

February 4, 2024

LIVING IN LIGHT OF GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL REIGN

Ezra 7-8

*(3 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)*

I'm notoriously bad at coming up with good sermon titles. Aaron makes fun of me for it. He tries to guess how I'll title my Easter sermon every year by thinking of the most boring title one could have for my sermon text and then adding "and the resurrected Christ" to the end of it. And, honestly, he typically gets pretty close to what I was thinking. But this week I thought I had a good one. I thought I'd title this sermon after a book on Western civilization that Francis Schaeffer published in 1976 titled, *How Should We Then Live?* It fit perfectly. Of course, I needed to see if I'd used it before, so I searched on the website, and wouldn't you guess it, I had. Not only that, but I used it less than a year-and-a-half ago, preaching through an early chapter in Luke's gospel. My best years may well be behind me.

But the reason I wanted to use that title is because what so often comes up in the Bible is a huge reality is presented that, because it is true, should greatly affect how we live. I mean, if I told you that the price of hammers was going to go up ten-fold and never return to their current price, we'd probably all go out and buy hammers. Maybe we'd buy a bunch so that we could sell them and get rich. But, of course, that's a hypothetical. I have no idea what's going to happen with the price of hammers. The Bible, on the other hand tells us things that are absolutely true. We can take them to the bank, and—in the same way as my example with hammers—these truths should cause us to live in certain ways and do certain things. The fact that we're going to be raised from the dead, for example, makes it much more reasonable to lay down your life in obedience to Jesus. The fact that money gives us an opportunity to store up eternal riches should make us much more eager to give it toward the Lord's purposes in this life. And as we'll see in Ezra 7-8, we'll see an individual in Ezra who doggedly held to a truth that greatly shaped how he lived. But before we get to that, let me explain the nature of these two chapters.

Ezra 7-8 finally introduces to the individual after whom this book is named. We're about 100 years into the story of the book, and suddenly Ezra makes an appearance. He'd not come back to Jerusalem with that first wave of Israelites in 538 BC who rebuilt the temple because, in all likelihood, he wasn't alive then. He'd grown up in Babylon (or now Persia), having descended from a priestly line that can be traced back to Aaron as we see in 7:1-5.

Now, when Ezra 7 begins, with the words, "Now after this," it's actually signaling about a sixty year period from the events that ended chapter 6 and begin chapter 7. If the temple was completed in 516 BC, we're now about 458 BC, and the king of Persia is now Artaxerxes. We'd been introduced to this king back in chapter 4, but that was a flash-forward scene of some events that actually occurred later in Artaxerxes' reign.

What happens in our chapters is that Artaxerxes tells Ezra—who was a scribe and priest—that he wants him to go to Jerusalem and take a group with him in order to assess how the Israelites are

obeying God's laws and commands and to instruct them in these laws and ensure they're obeying them. Moreover, Artaxerxes was willing to give Ezra every monetary blessing he needed to pull this off as well as make the workers in the temple exempt from paying taxes. Now, why in the world would Artaxerxes do such a thing? Well, we can see the reason in the text, but let me give you some context for understanding it. Just a bit prior to this decree by Artaxerxes, there had been a revolt within the Persian Empire from Egypt. In fact, the Egyptians had been somewhat successful for a period of time in overthrowing Persian rule. Now, things were back in an okay place, but Artaxerxes wanted nothing like that to happen again. Also, keep in mind, that he saw each people as empowered by their gods. In other words, if we'd asked Artaxerxes, "Why do you think Egypt rose up in revolt and even prevailed for a while?" he'd probably answer, "I must have done something to anger their gods."

This was the motivation Artaxerxes had in sending Ezra to make sure that the God of the Jews was being obeyed back in Jerusalem. He didn't want any other gods to be angry with him. He explicitly says this, writing in the decree he gives to Ezra, "Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons" (7:23). He wanted the God of the Jews to be happy with him.

But, if you read Ezra 7-8, you know that Ezra gave a different reason for why these things were happening. Ezra tells us it's because God's hand was moving people's hearts to make everything happen in a way to fulfill his divine purposes. This is the truth that I said that shaped everything Ezra did. He believed and held doggedly to the truth that God is providentially controlling everything in this world. Just note how he describes events in these chapters.

Ezra tells us that the king was kindly disposed toward him because God's hand was on him, writing in 7:6, "He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that he LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him." When Ezra speaks of going to Jerusalem in 7:9, it is because "the good hand of his God was on him." When he considers what Artaxerxes commands, he praises God, crediting him for putting "such a thing as this into the heart of the king" (7:27). When they are looking for Levites and find them, in Ezra's eyes it's because of "the good hand of our God on us" (8:18). When they traveled back and weren't attacked, he notes that it's because "the hand of our God was on us" (8:31). You get the feeling that if you said to Ezra, "Man, did you see the sunrise this morning?" he'd answer, "God made that beautiful sunrise." And he'd be right. It's obvious that this is how he viewed all things. He viewed everything that happened in the world as happening under the direction and control (that is, the providence) of God.

