

The Hand of the Lord Upon Ezra

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Church: 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel

References: **Ezra 7**, Ezra 7:6; Nehemiah 9:36-37; Luke 21:24; Ezra 7:7-10; 1 Peter 3:15; 1 Kings 8:53; Ephesians 2:14; Matthew 7:28-29; 1 Timothy 4:16; Ezra 7:11-28; Jeremiah 29:10-11; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Psalm 1:1-6; Acts 1:1

Introduction

All right, well, we've been reading widely in Chapter 7, but we haven't gone through all the detail. So I'm going to let Eric get started telling us some of the things that he's been reserving to tell us, and then we'll quietly move forward.

As we mentioned last week, the time period between Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 is about 50 years, 49 years after the completion of the temple, Ezra comes up to Jerusalem. And that's 69 years, nearly 70 years, after the first return of the captives. The first return, there were about 50,000 came up with Zerubbabel, who was appointed the governor. And so these events here in chapter 7 take place, as I say, about 50 years after they had completed the temple. It took 20 years to complete the temple. There were 16 years where there was a delay because of the, as you remember, because of the opposition that they endured from the inhabitants of the land.

And so these events take place, as I say, about 50 years after. We read the whole chapter, or most of the chapter, at least down to verse 26. But we didn't have much time to comment on the chapter. So I would like to go back to verse 6 of chapter 7. It says:

[Ezra 7:6 NKJV] - this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

God had given the authority over Jerusalem and Israel to Gentiles. They were not able to make their own decisions. They were captives in the land. Nehemiah, in chapter 9, expresses it in his prayer. If you go to Nehemiah chapter 9 and verse 36 and 37—Nehemiah follows Ezra about 12 years later, so very much current to this time, but 12 years subsequent to Ezra coming up—in his prayer, Nehemiah expresses himself here:

[Nehemiah 9:36-37 NKJV] - ³⁶ "Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, To eat its fruit and its bounty, Here we are, servants in it! ³⁷ And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, Because of our sins; Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle At their pleasure; And we are in great distress.

So Nehemiah very well expresses the situation that the Jews found themselves in when they came back. They were under the authority of the Gentiles. They couldn't make their own decisions. As a result, the Jews could do nothing without the authority of the reigning king. And that situation remains until this very day. We are still in the times of the Gentiles, where Jerusalem would be trodden down by the Gentiles:

[Luke 21:24 NKJV] - And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

So we read there in verse 6, back to verse 6, that this Ezra came up from Babylon, a skilled scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given to Israel. And notice this last sentence there: "The king granted him all his request."

So my earlier statement saying that the Jews could do nothing without the authority given to them by the Gentiles—somehow, and it would be interesting to know, but we're not really given much information, Ezra managed to get an audience with the king himself, which is remarkable. A captive—his reputation must have been such in Persia at the time that he could have an audience with the king. He was known as Artaxerxes, king of kings, king of Persia. And so how he got there, we don't know.

But the Lord, of course, had raised up other men to serve, like Daniel, of course, like Mordecai, as we'll read later on. He was brought up to a very high position. And, of course, Daniel's friends had occupied high positions in the Babylonian Empire: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

But, at any rate, somehow Ezra managed to relay to the king some very important information. And as we go through this chapter, we'll see that little details are given to us, so much so that the king himself decides not only to grant him permission, but actually to command him to go to Jerusalem. But that will come in a few minutes.

I would just like to look down and finish this portion here, next to verse—well, we finish off verse 6: "The king granted him all his request according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him." That's a reoccurring phrase in this story with Ezra: "the hand of the LORD was upon him." He was a chosen instrument. It wasn't probably—it wasn't Ezra. The Lord—let me phrase it differently—the Lord raised up a man to fulfill His will in bringing back, to be compassionate on His people.

