

God's Hand upon God's Work

Text: Ezra 7:11-28

Introduction:

1. Ezra chapter 7 divides neatly into two parts. In verse 1-10 we are introduced to godly Ezra and then in verse 11-28 we are provided with a copy of Artaxerxes letter to Ezra and Ezra's concluding words of praise for God's blessing (Vs. 27-28).
2. We need to remember that there is a time gap of approx. 58 years between Ezra 6 and 7 (516 to 459 BC). Some 78 years after Zerubbabel and Joshua had left Babylon, Ezra follows in their footsteps. During that time, spiritual decline had taken place in the returned remnant, particularly in the area of marriage.
3. Ezra 7 & 8 are a wonderful testament to the truth of God's hand upon His man and His work. Six times in these two chapters we have reference to "the good hand of God" being upon God's man (Ezra) and God's work (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Wiersbe writes, "If you could have interviewed Ezra and asked him the secret of his successful life, he would have said humbly, "The good hand of the Lord was upon me", a phrase that is found six times in Ezra 7 & 8 (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Nothing but the blessing of God can explain how an obscure Jewish priest and scholar, born in Babylonian captivity, could accomplish so much for God and Israel when so much was working against him."
4. In our last message we studied the first section of the chapter (Vs. 1-10) and saw not only the reality of God's hand upon Ezra but the reason for God's hand upon Ezra. Ezra was a Scripture studying, Scripture loving, Scripture living man and was therefore in a place where God could use him mightily. We now continue with the theme of God's hand upon His work as revealed in King Artaxerxes' letter.

Note firstly,

I. THE PROVISION FOR GOD'S WORK (VS. 11-24)

Hudson Taylor, the celebrated missionary to China once said, "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply." In these verses we see how God moved mightily to ensure the ministry Ezra was called to was abundantly supplied.

A. The Provision of Manpower (Vs. 11-14)

1. The Provision of a Godly Teacher (Vs. 11-12, 14)

The letter is addressed to Ezra and is a reminder that when God does a work, he raises up a man to lead that work.

- a. Ezra's Credentials (Vs. 11-12). We are reminded of Ezra's godly credentials by the **titles** the king uses for Ezra in the opening section of his letter. Ezra was:

A Revived Remnant – Ezra Series

- i. A Sanctified (set apart) Man – “Ezra the priest”. As noted in our last message, Ezra was from the line of the High Priest, tracing all the way back to Aaron. Therefore, he was a priest Himself. He was set apart by God to be a leader of God’s people. Ezra was a true priest as it was always God’s intention that His priests also be teachers of the law (See Lev. 10:11). We have also been set apart by God to be His spiritual priests in the New Testament era (See 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5-6, 5:10).
 - ii. A Scriptural Man – “the scribe”. Initially the scribes were merely copyists of the Scriptures but over time they became expositors of the Scriptures and Ezra was such a man. His was not a mere intellectual interaction with the Scriptures but a spiritual interaction whereby he sought to understand the Word of God in order that he might live according to God’s precepts (See Vs. 10).
 - b. Ezra’s Commission (Vs. 14). There was to be:
 - i. A search – “inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (Vs. 14a) The word ‘inquire’ means “to make search”. In fact, this same Hebrew word is translated that way four times in the Book of Ezra – “search may be made” (4:15), “search hath been made” (4:19), “let there be search made” (5:17), “search was made” (6:1). He was to diligently look into the spiritual state of the people of God. Godly leaders should be concerned about the spiritual state of God’s people.
 - ii. A standard – “according to the law of thy God” (Vs. 14b). The moral and spiritual state of the people of God was to be assessed on the basis of Divine truth and dealt with in light of God’s truth. Ezra was to declare God’s mind from God’s Word on the condition of God’s people and he did just that. He was no politician preacher who toned down the force of God’s Word to make himself more popular with the people.
2. The Provision of a godly Team (Vs. 13)
 - a. God moved in the hearts of a fresh remnant of people to join in this godly endeavor with Ezra. In 537 BC, the first wave of Jewish refugees, about 50,000 of them, returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel’s leadership to rebuild the temple. Now, in 458, Ezra was authorized to lead the second group, 1, 500 men plus women and children.
 - b. These were companions for Ezra, not conscripts. The king recognized the need for the volunteers to go “of their own freewill”.

A Revived Remnant – Ezra Series

- c. How the work of God needs not only godly leaders like Ezra but also godly men and women who have a heart to make themselves available to assist God's men as they carry out the calling God has for them.

