

Ezra 8

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 June 2018

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Let's go on an adventure, an adventurous journey that will take us from the palace of King Artaxerxes in Babylon, very much the center of world power at the time of the events described. So, the journey will begin there in the very heart of the palace there in Babylon, and then the journey will continue from there to Jerusalem and to the temple in Jerusalem. So, that's where the journey begins in the palace in Babylon, and the journey ends in the temple in Jerusalem. And that's the journey we want to go on this evening. You won't have to leave your pew or your seat. You can remain comfortably seated where you are. But even as you do, what we're going to do is retrace the steps of Ezra on that journey back to Jerusalem in the year 458 before Christ. But we're going to retrace that journey from one very particular perspective, and that is the part played in the journey by the gracious hand of God. I think I've already commented a couple of times in the reading that that's the focus of what we're going to be considering this evening. Just very quickly and just very fleetingly, it is good to always remember that even when we look at an event in history so long ago with lessons to be drawn from it in its own right, it is part of a bigger picture. It's part of the bigger picture of God preparing the way for the coming Messiah. So, even the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem was part of that big project of God, and it's good to always be mindful of that even though we're not going to be giving much thought to that this evening. So, the telling phrase that reappears time and time again in the account in chapters 7 and 8, which as I've said, both relate the same event but from slightly different perspectives, the telling phrase that reappears is this one, the hand of the Lord, his God, was on him. When it's speaking about Ezra, or when Ezra is speaking on the first person, the hand of the Lord, my God, was on me or sometimes on us.

So, slight variations, but the heart of the matter is the same, and as I say, repeatedly through the two chapters. And what we're going to do is we're going to identify the occasions when this expression appears in the account and explore what the expression and the manner and circumstances in which it is used, because it's used in different circumstances on the journey, and what the expression tells us about God and about His hand, His gracious hand, His powerful hand, and also what it tells us about Ezra, the one upon whom God's hand rests. And so, we're going to learn about God, but we're also going to learn about Ezra, and Ezra in that sense will serve as a model and an example for us. What was true of Ezra, and it ought also be true of us. Now, just to complicate our task a little, this retracing of the steps as we look at these chapters, chapters 7 and 8, what complicates things a little is that, as I've already said, the two chapters aren't chapters that follow a historical sequence. They both relate the same events. And because I want to draw out this expression in both chapters, as we do that, we're not going to simply begin at chapter 7 and then find the first time that we see the expression and speak about it and move on and find the next one. We're going to have to be jumping back and forwards a little bit in chapters 7 and 8. So, you'll need to be focused, or else you might get lost. We wouldn't want you to get lost on this journey that we're embarking on. What I can do is give you a little bit of advance notice of our route map. We're going to start in chapter 8 and in verse 22, where reference is made to the first meeting of Ezra with King Artaxerxes in the palace in Babylon.

And so, that's the beginning of the journey. Now, that reference is given in the context of the journey having already practically begun, but nonetheless, it refers back to that first meeting.

If you wish, the beginning of the journey. We'll then continue. We'll notice how the request that Ezra brought to King Artaxerxes was granted, and how that is also spoken of in the context of the hand of God being upon him. We'll then move on in chapter 7 and verse 28, when we have the traveling party being assembled. And then into chapter 8 and verse 18, we'll notice how that traveling party required additional help, and how that help was secured. And then we'll move on a little bit in the story, just before the traveling party embark, when there is this fast that Ezra proclaims and announces.

And again, in that context, reference is made to the hand of God upon his people. And then finally, we have the journey itself, the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem and arrival in Jerusalem.

[5 : 46] And again, there are two occasions when referring to the journey and then referring to the arrival, the same expression is found, the hand of God was upon us. So, that's kind of the route that we're going to be taking. So, we'll begin in chapter 8 and verse 22. Let's just read what is said there.