So, he goes into the audience of the king, and the hand of the Lord is upon him. And it must have impressed the king very much in order for him to grant him his request. Then we read a very brief account in verses 7, 8, and 9 about their journey to Jerusalem, the ones that came with him. Later on in chapter 8, we get more details of that journey and the problems that they faced and how they overcame them. But just reading verses 7 to 9:

[Ezra 7:7-9 NKJV] - ⁷ Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸ And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

Now, we might ask ourselves, how would you have the good hand of the Lord upon your ministry or mine? How do we know the good hand of the Lord upon us? Well, I think verse 10 opens this up for us, because "for," this connecting word, gives us the reason why the good hand of the Lord was upon him. Not only was it God's purpose, but He was able to use this man who had prepared himself for the work:

[Ezra 7:10 NKJV] - ¹⁰ For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra's Preparation and Purpose

To prepare his heart—this was the secret of his success. He prepared his heart. The word there, "prepared," is a root word in the Hebrew. It means to set up or erect, as they used to erect pillars in the—well, anywhere in the world, pillars are set up, such as the Washington

Monument. There's a number of other pillars, very famous, and they seem to be self-supporting. Even earthquakes, they seem to be impervious to earthquakes because of their balance. And that's the word that is used. The word is used to establish, set up as a pillar. He had prepared himself to walk uprightly in the law of the Lord, to not deviate one way or another.

So having prepared his heart, how do we prepare our hearts? Well, Peter tells us that we should sanctify the Lord God in our hearts:

[1 Peter 3:15 NKJV] - But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

That is, we set Him aside in our hearts to a special place so that in every circumstance that we may face, we have the Lord there directing our innermost thoughts and our actions. If we set up anything else, it'll topple over. It'll be like a pillar that's set on an angle. Gravity will take it down with the least bit of disturbance.

But he prepared his heart. First of all, it says, "to seek the Law of the LORD." The law wasn't lost; he didn't have to go and search for it to find it. He sought or studied it to know its meaning. Okay? And, of course, what was the purpose of the commandment as far as it was given to the nation of Israel? Those were laws, judgments, statutes that were given, precepts. They were given to separate those people from all the other nations of the earth. They were to be a special people, separated.

And that law, that partition then that was set up by the law, all the laws of Moses, they separated them from all the other nations. And so God then had separated them from the other nations, and they themselves and the other nations were separated from them. So they were a separate people. He came to study it. And later on, we'll find that one of his actions was to separate the people themselves from these unlawful marriages that they had committed. And that was separation. One of the main actions of Ezra was to separate the people to God again. And that was a purpose that he went to Jerusalem to do: first of all, to know the meaning, the purpose of God for a separate people.

In 1 Kings chapter 8, in the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, 1 Kings 8 and verse 53, Solomon is praying here and says:

[1 Kings 8:53 NKJV] - For You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be Your inheritance, as You spoke by Your servant Moses, when You brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD."

And that's one of the purposes of the Spirit of God among us: separation. True separation is to be separated from the world and all its enterprises—to be separated from the world, but primarily to be separated to the Lord and from the world. A true separation involves both.

Sometimes we can think about separation as being separate from the world, but we lose the focus if we're not separated to the Lord. So first of all, the Scriptures point out that we're separated to the Lord from the world. That is Christians. But the law of Moses that was given to the children of Israel was what separated the children of Israel to the Lord from the world. And so that was the first thing that he did, was to seek out the very meaning of all that, all those 600-and-some statutes and judgments and laws and commandments that were given. There's some 623, I believe, if you add them all up. So they were, as I said, a containment for His people.

Now today, that middle wall of separation has been broken down, we read in Ephesians:

[Ephesians 2:14 NKJV] - For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,

So now God has formed a new body made up of both Jew and Gentile, because the law has been superseded by the grace of God that is now given to both Jew and Gentile, and a new body has been formed. The old body was Israel; it was contained.

So that was Ezra. His main purpose was to go up to Jerusalem and to separate the people unto the Lord again. So the first thing it says: he prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, his God, and then to do it. Before he could teach it, he had to do it. What gave him such power was that he practiced what he preached. You recall the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter 7, He was on the mountain teaching the children of Israel there. And when He had finished teaching the Sermon on the Mount, the principles of the kingdom of heaven, the people said:

[Matthew 7:28-29 NKJV] - ²⁸ And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, ²⁹ for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

The scribes, of course—the Lord said, yes, do what they say, but don't do what they do. They did not practice. One of the reasons why our Lord Jesus spoke with such authority was that He was completely obedient to the will of His Father and did not deviate. And like Ezra, He sought to do the will of the Lord, to seek the law of the Lord and to do it. And then he could teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel with effect.