B. The Provision of Materials (Vs. 15-24)

God provided for the financial needs of this endeavor in a most remarkable and amazing way. When God calls a man to do a work for Him, He supplies the needs to ensure that His work is done.

Remember that God supplies for **His Work**, not every idea we may have we think we should do for Him. There are a number of means of provision outlined in the text:

1. The King's Contribution (Vs. 15, 19)
 - a. The people involved in giving – the king and his counsellors. This was a contribution from the king and his court to the project. God moved in the hearts of these heathen men to financially assist the house of God in Jerusalem.
 - b. The principle of their giving – the offering was “freely offered” and most importantly it was “offered **unto** the God of Israel”. While the motivation in the heart of this pagan king may have been partly superstition, he clearly had a respect for Israel's God which lead to his favorable support to the project.
 - c. The particulars of their giving – “silver and gold” (Vs. 15); “vessels” (Vs. 19). As the other temple vessels were carried back to Jerusalem with the first remnant, it seems likely these were additional vessels contributed by the king.
 - d. Note: If a heathen king could contribute financially to the house of God, how much more should we who know God personally be prepared to contribute to the New Testament house of God (local church)!
2. The people's offering – “with the freewill offering of the people” (Vs. 16-18). A contribution was made by the people of God still in Babylon.
 - a. In the work of the Gospel, some are called to pioneer and lead the work of God both home and abroad. Others are called to the very important and vital ministry of support. You may not have a call to be a full-time pastor, church planter, evangelist or missionary but you can be a financial supporter of God's work and help keep home base strong and stable.
 - b. The **voluntary nature** of the offerings is emphasized again twice – “the freewill offering of the people...offering willingly”. We are reminded of the timeless biblical principle that the primary means God uses to finance His work is through the freewill tithes and offerings of God's people. When God does a

A Revived Remnant – Ezra Series

work, He moves the hearts of His people to supply the financial and material needs of that work.

3. The king's instructions (Vs. 17-18) How the offerings were to be used is outlined in these verses. Instructions were given concerning:
 - a. The primary use of the funds (Vs. 17). The funds were to be used to finance the running costs of the Temple, particularly in relation to the costs of the offerings.
 - b. The procedure for surplus funds (Vs. 18). Some liberty was afforded Ezra and his team with any funds that might be left over. Two safeguards would help prevent the funds from being misappropriated:
 - i. Ezra was to use the funds in consultation with the "brethren". This is a very wise principle we find often in the Scriptures in relation to the disbursement of funds the Lord has provided for His work. In the New Testament church, it is only natural that the Pastors as overseers of the assembly provide leadership in relation to the use of church funds in consultation with church office bearers (e.g., Deacons) but the "brethren" still need to be afforded an opportunity to be a part of the final decisions. The annual church budget is a good, practical way this can be done.
 - ii. Ezra was to use any extra funds "after the will of your God". This is the highest governing principle of all. Any extra moneys were to be spent in accordance with the revealed will of God.
4. The king's treasury (Vs. 20). This reveals the high level of trust Artaxerxes had in Ezra's character! What a testimony he must have had in heathen Babylon! We again wonder in amazement at the abundance of God's provision.
5. The king's treasurers (Vs. 21-22). The king now issues a further decree to the treasurers responsible for collecting the taxes in the provinces of Judea and surrounds that they be prepared to assist Ezra with resources that might be required for the temple. Caps are put on silver, wheat, wine and oil but not limit on salt. While there were caps, the provisions were still generous. For example, a hundred talents of silver would be nearly four tons of silver! (Wiersbe)
6. The king's attitude (Vs. 23). There is a real emphasis in Artaxerxes letter on the importance of the work being carried out:
 - a. Diligently (Vs. 23) – diligence is the opposite to idleness and sloppiness. Diligence is the outworking of the right attitude and mindset. The work of God deserves our best. Sloppiness,

A Revived Remnant – Ezra Series

laziness, idleness and passivity have no place in God's work. Service for the Lord should be approached in a disciplined manner.

- b. Speedily (Vs. 17, 21 & 26) – doing things speedily is really a subset of diligence. God's work needs people who will carry it out diligently and without delay. There is a time to wait on the Lord to reveal His will on certain things in our lives and we should avoid fleshly haste in our decision making (Prov. 19:2). However, so much of God's will for the Christian life has already been revealed and to delay in carrying it out amounts to disobedience. The king's wishes had been made known and were to be obeyed at once. In like manner, the orders from the King of kings should be attended to without delay!
- 7. The king's tax relief (Vs. 24). The king also decreed tax exemption for the temple priesthood, singers, porters and ministers. Christian nations that have been influenced by the Bible generally provide some kind of tax relief to churches. For example, Churches are tax exempt in Australia. This is a reflection of the influence the Bible has had on our history. It is right and appropriate that the government provide such tax relief to God's house.

