

Teach the Word

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Preacher: James Lapping

[0 : 0 0] Amen. Great. Thanks, Graham, for reading there. Thanks, Jack, for leading. Graham, really well done with all the names there. Let's pray as we begin.

Father, we thank you that your hand has moved to restore your people in the past through the teaching of your word. Please may your hand move within our hearts tonight to bring us to a greater love and understanding of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Well, as we begin, let me ask you, by what different means do you think God acts in your life? By what different means do you think God acts in your life? Or maybe slightly differently, as you deal with the muck and mire of life, how might God guide you into his heavenly kingdom?

How might God guide you into his heavenly kingdom? Well, in tonight's reading, we've jumped forward 60 years from the end of chapter 6. And if we've got our diagram there that Jack should put up, we've moved to Ezra. And this is in the time of Artaxerxes. So just after the story of Esther, which we remember so well, Esther was possibly, probably, but probably not Artaxerxes's mom by Xerxes. So there's a king between them. And we are looking at the time of Artaxerxes, 60 years later from Zerubbabel, the time of Ezra. And so chapters 1 to 6, we've looked at the first returnees who came with Zerubbabel and who rebuilt the altar and the temple. And in chapters 7 to 10, we're going to be looking at the second group of returnees under the priest of Ezra. And a word to the wise, if I were reading Ezra at home by myself, I probably wouldn't read it as a history book. I wouldn't take it prescriptively, but I'd rather read it as a wisdom book. And the question that it's trying to answer is, how to live life in the muck of life as I wait for a heavenly king?

And if that's the question, then the guide rails that are going to guide my answers, that are going to bracket my answer in, is that great theme of Ezra and Nehemiah that we've picked up a time again, and that is God's hand in bringing his people to worship. The structure of our talk, so the structure of the passage, we're looking at chapters 7 and 8. We've only read bits of it. So chapter 7, verses 1 to 10, we are introduced to Ezra, and he's a priest and a teacher of the law of God. Then we've got the letter, and we just saw the end of that letter, verses 11 to 28, and that's a letter from King Artaxerxes giving permission to Ezra to return to Jerusalem and offering him help. And then chapter 8, we've got this preparation and prayers for the journey, and then the safe arrival in Jerusalem.

[3 : 12] If I'm scanning the passage at home, I don't have to be a rocket scientist, but three things jump out bold as brass. It's impossible to miss them. The first thing is that Ezra is described as a teacher of the law of God. I think that's mentioned about six times in this passage. The second thing we notice is that God's hand is moving throughout this passage and throughout the start of Nehemiah, is moving mightily. And then finally, the last thing that we see is that this passage is filled with people going to Jerusalem. And that Jerusalem there is a picture of that heavenly Jerusalem that awaits us. So we're going to look at three miracles or three ways that God's hand moves within this passage. And the first one is going to be God's hand in sending the people a Bible teacher. And we're going to look at Ezra in the introduction there, verses 1 to 10. Then we're going to see God's hand in moving the king's heart. And then we're going to look at that letter that Artaxerxes write, verses 11 to 28 of chapter 7. And then finally, we're going to look at God's hand in bringing the people safely to Jerusalem. And that's chapter 8. So God's hand in sending the people a Bible teacher.

Well, verse 1, we finally, in verse 6, 1 to 10, we finally meet Ezra. Great news, the chap who the book is named after. And he's a bit anticlimactic, to be honest. You see, Ezra's not brave like David.

And he's not strong like Samson. And he's not wise like Solomon. And he's not sneaky like Gideon. And he's not a powerful miracle worker like Elisha. And he's not a prophet speaking fresh words from God like Isaiah. Ezra doesn't write the book of Ezra. But what is he? He's a teacher, well-versed in the law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. Verses 6 and 11.

Ezra was a Bible teacher who, in the word of verse 10, that wonderful word, had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

And devoted theirs. Literally, he had set his heart to it. You see, to be honest, Ezra would be delighted with lockdown. He'd think, finally, I can get some good Bible work and without distractions. A couple of years ago, I was down south and I heard the story about this chap who was at Oak Hill. And he was a young, precocious, not Oak Hill, Cornhill even.