Paul also, in his exhortation to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 16, gives him this similar advice:

[1 Timothy 4:16 NKJV] - Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

Take heed to yourself, first of all, and then to the doctrine. The doctrine, certainly, he had been taught by the Apostle Paul, but he said, "Now, first of all, you do them, and then you'll be able to teach the doctrine that you learned from me."

The King's Decree

And so then we come to the letter itself. This letter was written in Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible. It's not written in Hebrew; it's written in Aramaic as though it were a complete transcription of the letter itself:

[Ezra 7:11-12 NKJV] - ¹¹ This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel: ¹² Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace, and so forth.

It's interesting here that he was an expert, recognized as an expert. So his reputation in Persia was such that he was considered an expert in the law. Now, experts in laws, of course, the lawyers and judges and so on, they hold high positions in government circles. The Chief

Justice of Canada, for example, occupies a very high position; he's an expert in the laws of Canada. So Ezra, no doubt in Persia at that time, being an expert in these very important laws of the captives—there were many captives living in Persia at that time—he would be a man of great reputation. As mentioned earlier, in order to get an audience with the king, he needed to have a good reputation.

So here's the letter, and it's a written, trusting letter. It's written to Ezra. The king is handing him the authority—which we will find out later, he has a great deal of authority—"To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven." This king must have been touched by the message that he learned from Ezra, because he calls him "the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace, and so forth."

Now, he issues a couple of decrees—two decrees, actually, that I see here that are mentioned in this. It wasn't just one decree; it's actually two decrees: one for Ezra and one for the treasurers beyond the river, as we read in verse 21.

[Ezra 7:13-16 NKJV] - ¹³ I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you. ¹⁴ And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand; ¹⁵ and whereas you are to carry the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem; ¹⁶ and whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem--

So it was a voluntary thing. The command was not to the captives; it was voluntary. However, this was not so with Ezra. The king actually commanded him to go. It says in verse 14, "And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors..." Apparently there were seven leading families that the king relied upon, a very powerful group of people in Persia at that time. There were seven of these big families that supported the king, and so there was a time of prosperity in Persia. However, "you are being sent," he says, "by the king." Ezra received this commission by the king, none other than the king.

And notice what this commission involves. It says: to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem. That is, to search out what the spiritual condition of the place where God's house is—the God of heaven has a house. "With regard," he says, "to the Law of your God which is

in your hand." And whereas you are to carry the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel.

So first of all, in verse 14, to inquire regarding the law—is that being taught there? So the commission of the king is to inquire to make sure that the law of God is taught, and he has sent Ezra for that specific purpose. So the hand of God was on the king, not only on Ezra. It's beautiful in that regard.

Not only that, but the king and his counselors, in verse 15, also give a gift to carry, silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of heaven whose dwelling is in Jerusalem. And all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem. He doesn't command the people; the only one that gets a commission is Ezra, which is interesting.

And then in verse 17 he says:

[Ezra 7:17-20 NKJV] - ¹⁷ now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem. ¹⁸ And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God. ¹⁹ Also the articles that are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. ²⁰ And whatever more may be needed for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide, pay for it from the king's treasury.

So there's additional resources that are given to Ezra. But the commission is there that they should offer these offerings on the altar.

And then the second decree that Artaxerxes the king issues is in verse 21. And this is to all the treasurers who are in the region beyond the river:

[Ezra 7:21-23 NKJV] - ²¹ And I, even I, Artaxerxes the king, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the region beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, may require of you, let it be done diligently, ²² up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred kors of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribed limit.

²³ Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it diligently be done for the house of the God of heaven. For why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?

That's an interesting line, and I pondered that. You may have some thoughts on it, Harold, but I'm wondering if when Ezra had an audience with the king, he didn't go over some of the history of Israel, and how Moses had brought the people out from Egypt, and the Egyptian army was completely destroyed, and Pharaoh and his army were destroyed in the Red Sea, and how the mighty kings had risen in Israel in past days and had overcome many kingdoms. And so the king himself—whether that's so, I don't know, but he seemed to ask him to make those offerings for him and his sons.

And then we notice, too, in verse 24 that the priests, the Levites, and any of those ministering at the temple would be tax-exempt. And that's a wonderful thing, because sometimes those taxes were pretty heavy:

[Ezra 7:24-25 NKJV] - ²⁴ Also we inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God. ²⁵ And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them.