He sums up this viewpoint, noting to those who would go with him to Jerusalem that he told the king in 8:22, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him." That's how Ezra viewed the world. He believed God was in control of everything and his heart was inclined to work for the good of his people in this world.

Now, when I saw that, my thought was, "How then did he live?" In other words, how did this truth shape Ezra's life? Moreover, what Ezra believed was true. God *is* in control of all things

and shaping things toward his purposes. So how then should we live in light of that? Well, this morning, I want to answer those two questions together by seeing what Ezra did and then exhorting us to imitate his faith. I want to note three things Ezra did, starting with the note that he studied, obeyed, and taught God's Word.

### **Ezra studied, obeyed, and taught God's Word**

I've already mentioned that the big event that happens in our story in Ezra 7-8 is that Artaxerxes decides that it'd be good to try to appease the God of Jerusalem, and so he decides to send someone to Jerusalem to make sure they're obeying God's commands. And, well, he decides that Ezra is the choice. But why Ezra?

Well, the chapter opens by showing us his priestly credentials. But it seems what made Ezra a perfect choice is that he studied, obeyed, and taught others to obey God's word. We know he's skilled in the law because we read in verse 6, "He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him." Then, in verses 7-9 we have a summary of his trip and who went with him back to Jerusalem, and that summary ends in verse 9 as we read, "For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him." Again, with that last phrase we see the high view Ezra had of God's sovereignty. It's as if he sees every action as God did this, and then God did that. But notice the link from the end of verse 9 to verse 10. We read, "For the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and his rules in Israel."

Ezra was chosen by God for this crucial task because he had set his heart to study, obey, and teach the Word of God to others. Now, let me ask us a question. If it's true that God created the world, rules over it in such a way that he's in control of what happens on this planet, and that that God has given us a book that reveals to us who he is, what he does, what he promises, what he commands, and so on, then isn't it the most logical thing in all the world that we'd be a people who know God's Word, obey it, and teach others to know and obey it as well? Absolutely it is.

But it's not just that it's logical. It's also what we're commanded to do. The Scripture continually upholds the need for God's people to know God's Word, even hiding it in our hearts so that we might not sin against him. Jesus tells us that if we love him, we'll keep his commandments. We're actually told in 2 Timothy 2:21 that if we cleanse ourselves from what is dishonorable, we'll be a vessel ready for every good work—as Ezra did. Finally, Jesus commands us in the Great Commission to teach one another to obey all that he commands. That is, we're commanded to know God's Word, obey it, and teach others to obey it as well.

So let's make this our task as a church. Let's learn God's Word by reading it. Let's gather and focus on learning it as we gather on Sundays and it's preached. Let's make our pursuit each day to walk in obedience to it. And, let's make our concern for others—our spouses, children, and

other brothers and sisters-in-Christ—that they are walking in obedience to God’s Word. If God really is who he is, this is what we must do. Second, Ezra worked hard to obey the Lord.

### **Ezra worked hard to obey the Lord**

Now, this was noted in saying that Ezra did God’s Word, but I want to highlight his attitude to get to work and do everything necessary to obey God’s command because we can sometimes mistake a high view of God’s providence as a reason *not* to work hard, when we see the exact opposite in Ezra. Let me explain.

In 7:11-26 we see Artaxerxes’ decree. He commissions Ezra to go and take a group with him in order to teach and carry out God’s laws back in Jerusalem. He also appoints material provisions to be given for the people to take with them and to be used at Ezra’s disposal. And, once more, Ezra recognizes God to be the one directing all of this by his hand and for the good of his people. He writes, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before the all the king’s mighty officers” (7:27-28a).

But then notice how the rest of verse 28 reads. He writes, “I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.” Notice what Ezra doesn’t say. He doesn’t say, “I knew God’s hand was directing these things, so I sat back to see what God might do.” This is no “let go and let God” theology at work. He basically says, “I saw God was showing favor, so I got to work.” He says, “I took courage . . . I gathered leading men from Israel.” He’s acting responsibly and wisely. In chapter 8, after naming the men whom he gathered to go with him to Jerusalem in verses 1-14, we find out in verse 15 that Ezra gathered the men and had them camp for three days there so that he could review the people and make sure he had all that he needed. And sure enough, this exposed that there were no Levites—a group of people necessary for the proper function of worship in Jerusalem.

