentimes in the Bible, we see God's people looking to the heathen for help, rather than turning to God for help. Even today, many churches look to the government for a handout. I think that is a poor testimony.
5. Spurgeon said, "Would any believers seek state endowments for their Church, if they remembered that the Lord is dishonoured by their asking Caesar's aid?" (Ezra 8:22).
6. It is shameful to look to man for help when God is able to deliver us from all our troubles (8:23).
7. Second Chronicles 32:7 and 8 says, when King Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib was come, and that he was purposed to fight against Jerusalem, he said to his soldiers, "Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words."
8. King Hezekiah said, "With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles."
9. *Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in His strength alone; The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own. Put on the Gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer;*

Where duty calls or danger, be never wanting there. (George Duffield, Jr.)

10. There is a wonderful story behind that hymn. "Tell them to stand up for Jesus" were the final words of a twenty-nine-year-old Episcopalian pastor, Dudley Tyng, as he spoke from his deathbed to a group of sorrowing friends and fellow preachers.
11. A great citywide revival was sweeping across Philadelphia in 1858. Of the participating preachers, none was more powerful than Pastor Dudley Tyng, known as a bold and uncompromising preacher.
12. In addition to pastoring his own church, Tyng began holding noonday services at the downtown YMCA. Great crowds came to hear him preach.
13. On Tuesday, March 30, 1858, over five thousand men gathered for a mass meeting to hear Tyng preach from the Exodus 10:11 text, "Go now ye that are men, and serve the LORD."
14. Over one thousand of these men committed their lives to Christ. At one point in the sermon, the young preacher shouted, "I must tell my Master's errand, and I would rather that this right arm were amputated at the trunk than that I should come short of my duty to you in delivering God's message."
15. The following week, while visiting in the country and watching the operation of a corn threshing machine in a barn, the young pastor's sleeve was accidentally caught between the cogs. His arm was lacerated severely, with the main artery severed and the median nerve injured. As a result of shock and a great loss of blood, Pastor Tyng died four days later.
16. On the following Sunday, Tyng's close friend, George Duffield, the pastor of the Temple Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, prepared his morning sermon as a tribute to his departed friend. He chose Ephesians 6:14 as his text: "Stand, therefore, having your loins girded about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness."
17. Pastor Duffield closed his sermon by reading a poem that he had just finished writing. He told his people that it had been inspired by the dying words of his esteemed friend -- "Tell them to stand up for Jesus."
18. The superintendent of the Sunday school had it printed for the children—a stray copy found its way into a Baptist newspaper, from that paper it spread all over the world.

19. Soon the challenging words were set to music:
*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross;
 Lift high His royal banner, it must not suffer loss.
 From victory unto victory His army shall He lead,
 Till every foe is vanquished, and Christ is Lord indeed.*
20. Ezra and his men sought God with all their heart, and Ezra said, "and he was intreated of us" (8:23). God heard their prayer, and God answered their prayer.
21. Jesus said in John 14:14, "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it."
22. They fasted and prayed (8:23) because they recognized their need of seeking God's face and His guidance and protection.
23. The fasting was the outward sign of deep humiliation and an expression of their dependence -- "to seek of Him a straight way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance" (8:21).
24. The need of guidance and protection was fully recognized by Ezra and the others, and they trusted the LORD for both.
25. Psalm 115:11 says, "Ye that fear the LORD, trust in the LORD: he is their help and their shield."
26. Psalm 118:8 says, "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man."
27. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5, 6).
28. Ezra served the LORD over 2,500 years ago. And today, this is still the pathway of blessing for the children of God.
29. Ezra had told the king that he trusted the LORD, that His hand is upon all them for good that seek Him, and so he was ashamed to ask a military escort to protect them against any enemies or robbers, who might waylay them and rob them of their possessions (cf. 8:31, 32).
30. Ezra knew God and His angels were His best shield in guarding him and his companions, and keeping evil away from them.

CONCLUSION:

DL Moody said, "Trust in yourself, and you are doomed to disappointment; trust in your friends, and they will die and leave you; trust in reputation, and some slanderous tongue may blast it; but trust in God, and you are never to be confounded in time or eternity."