So he is given now some civil authority as well, to appoint magistrates and judges. There will be a new administration under Ezra set up according to the laws of Moses, because he says, "all such as know the laws of your God," and he says, "teach those who do not know them." So great blessings accrued from the commandment of Artaxerxes.

And then he makes another command here in verse 26:

[Ezra 7:26 NKJV] - ²⁶ Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.

And so that's the two edicts there or decrees that he makes: one, to send Ezra to set up the kingdom as far as it could be set up under the law of Moses and instruct those who did not know the law; and the second decree had to do with the authorities, the treasuries, those that held the resources in that land, to assist them in whatever way that they needed up to a certain point.

And then in verse 27, we read Ezra's blessing:

[Ezra 7:27-28 NKJV] - ²⁷ Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me.

Now notice that he's speaking now for the first time in the first person. He says there: the king "has extended mercy to me... So I was encouraged," he says. So now he's speaking in the first person as though he is the writer of this portion of the Scripture. Up until now he's been writing in the second person, but now he goes to the first person, and he'll continue on through the rest of the book.

So, God has a plan. In Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 10—you go there with me, Jeremiah chapter 29. I'm always interested in what the prophets have to say that were about this time, this captivity: Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Ezekiel prophesied partly during the captivity, Jeremiah immediately before, and so on. But in Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 10:

[Jeremiah 29:10-11 NKJV] - ¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. ¹¹ For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Those good thoughts of the Lord were expressed when Zerubbabel came back after 70 years. That was the first return after the 70 years of captivity. But God's mercies didn't end there. 50 years, actually 70 years later, God still has His eye on His people and a concern for them.

And all the reforms that were made under Zerubbabel and Joshua, the high priest, helped by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah—that was now all past. A new generation had arisen, and no doubt declension or backsliding had come in. And so the people needed fresh help from the Lord. And so the Lord says His thoughts towards them, thoughts of peace and not of evil, would continue.

His thoughts were toward Israel, but who would God use then to further His plan to encourage His people? Well, there was a man already prepared, who had prepared his heart. And the Lord uses him, raises him up to have an audience with the king, the great king of Persia. Persia was at the very height of her powers at that time. And yet, this king was favorably disposed. God was working there behind the scenes. He used that man, Ezra, who, as we'll see, was encouraged much. He was a humble man; he always acknowledged that it was the hand of the Lord that was upon him, guiding him, directing him, correcting him, and encouraging him as he went.

And so we read there in chapter 8, he begins to collect the men together to go up. And he volunteers now; he would go up alone if necessary. He had a command from the king, but if there were others that would go, certainly he would encourage them to do so. And we'll read that probably about 1,700 males, and probably an equal number of females and children—so probably about 5,000—would have gone up with Ezra. That brief account of his journey that took four months we had earlier, but now in chapter 8 we will look at some details of not only who went up with him, but how they went up.

Amen.

Seeking the Miraculous Hand of God

Well, just a few more thoughts on chapter 7. As Eric has pointed out, it's remarkable that the king would have picked up on Ezra, and remarkable that all the others had access to the king: Daniel and his friends, and Esther, and Mordecai, and Nehemiah. What's going on? In this book of Ezra, how many letters from the king? And you say to yourself, what's happening?

And the answer is that God is doing remarkable things. He is moving in miraculous ways to rebuild His temple, to rebuild His city, to rebuild His people. And so I sit back and I say, Harold, what we need is the miraculous intervention of God to send a revival to the people. And it doesn't necessarily mean that a little that I might do or a little that somebody else might do will turn the world upside down. What they received was a miraculous intervention

from the powers that be in the world—God doing incredible miracles by elevating His own people to positions of power so that they would promote their cause.

All of which says, Harold, you've got to pray more. Assembly, we've got to pray more. We need the miraculous intervention of God. I keep thinking of my friend Amir and say to myself, if I were Amir, what would I be doing to rebuild my country? And Amir says, well, I could send another \$50, but that's not going to change things. I could write another letter, but that's not going to do very much. Right? Amir is saying, my country needs a miracle from God. And we keep quoting 2 Chronicles 7:14:

[2 Chronicles 7:14 NKJV] - if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

So I just marvel at this book. It's letter after letter after letter, miraculously sent to the people. We need the miracle of God. We don't sit back and wait for it; we behave like Israel. And we seek to know the law, we seek to do the law, we seek to teach the law. And on the basis of that, by the grace of God, the miracle may flow.