Therefore, we’re told that Ezra sent for some particular men, whom he identified as leading men and “men of insight” (8:16) to go and gather some Levites, whom they successfully find. Then, we read in verses 24-30 that he divided the men into groups and weighed out all the materials that they had—the silver and gold and bronze and gave some to each group to transport, charging them to ensure that all of it arrives in Jerusalem. Then, wouldn’t you know, we’re told in 8:34 that when they got to Jerusalem, they weighed everything again to make sure everything had made it.

This is a man who employs everything at his disposal to ensure that he’s carefully thinking through how best to carry out God’s commands. Now, yes, if you ask Ezra, he’s going to credit everything to the Lord. When they found the Levites, he says in 8:18 that it was because “the good hand of our God [was] on us.” When they arrived safely, according to 8:31 it’s because “The hand of our God was on us.” But we can also say that Ezra acted responsibly and got to work.

Many times people protest that if you stress the Lord's providence in guiding and directing all things then it will make us passive or lazy. My response is, not if we're reading our Bibles. Stressing God's sovereign control makes us humble instead of arrogant. It makes us genuinely acknowledge when people praise us that it's all the Lord's kindness and grace—as Ezra does. Moreover, the Bible tells us that as we consider God's power and control exercised in his providential care over all things, it should make us courageous, as Ezra says, "I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me" (7:28).

We must make sure as a church that we're employing biblical doctrines in biblical ways. And if we ask, "How should it affect us to realize God is providentially exercising his control over the world?" the Bible's answer is that it should cause us to be courageous and get to work obeying our God. After all, our God loves us and is in control. Is there a greater incentive we could have for giving ourselves in hard work to obeying all of his commands? That's what Ezra did. And, finally, Ezra sought to honor and glorify the Lord in everything.

### **Ezra sought to honor and glorify the Lord in everything**

Now, in one sense, we've already seen this. After all, if Ezra is the author of this book, then he's bent over backwards at every point not to give credit to Artaxerxes or to himself for anything. He wants the reader to know that all these good things happened because the hand of God was on them. That's his way of making sure that the Lord is honored and glorified every step. But we also see it in one key moment of the journey back to Jerusalem.

When Ezra gathers everyone who will transport the vessels of gold and silver and bronze, he makes a decision. His decision is not to appeal to the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect them on their way. And this was a big deal because they easily could have been ambushed. They were carrying with them many vessels that were worth much money. And they'd be an easy and rewarding target for anyone who wanted to attack them. So if Artaxerxes would have given Ezra anything—which he would have (see 7:6)—then why did Ezra *not* ask for a band of soldiers to protect them on their journey?

We find out in 8:21-23. Ezra writes, "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, 'The hand of our God is for our good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.' So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty."

Now, there's nothing wrong with asking for a royal escort. In fact, later, when Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, he'll have royal protection, and he'll thank God for it. It doesn't necessarily reflect our lack of trust in God. But in Ezra's particular case, he'd expressed to Artaxerxes that he was confident that the Lord would protect them and keep their enemies at bay. And the thing that mattered most to Ezra when thinking through this was, "What will bring

most honor and glory to God?” He determined that asking for protection would send a message to the king that he was doubting God’s ability to protect them. So instead of asking the king, he asked the people to pray and fast together, asking for God’s protection—and God granted it and so they worshiped the Lord with burnt offerings.

Brothers and sisters, if our God really is who the Bible says he is, and he loves us and is in control of this world, then wouldn’t we be crazy not to seek to honor and glorify him in everything we do? We should make sure he gets credit when every good thing happens. We should ask when making decisions, “What will be most glorifying and honoring to God?” If we let that question guide whom we date, what we do on dates, what we do with our money, how we behave, and on and on, then we’d reflect a heart like Ezra’s, one who wanted to see God honored and glorified above all else.

So, when you read Ezra 7-8, I think the thing that stands out most clearly is that Ezra saw all things as unfolding under God’s providential hand. The phrase “the good hand of our God” was the reason this or that is listed as taking place occurs, six times, and that’s not counting Ezra saying things like “[God] put . . . this into the heart of the king” (7:27). How then do we live in light of that reality that our great and good God is over all? We know and obey God’s Word, working hard to do so and teaching others to do the same. And we seek to honor and glorify him in all things.

Have you ever been reading your Bibles in the days of the kings of Israel and Judah, and you read, “Then arose a king who did not obey the Lord” and you want to scream, “Quit being so foolish and obey the Lord. I mean, anybody can see what matters most in a world where God is in control—your obedience to the Lord”? Well, brothers and sisters, that’s our world. Moreover, unlike Israel’s kings, we can talk about Jesus living, dying, and being raised for us. Therefore, let’s learn from Ezra’s example of how one should live in light of the huge reality that God is in control of this world. And let’s express our commitment to that end now as we come to the table. Amen.