And the second half of the verse, because we want to just focus straight in on this expression. The second half of verse 22, we read, The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him. Now, the context in which this is stated is Ezra explaining why he didn't ask the king, King Artaxerxes, for soldiers. And this is the reason he gives. He was ashamed to ask for soldiers, given that he had, at that first meeting in the palace, when he was requesting help to travel to Jerusalem, he had said that to the king. He said, this God that we serve, the God of Israel, is a God whose gracious hand is on everyone who looks to him. This is what we believe about our God.

And so, he's remembering what he said there to the king. And so, as I say, the writer of the chapter records these words in the context of this pre-journey fast, but they refer to what was said by Ezra at that first meeting in the palace. Now, what do these words, and what do they tell us about God, and what do they tell us about Ezra? Well, first of all, what do they tell us about God? Well, they tell us about his promises and about his track record. Now, why do I say that? Well, I say that because we could pose the question, how does Ezra know that this is true of God? He tells the king, the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him. Okay, Ezra, here's a question for you. How do you know that? How do you know that's true? It sounds grand, but how do you know that that's actually true? And of course, the reason Ezra knew that to be true was because of God's word and because of God's track record. Ezra, as we've already discovered, was skilled and knowledgeable in the law of God. He had access to and was familiar with the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, and he knew what was contained therein. He knew all that God had said when he established his covenant with his people, that he would be their God, that he would be with them, that his hand would be upon them. And so, on the grounds of God's word, he was sure that this was true of God. But also, this expression speaks of God's track record. It's not just that God had said, well, this is the kind of God I am. I'm a God who will look after you. My hand will be upon you.

He had demonstrated that. You know, we're at a point in the history of God's people when centuries have passed since that people were constituted, and God's people could look back in time and could see the manner in which God's hand had indeed been upon them. We may think especially of the Exodus from Egypt. And this very language is used often in Exodus and Deuteronomy about the hand of God being on his people, delivering his people, and keeping the Egyptians back from opposing his people, and so on and so forth. And so, this statement of Ezra directed to Artaxerxes in the palace in Babylon tells us about a God who makes promises to his people and a God who keeps those promises. But not only does this statement of Ezra tell us about God, it also tells us about Ezra, and it tells us about his faith. And it tells us of a faith that is grounded in God's Word, and a faith that is grounded in personal experience.

You know, when he said to Artaxerxes, the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, he's not simply repeating something he'd read in the book. He's talking about his own experience of God.

[10:12] This is what I've discovered. I look to him, and his hand is upon me. And so, this first occasion when this truth is declared, there in the palace, Ezra goes to the king, and he has requests to make of the king. And in the context of making these requests, he makes this statement, this profession of faith. The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him.

So, that's the first time we find the expression, right at the beginning of the journey. But then we find it again, and really immediately subsequent to the requests of Ezra being made. Because in chapter 7 and verse 6, we're back in the palace, but now we're being told about how the king responded.

So, in chapter 7 and verse 6, you just go to backtrack a page, we read, the king had granted him, that is, the king had granted Ezra, Artaxerxes had granted Ezra everything he asked. So, he'd gone to the palace, he had his list. We don't know what the list was, but he'd asked for a number of favors or support or help, and we're told that the king granted him everything he asked.

And then we're told, notice what it says, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. So, what does this tell us? What do these words tell us about God? What do they tell us about God's hand?

Well, they tell us that God's hand is a powerful hand, capable of moving the hearts of pagan kings. It's the king who had provided all this list that Ezra had when he requested that of the king.

[12:00] And yet, why did he do so? Why did he prove so generous? Why did he respond in the manner that is described? Because the powerful hand of God was on him, was on Artaxerxes, as we've seen repeatedly in this book, on Cyrus, on Darius, now on Artaxerxes. And so, we are confronted with a powerful hand.

The hand of God is powerful. It's gracious, but it's also powerful, and it's generous. Everything he asked for, everything he asked for provided by Artaxerxes, provided by God through Artaxerxes.