So my second point, I guess, is that I'm rather amazed—Eric pointed it out in verse 11 —"Now this is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest." And Eric pointed out that it's written in the Aramaic language, the Chaldean language. It's not written in the normal Hebrew language. I think what was recorded here was the precise wording in the precise language of the king. Sometimes—and those of you who are of Chinese background understand that—very often things are lost in translation. Doesn't matter how good the translator is, often things are lost. And I think that in this case, there could have been those who said, well, that's just a translation; Artaxerxes didn't really say that. And so instead of allowing that argument, the Lord allows it to be written in the original language so that nobody can say this is a translation. This was the original language, and that's what had to happen. And praise the Lord, He left no excuse for following up, and the king left no excuse for following up his words. So all of that is very interesting.

I'm amazed at the verses—see if I can find them here—verse 17, I believe it was: that you may buy speedily with this money bulls, rams, lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem, and whatsoever else shall seem good to you. And there's dollars given. The question is, how did this man, Artaxerxes, know what would be required for offerings for the God of heaven in

Jerusalem? How did he know that they would need bulls, rams, lambs for grain offerings and drink offerings? How did he know what was required?

And I don't think we know the answer to that, but I think maybe we can speculate. Did Ezra spend a fair amount of time talking to Artaxerxes about the work of God in Jerusalem? I kind of think he might have. The kings, when you get to the Gospels and Acts—King Herod, Pilate—they spent a little bit of time talking. Chief priests, the rulers, they knew what was going on. I just wonder if the Lord didn't give to Ezra the opportunity to explain the truth of God to Artaxerxes at maybe considerable detail. We don't know what the relationship was. Nehemiah, we'll find out, was closely related; he was the king's cupbearer, and he probably had a lot of chats with the king. Maybe Ezra was the same. Certainly Mordecai and Esther were close to the king and probably spent a lot of time telling him about the truth of God. It wasn't just a simple response to a simple question; I think there was a background there of contact.

And I think our responsibility is to keep telling people about the Lord and tell them more. Let them ask the questions, answer their questions, ask them questions. We try at 16th to have more meetings so that people with an interest can come and learn more. And it isn't just if they come once, they've got all the answers. I find some people who come the most have got the most questions. That's wonderful! That's the way it should be. And the more you read your Bible, the more you end up with questions. And the thrilling thing is, the more you read the Bible, the more you end up with answers.

And so I think that there maybe was a relationship between Ezra and the Lord here. Verse 22 is interesting. Let's pick it up at 21: "I, Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra, the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you to be done immediately unto a hundred talents of silver, and a hundred measures of wheat, and to a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of oil, and salt, without prescribing how much." Again, how did he know that that's what they would need? But when he gives them, he says, I'll give you so much. Somebody tried to calculate some of those values there, and I think I saw a footnote somewhere that said it might have come to a total of \$20 million. And I thought to myself, \$20 million, that's not very much! The amount of money that went into Solomon's temple was far closer to \$20 billion than \$20 million. And what we've got here is, well, it's nice, and the Lord promises more through other words. Artaxerxes is generally liberal, but not anywhere in the ballpark of the amount that Solomon was able to pour into the temple.

What is all meant by that? Well, number one, praise the Lord, because there was great provision from Artaxerxes to rebuild the temple, and that's a marvelous thing, and the city.

But the second thing is that it's true, it was small potatoes. And so we understand again why, when the people rejoiced that the temple had been completed, some rejoiced with joy and some rejoiced with tears, saying this is nothing compared to what was.

The thing that thrills me is that we often start with little—much in the eyes maybe of the Lord, much in the eyes of some of those around us, but really very little. Well, I say to myself, what can 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel accomplish? Oh, not the kind of thing that was accomplished 200 years ago in marvelous waves of blessing; they went all the way around the world in that century and the one that followed. But we can do something, and the Lord will give us far more than we deserve. And we take what we've got and we use it for the Lord. So I guess I'm encouraged. His dollars were there.