[5 : 56] He was a young, precocious chap. He was about 17 or 18. And when he got on the course, they had this Bible quiz. And sure enough, they pitted this chap against one of the prime Bible teachers on this course. And he absolutely wiped the floor with him. He knew all the answers straight off the cuff. He knew all the characters in the Bible. He was someone who's devoted to God's word and knew it inside and out. And that's the type of Bible nerd, in a good way, that Ezra is. He studied God's word. He applied it to his own life. And he taught it to others with sincerity and devotion, out of love for God and love for his word. And in God sending Ezra, we should see a great miracle of God, a great kindness. If the theme of Ezra and Nehemiah is God's hand in bringing his people to worship, and if we see God's hand in bringing honour to himself, and we'll see that in verse 28 of chapter 7, then in God sending a Bible teacher is the means through which God does this in chapters 7 and 8. Personally, when I think back of my own Christian experience, I think it was about six years before I met Bible-centred, conservative, believing Christians. And I think back to the Bible teachers and friends who pointed me to Jesus in the Bible. And it's the greatest miracle outside of the Lord Jesus that I can remember. I remember Lovach, who patiently read One John with me, and Lee, and Izzy, and Mike, and Matthew. And some of them were friends from the beach who kept me accountable. Some of them were kids club leaders who modelled me to me how to teach the Bible to others and how to apply it in my own life. And others were pastors who I sat under Sunday by Sunday, and all of them a great gift to me for which I was very grateful, both myself and to others, in bringing us to worship.

And the wisdom of Ezra says, if we're going to survive and continue as God's worshipping people, then we are going to need not a new word or prophecy, not a mighty miracle worker, not a heroic champion, but truthful Bible teachers who will apply the word given to themselves and then to their hearers. The second miracle, God's hand, that we see moving in this passage is God's hand in moving in the king's heart. And that's King Artaxerxes. And we're looking at the letter there from verses 11 to 28, if you've got the passage open in front of you. And it really is a miracle that the king says that Ezra can go. Just look down at verse 13. And then he gives Ezra's purpose in going, that Ezra is to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the law of your God, which is in your hand. Ezra is to do a spiritual audit of the land. He's to measure up how the people are doing against God's word.

Notice some of the details from the letter. It's filled with gold. The king gives tons. The provinces are to give tons. The Israelites who are remaining behind had to give tons. It was a blank check. And we're meant to be amazed by that at God's hand moving. We notice tax exemption for priests. Hooray!

Verse 24. Verse 6 and 20 and 23. Anything you want is offered to Ezra. Anything that he needs. And the aim of this is worship. And we see that in verses 20, 17, 20 and 23. It's not just religious or temple worship. But look at verse 25. And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the peoples of trans-Euphrates, all who know the laws of God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.

Ezra is to teach and govern the people according to God's laws. And we know that this is a miracle because look at how Ezra responds. He breaks out in absolute praise at this decree that Artaxerxes has written in verse 27 and 28. And in those verses, it changes to the first person. The narrator who's writing this book is quoting Ezra here. So verse 27. Praise be to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

[10:58] And I think today we're quite polarised over politics. Maybe we're not. Maybe we're not really tuned into it. But the wisdom of Ezra says that like them or lump them, it makes no difference because God is using the kings and rulers of this world to accomplish his purposes and to bring his people to worship. And that should fill you with an enormous confidence. You see, in Artaxerxes' letter, we have God's hand at work using a legal statute to bring his people to worship. And growing up, my dad was a criminal lawyer. And one of my summer jobs was whenever the new laws were published, you had to update the filing of the statute. So you'd have to take out the old law and put in the new law. And it was an incredibly boring job. And reading the laws were incredibly boring.

I never read one and thought, isn't God amazing? But that's what we have in chapter 7. The statute that causes praise within God's people. It's an extraordinary moving of God's hand, working through very ordinary means, through the kings and rulers of the world, shaping world history. To what end? To what purpose? To bring God's people to worship.