That's what the expression tells us about God. But what does it tell us about Ezra? Well, remember that this is in the context of Ezra making his requests in order that he might go to Jerusalem, in order that he might beautify the temple and indeed fulfill other ministries that we'll see in due course. And so, this tells us about Ezra's intentions. You know, why is Ezra approaching the king for help? Because he has a job to do. He has a calling laid upon him. And so, in the context of that call, in the context of that mission, he declares his intentions, and he makes his requests of Artaxerxes, and effectively of God through Artaxerxes. And he receives everything that he needs. We can do the same as we identify what God would have us do, the ministry that he would have us serve in, as there are needs for that. When we're clear on what it is God is having us to do, then we can come and ask for that which is needful. Often we ask and don't receive because we ask amiss, as James reminds us. But when we know what it is God would have us do, then we can ask of God with confidence. And meeting Ezra there in the palace, making his requests, also speaks to us of Ezra's boldness, that he would have that boldness of approaching the king to lay before him that which he requires. So, this is the second occasion we have this expression. Really, it's at the same time.

It's spoken of when Ezra is recalling the visit to the palace. And then in chapter 7, we're told that everything was granted because the hand of God was on him. But then we have the next occasion when the same expression is found. And this is in the context of the assembling of the traveling party.

So, if you're following the timeline, Ezra has gone to the palace, permission is granted, now it's time to organize the journey. And in chapter 7 and in verse 28, we find the same expression in that context. So, chapter 7 and in verse 28, we read, well, let's read from verse 27.

[14:52] It's the only way of really getting the context. Praise be to the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way, and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisors and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me. So, he's left the palace. He has his permissions. He maybe has the letter. I don't know. But certainly, he needs to gather the traveling party. And that task is couched in this same language, because the hand of the Lord my God was on me. What do these words, or what does this expression in this context tell us about God and about Ezra, about God's hand? Well, it tells us that God's hand is a sending hand. He was sending Ezra to Jerusalem. He had a destination in view. He was being pushed out of, really, the comfort of

Babylon, where he enjoyed a position of some importance, of some significance, no doubt a measure of material comfort. And he was being told to leave that behind and to go to Jerusalem, to serve God's people in precarious circumstances. And so, God's hand is sending Ezra. But as he sends, God's hand is also encouraging and enabling Ezra. You know, Ezra himself testifies to that. He says, because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage. Not just I went, because he's sending me, but I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go with me. And so, Ezra, he hears God's call. He sees God's provision, and he takes courage and acts. And note that his courage and passion for the mission he has given is contagious, because we read there in that verse that he gathered leading men from Israel to go up with him. So, he's persuaded. He is convinced. He's encouraged. He's enabled.

And he gathers others. And no doubt his passion for the task was drawing others to join with him. And we can see that in ministry today. I remember a few months ago, we had Andy Robertson preaching and telling us a little bit about the work that he was about to commence in Charleston in Dundee, planting a church there. And you could sense the passion that he had for that work. And what has that resulted in? Well, part of what it's resulted in is that others there in Dundee, maybe comfortably settled in a large church in the city center, have been willing to join with him and form part of a core group to work in much more difficult circumstances in many ways. There's a contagious sense in which a man who is clear on God's call, who is given that empowering and enabling by God is able to draw others, a man or a woman for that matter, with those characteristics. And that's not only true of big projects like planting a church, but it's true of ministry within a congregation, within our congregation. And so we have this next occasion as the traveling party is gathered together.

The hand of God is on Ezra. But now we have the next occasion in chapter 8 and verse 18, when we find this same language again. Chapter 8 and verse 18, notice what we read there.

And because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man. Now, what's the context here? Well, this is at the point where Ezra gathers the people. There in verse 15, he assembled them at the canal that flows towards Ahava, and we camp there three days. So the traveling party has been gathered. They're about to embark on the journey, but they pause. They pause. It seems a very picturesque scene by the canal towards Ahava, presumably just in the outskirts of Babylon from whence they would depart towards Jerusalem. And there they are. And there is time, as we'll see in a moment, for fasting and prayer, for planning and preparation during these three days by the canal.