Beautifying the House of God

It's interesting, verse 24 says, "Also we inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom upon them." And you say, well, that's kind of nice, I don't have to pay taxes. Do you know what the taxes are here at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel? And we haven't published them the way we should, and that's my fault, and I apologize; we're going to deal with that. But the fact is, we don't pay taxes at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel. We pay for water, we pay for a couple of other services, but the normal taxes are not being paid. Why? Because we're a church, and the Church Act as it relates both to the federal government, the provincial government, the municipal government, exempts us from taxes. Well, that's pretty good.

Some of you are familiar with Parkdale Manor. Shirley lives at Parkdale Manor; Sebastian works at Parkdale Manor. That's a big-deal place. What taxes do they pay at Parkdale Manor? They don't pay taxes at Parkdale Manor. For some reason, by the grace of God, when the operation was put together way back in the 1960s to provide an incentive for Parkdale Manor to be built, the city of Vancouver exempted Parkdale Manor from taxation because of the benefit that they were going to bring to the city. Well, frankly, that was a long time ago, and the city doesn't really like that clause. So they basically said, we want to revoke that. And Parkdale Manor management basically said, no, we don't want that revoked. I'm not sure the precise number, but it's probably in the neighborhood of \$250,000 a year. And the city of Vancouver has continued to extend that mercy, that grant to Parkdale Manor every year. Now, some of you pray a lot for Parkdale Manor; keep praying! That \$250,000 is \$250,000—that's a lot of money. Shirley, if there were 125 people at Parkdale Manor and the bill came in for \$250,000, how much more would you have to pay in rent? That's mathematics, and the answer is \$2,000 a year. Shirley says \$2,000 a year for every tenant

there. So where did the idea come from? Well, I think it came from Artaxerxes! And we say thanks, Artaxerxes. People like Shirley are smiling and saying, that's nice, we don't have to pay that.

So I just find that very, very interesting. And frankly, we praise the Lord for the kindness of the city to protect us in that way. Keep praying for Parkdale Manor and the city, because not always do things go exactly as we would like.

Back to the line that Eric referred to in verse 23: "Why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?" How did he know that the God of heaven was behind the city of Jerusalem and the temple? Somebody probably told him—probably Ezra. And in the discussion, can you imagine Ezra saying to the king, "You know, King, the God of heaven wants to be glorified in the temple and in Jerusalem. And frankly, those who do not glorify the King of heaven, the sentence of God is upon them." Do you think possibly he preached heaven and hell to Artaxerxes? And we're not sure whether Artaxerxes believed it or not, but he might have been scared enough to say, "For a few hundred million dollars, I just might be able to please this God of heaven a little more, maybe." Certainly many people say, "I think I better be a little more religious because I don't want the punishment of God, the judgment of God, to be upon me." Praise the Lord! That's a reason why many trust the Lord as Savior.

But I think we've got to keep pointing out the blessings associated with trusting the Lord and the curses that befall those who don't trust the Lord. There is much in Scripture on the curses as well as on the blessings. Certainly at the end of Deuteronomy, you read the list of blessings and it's long; you read the list of curses and it's a whole lot longer. Sometimes we've got to be shaken. I wonder whether this king was shaken.

And then back to verse 27, and it says: "Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem." How did Artaxerxes know how to beautify the house of the Lord? To build it is one thing; to beautify it is something more. I'm not sure on the distinction between the two, but I think maybe he sent some extra money to those who could do the work, basically saying, "Make the place beautiful."

I think that's our responsibility, isn't it? I'm always proud of 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel. Did you know that we probably have the best grass in our front yard—not backyard, front yard—we probably have the best grass of anybody on the block! Is that good or bad? Well, if we had the worst grass, it would be bad. Does it do any harm to beautify the building? And the answer is no; it's good to have it attractive. But that's not what it's all about. That was probably Artaxerxes' plan, to beautify the building. What's our plan? Our plan is to glorify the Lord and to beautify the church—each individual being a beautiful example of the Lord

and His behavior. And so we spend a lot of time not polishing up the brass on the front doors of the building; we spend our time, by the grace of God, polishing up the appearance of the saints in the days of difficulty and in the days of plenty.