The third miracle working that we see in this passage is God's hand brings the people safely to Jerusalem. And we're looking at chapter 8 here. It starts off with a list of all those who are coming on the journey. And what's noteworthy is they're all descendants of the first crowd that went with Zerubbabel, bar one. Like any journey at the start, there's a bit of an initial delay because they can't find any priests, verse 15. But then the hand of God provides not only priests and the capable sherebi, but temple servants. Hooray! And then the people fast and they humble themselves in anticipation for the journey. They've refused the king's escort out of reverence for God.

Later we'll see Nehemiah accepted, which emphasizes the wisdom nature of this book. But Ezra, and then we see how Ezra entrusts the offerings to the priests for the journey.

And so with trepidation, they head off on this dangerous journey. And four months later, joyfully, with praise and thanksgiving, they arrive in Jerusalem safely. And it's an absolute miracle.

[13 : 41] God's hand has brought them out of Babylon, not once, but twice. Firstly, under Zerubbabel, and now again under Ezra. And God's word to his people through Isaiah the prophet has been proved true. I wonder if you've been going through this pandemic and you've been thinking, I don't know if I can make it. I don't know if I can get through it. I don't know if I can get to the other side. Maybe you've been worried about your job. And maybe you are separated from family members. Maybe you're struggling with homeschooling. Maybe you're feeling anxiety or mental issues.

Maybe all of this is pressing down on you and you feel like giving up on Jesus. And the wisdom of Ezra teaches us in chapter 8, verse 22, that the gracious hand of God is on everyone who looks to him.

And throughout this chapter, that he will bring his people home. The promise and wisdom of Ezra in chapter 8 is that as you go through the muck and torment of life, God's hand is working at powerfully to bring you to worship. God's hand will accomplish God's purposes, bringing you to that heavenly city of Jerusalem, surrounded by angels in the very presence of God.

And the message of Ezra chapter 7 and 8 is not that when faced with adversity and struggle, we need to be more like Ezra, study our Bibles more. Although Ezra is a good example and that is a good thing to do. The message is that we need a priest. And that's the point of Ezra's genealogy there, is that he is a priest who is a Bible teacher. One that Ezra is a picture of. One who'll teach us the Bible perfectly and who'll bring us out of the muck of life and into that perfect kingdom.

That perfect land to worship God. That he'll do it through God's word given to us, taught faithfully. That he'll do it through God's hand working unseen behind the scenes for his glory and our good.

[16 : 10] And the one that Ezra points to and is a picture of is that perfect Bible teacher, Jesus. At the start of Hebrews chapter 8, we read how Jesus is not only the perfect priest, but also one who teaches God's law perfectly. And so we'll just hear a couple of verses from 10 and 11 in Hebrews, quoting Jeremiah, I will put my laws in their minds and I'll write them on their hearts.

I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to one another, know the Lord, because they will all know me from the least to the greatest.

And by perfect there, he's not just saying that we understand it perfectly intellectually, but that we will obey it perfectly in our lives. And we read earlier in Hebrews how Jesus learns perfection through obedience by putting the law into practice day by day.

And as we trust Jesus so that we grow and know and worship God perfectly, we'll grow and know and worship God perfectly as true worshippers.

And the exodus that Jesus leads is not simply the people coming out of Egypt or Babylon, but out of the muck of life filled with sin and death and into that perfect heavenly city.

[17 : 41] And Jesus is the perfect priest who dies at a perfect sacrifice on behalf of his people. He's the perfect Bible teacher who is God's final word to us, who taught his disciples when he was in the flesh, but continues to teach his disciples through his Holy Spirit as they read the Bible and equipping his church with gifted men and women to teach the Bible.

Amen. Let's pray as we close. Amen. Amen. So Father, we thank you for your hand working through your people long ago, through Ezra, through King Artaxerxes, through all those events long ago.

We pray that we would trust that your hand is still working behind the scenes today. We pray that we'd seek to obey and listen to and hear your word faithfully each day more and more.

until we reach that heavenly city, Jerusalem. Amen.