Note secondly,

II. THE PROTECTION FOR GOD'S WORK (VS. 25-26)

The house of God was to be protected by:

A. Godly Overseers (Vs. 25)

King Artaxerxes commanded Ezra to:

- 1. Elect the wise (Vs. 25a)
 - a. Their principal qualification was that they were to be men who knew "the laws of thy God". They were then to judge righteous judgment based not on their own opinions but the revealed truth of God's Word.
 - b. The New Testament church does not have a judiciary function within government. The church and the state have separate functions. However, within the sphere of their oversight in the local church, the Eternal, unchanging standard of God's Word should be the basis of all faith and practice. In the words of our Statement of Faith, "We believe it (the Bible) to be the sole and final authority for all faith and practice of a Christian, and **the supreme standard** by which all human conduct, creeds and opinions shall be tried."
 - c. Judgments and decisions of a spiritual nature are to be made in the church by God's appointed overseers. Such men must be

A Revived Remnant – Ezra Series

men of the Word who will seek to apply the truths and principles of God's Word to every situation that arises. Many people want the preacher to deal with spiritual matters in the local church in the way the world would deal with it (e.g., the political approach) but he cannot afford to do this! The Word of God is the only standard for the local church and all of God's people must yield and submit to that standard.

- d. Godly overseers who know God's Word and seek to diligently lead according to God's Word play a tremendously important role in the spiritual protection of the local assembly.
2. Educate the ignorant (Vs. 25b). Those who were ignorant of God's law were to be instructed by Ezra and other godly leaders appointed by him. Ignorance of the whole council of God's Word is one of the great blights on the church in our day and the pulpit ministry must take a leading role in seeking to fix this problem.

B. Government Order (Vs. 26)

Artaxerxes decree included laws to deal with the disobedient and rebellious. Judgment was to be executed:

1. Speedily – it has been expressed as a legal maxim that “justice delayed is justice denied”. Crimes in a society should be dealt with swiftly but this is often not the approach in our society today.
2. Firmly – four possible punishments our listed which the magistrates and judges of the land could impose on offenders, no doubt depending on the severity of the crimes committed. They were:
 - a. Death.
 - b. Banishment.
 - c. Confiscation of goods.
 - d. Imprisonment.

Note thirdly,

III. THE PRAISE FOR GOD'S WORK (VS. 27-28)

The final two verses of this chapter contain Ezra's words of praise in response to the moving of God's hand on behalf of His people. “This is the first occurrence of first-person narrative in the book; it continues through 9:15.” (Wiersbe) We must always remember to give God all the glory for any success in His work. Ezra expresses thanksgiving and praise for:

A. God's Hand Working in Artaxerxes' Heart (Vs. 27)

1. Ezra recognized that everything that was taking place as due to the mighty hand of the all-powerful, sovereign God. Ezra claims zero credit and zero glory for himself. If it wasn't for God, none of this would have happened. We would do well to remind ourselves that apart from Christ, we also can do nothing (John 15:5).

A Revived Remnant – Ezra Series

2. God had sovereignly put it in the heart of this heathen king to “beautify the house of the LORD”. God is so powerful; He can even work in the heart of an unsaved ruler. We are reminded of the truth that “**The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD**, as the rivers of water: **he turneth it whithersoever he will.**” (Prov. 21:1)

B. God’s Hand working in Ezra’s Life (Vs. 28)

God had moved on Ezra’s behalf in at least three ways. God’s hand had:

1. Granted Ezra favor before the king (Vs. 28a).
2. Strengthened Ezra for the task (Vs. 28b). The word ‘strengthened’ means “made strong” and the same word is used by the Lord to exhort Joshua – “be strong”, “only be thou strong”, and again, “be strong” (Josh 1:6, 7 & 9). In the N.T. Paul exhorted Timothy, “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus”. (2 Tim. 2:1)
3. Enabled Ezra to lead others (Vs. 28c).

Conclusion: How much do we earnestly desire for God’s hand to rest upon us as a church? How much do you desire God’s hand upon your life as one of His children? If your desire is to be blessed like Ezra then follow his example and love, study, live and teach God’s Word.