And what would you do if someone came up to you and said, "Do you know why I come to this church?" You say, "No." And the answer is, "Because I want to be like you." You say, "Well, you got the right person!" But wouldn't that be wonderful? The mother says, "I think you should go to Sunday school, Johnny." "Why?" And the mother says, "Well, I sent Johnny to Sunday school because I wanted him to be like that other boy in the Sunday school, that other girl in the Sunday school. I didn't send them along just because they were invited; I sent them along because I want them to be like you." We can understand ourselves saying we want to beautify the church. But Ezra said Artaxerxes understood that, and he said, "I want to make sure that that's a beautiful church." And you and I say, "Lord, we would like it to be a beautiful church." And if You've got to give us an extra \$200,000 reducing our taxes—here at 16th it's probably only \$10,000 or \$12,000 a year we don't have to pay, but we don't have to pay it.

So my question is, what can we do to beautify ourselves, to beautify one another, so that 16th Avenue is a beautiful place and people want to come? I told you, didn't I, I knocked on the door of a house across the street on 16th Avenue. And this was a long time ago. And I said to the lady at the door, "I'm from 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel across the street." She said, "I know." I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know that. Well, how do you know me?" She says, "I can see you." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "I stand at the window here, I look out, I know people. I watch the way they come, watch the way they go. I watch them on the street." And she had nothing but good to say for 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel, just because she saw what we do on a summer day after the meeting, standing on the sidewalk or on the grass talking to one another, and she watches the way we come and the way we go. She's not the only one who does that.

Norm and I used to live, when we were children, across the street from a Catholic church. And sometimes I couldn't go to Sunday school because I was sick, and so I would stay home on Sunday morning, and I would watch people going to the Catholic church, and then I'd turn around and watch them go home again. And I said to myself—and I was pretty young—I said, there's something wrong with that church. Those people go in alone, and when the service is over, they come out alone and they run to their cars to get out of there! And sometimes I watch what happens here, and it's half an hour, three quarters of an hour after the meeting, and people are still standing around talking. And I say to myself, which one is the beautiful church? And even a child could say, there's something wrong with that other

place. If they really believed in God, they'd love one another, and the place would be much more beautiful for the people.

So anyway, I have underlined in my Bible: good for you, Artaxerxes! You want to beautify the house of the Lord; we want to beautify the house of the Lord, too. In particular, we want to beautify the people of the house of the Lord. So that's basically brought us down to the end of chapter 7. Any further comments, questions, comments from Zoom land or from the audience here on the information up to the end of chapter 7?

The Blessed Man

Eric touched on verse 10: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it..." That just brought my mind to the fact that that is the blessed man in Psalm 1, someone who delights himself in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. So that's a good connection.

Better than referring to it, maybe read that for us.

Yeah, okay. It says:

[Psalm 1:1-6 NKJV]

¹ Blessed is the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

² But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

³ He shall be like a tree

Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.

⁴ The ungodly are not so,

But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

⁶ For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Ezra is that blessed man.

Amen. And Luke summarizes it very well in the book of Acts, chapter 1 and verse 1:

[Acts 1:1 NKJV] - The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,

Ezra studied it, did it, taught it. Jesus did it, taught it. And probably that's, as Eric pointed out right in the beginning, that's why Artaxerxes paid attention to him. There was something different about Ezra. We don't know all the details of it. All we know is that somehow Artaxerxes was under the hand of God in a miraculous way so that Ezra would be honored for his heart and enabled to accomplish his objective.

Very good. Any more on chapter 7?

Just the last two verses there, where Ezra acknowledges, it says: "Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD." He acknowledges that it's God's work. It wasn't his persuasive powers or his personal power in any way that convinced the king; he recognizes that it was the Lord that put it in his heart—a man that was completely dependent upon the Lord.

You can imagine, and he thanks the Lord that He "has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes." He looks at that as a mercy of the Lord. Amen. And so he was encouraged, he says, "as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me." To be encouraged is good because, no doubt, he went into the presence of the king and the counselors—I mean, these were all the most important people in the kingdom, and the most powerful kingdom on the earth at that time. You can imagine he'd be like Nehemiah later on; we find out Nehemiah was quite concerned about this, because we read in Esther that you didn't just walk into the presence of the king. If you did and he didn't want you there, you were a goner; you were strung up on a gallows outside! You had to have an entrance into the presence of the king. And you remember Esther, when she came in unannounced, her life was at stake: would the king extend his scepter to her to show her mercy, that he would receive her into his presence or not?

Well, I'm thinking of Ezra now. At some point he managed to get an audience with the king, and he's depending upon the mercy of the Lord, and thanks the Lord that You extended that mercy to me. And so he was encouraged. It must have been a great—more than a relief to him that the king not only heard him, understood him, but actually sent him now to do what he had probably asked the king to do, that he might go and help out there because the word

of God was needed in Jerusalem. And the king gives him all his requests, so he was greatly encouraged, he says: "So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me." And so with that encouragement, he goes out now to the captives, some of the captives, to see if there are volunteers who might go with him up to Jerusalem. And I guess that will be probably next week before we begin our journey there.

Yes, come here. I guess the other thing is the precise wording of verse 28: "and has extended mercy unto me before the king and his counselors"—there were seven of them—and the next line is: "and before all the king's mighty princes." Yeah, the whole court, the king's mighty princes. Who are they? All we know is that he got the approval of all of them. When you get to the Gospels, we take the little word "all" and we rejoice in it, and we say the Lord's will is not the death of any, but that all would come to repentance. And you can preach a good sermon on the little word "all." The Lord wants all to come to repentance, and here, all the king's men. Did Ezra have a seminar? Did he have regular meetings explaining to all the king's mighty men the truth of God? Did they have some Old Testament Bible studies? I don't know, it's remarkable! But the word "all" is there.

And then you go to the remainder of that verse: "So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me." Who went with him? A bunch of the ordinary yokels? That's not what it says: "leading men." And we're going to read all about them next week in Chapter 8, and you get overwhelmed by the details. Eric said probably 1,700 went up. Some of them—I think many of them were very, very leading men. And they came to revive and to beautify and to complete, to fulfill the prophecies of the prophets and Daniel and the others. But they came, leading men. It's good that very often great men are involved in the work of God.

In the early days of the Brethren, back in Ireland and in the UK, way back in 1825, 1850, and so on, many great men became zealous for the Lord. He was not R.C. Chapman, but he was Radstock—Lord Radstock. He lived in a little palace of his; I think he had 23 bedrooms in it. And Wes Gardner was one of the elders in the assembly, and he got saved, and he was in the assembly, and then he went over to Russia and did a great work for God. But he wasn't an ordinary man. John Nelson Darby wasn't an ordinary man. He was related to the Nelson of the Spanish Armada, and the defeat of the Spanish Armada. And many, many—R.C. Chapman was very, very well-to-do; C.T. Studd, very, very well-to-do. God often uses big men, praise the Lord! But the other thing that's thrilling: He often uses little men like us, and so praise the Lord!

But in this case, Artaxerxes had with him some pretty big men. That's our time tonight.

You know, Amir had a question. Maybe we do not have enough time; I can ask the question next week.

Yes, we don't mind waiting.

How can we recognize God's hand in our own lives today?

How can we recognize God's hand in our lives today? Yes, in our lives today. Well, I think that's a big question, and yes, that's a next-week question. But I think the simple answer is: be like Ezra. Take the time to study the law, take the time to live the law, and teach the law. And in the process, you'll see the hand of your God upon you. Frankly, it's easier for me to see the hand of God today when I look back over the many, many years, and I see God's—clearly, I see God's hand there. What happened when I was, frankly, 12 and 13 years old? Big, important things happened; I didn't realize it at the time, but I can realize it now. So you keep doing what God wants you to do; He'll see it, He'll teach it to you, you'll realize it.

Eric's got some far more profound answers than that.

I was just thinking, verse 6, where it says: "this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given." He was skilled in God's word; he had paid attention to it, and had learned it, and had done it. And notice here, it says: "The king granted him all his request." The king must have asked him at some point, "What would you like, Ezra? You've explained a lot of things to us here in this court. What would you like?" I can imagine his knees were shaking, but the hand of the Lord was upon him because he was prepared to do the will of God. So the hand of the Lord—even though he felt weak, probably—the king granted him all his requests because the hand of the Lord was upon him, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him. That doesn't mean to say you'll feel very strong by any means. I don't think Ezra felt very strong when he stood in front of all the counselors and all the princes there in the land explaining what he wanted to do, what the Lord had laid on his heart. But the hand of the Lord was upon him at that point.

Amen. Amen.

So, yeah, it's hard to say, you know, when the hand of the Lord is upon you. If you're willing to do His will, you'll know that the hand of the Lord is upon you, guiding you.

Thank you.