[19 : 31] And at that point, Ezra realizes that there is a gap in the traveling party. Basically, they don't have Levites, those who would assist the priests in service in the temple. And there are no Levites among them. There's a fairly numerous gathering, but there is this very marked absence of Levites. And so there's a need to find Levites. We don't have time to read all that he did.

But basically, that additional support is secured. And how is it secured? Or why is it secured? Why are they successful in securing that additional support? Because the hand of God was upon them.

The gracious hand of God was on us. And what does that tell us about God's hand? Well, it tells us that God's hand is a directing and providing hand. They brought us, Sherebiah, a capable man. And indeed, God provides beyond the expectations of Ezra. In verses 18 to 20, we find that the number of Levites who now volunteer for the journey is far more numerous than I would imagine Ezra had anticipated. God answers him and provides beyond his imagining or asking, to use the language we find in Ephesians in the benediction at the end of chapter 3.

And of course, this expression in this moment in the journey also tells us about Ezra. Here is a man who is conscious that God provides, who is conscious of God's directing, who is conscious of God's initiative in this whole venture, and yet a man who plans and takes responsibility carefully and seriously for the task before him. God's directing and providing is no excuse for failing to plan and organize. In fact, it's only as Ezra takes the initiative and identifies the need for Levites that God, in a sense, makes himself present and his hand is upon them to provide suitable men for the task. Let's move on. There's just a couple more occasions when we're going to see this expression.

And the next occasion, if we're following the journey chronologically, we're still by the canal that flows towards Ahava, but we're moving on a little bit to the fast that Ezra proclaims.

[21 : 55] And in verse 22 of chapter 8, we find the same expression, The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him. Now, we've seen this already. We saw it right at the beginning. Why? Because at this point, Ezra is remembering how he had said that to Artaxerxes in the palace. But now we're at the fast that has been announced by Ezra. And we're told that Ezra and the people prayed. They prayed for safety and the journey. They prayed for their children, for their possessions. And then we're told, curiously, of something that Ezra did not ask for.

And let's just notice what it is there in verse 22. In verse 22, we read, I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him.

What do these words tell us about God and Ezra? This curious acknowledgement on the part of Ezra that he hadn't asked for soldiers. He hadn't asked for protection.

Well, the fast that they hold and the prayers that they pray are evidently prayers that God answers. And so, God is one who answers the prayers of God's people by his answering hand. But it also tells us a great deal about Ezra. And I think we can identify three core features of Ezra's faith in what is related for us here in this part of the journey, in this fast that is being conducted just before they embark on the journey. And I think we can see that Ezra's faith is marked by, first of all, humility before God. In verse 21, we read there by the Havokanal, I proclaimed a fast so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey and so on. So, humility before God is a feature of Ezra's faith, but also dependence upon God. They, in the course of this fast, are asking God for a safe journey for us and our children with our possessions. So, there's humility before God, there's dependence upon God. But then you have this third element that we draw out from this curious acknowledgement that Ezra had not asked for soldiers. We have what we might call a passion for God. And this is illustrated by this reluctance on the part of Ezra to ask for soldiers. Why? Why didn't he ask for soldiers? He clearly had asked for several things. Why not soldiers? Well, he tells us. He says, I was ashamed to ask for soldiers because

I'd already told the king that God looks after his people. So, you can see his problem. He's saying, well, I've just told the king that God is a God whose hand is on his people. So, if I then say, could you give me some soldiers? The king might say, well, what about your God? Is he not the God who protects you? So, why do you need soldiers? And so, this is the struggle that Ezra has. Of course, this is the struggle that he had when he was in the palace and he was deciding what to ask for. But he remembers it here as the fast is being conducted. Would it have been wrong for him to ask for soldiers?

[25 : 27] I don't think it would have been wrong. He asked for plenty other things that presumably God could have provided in some miraculous way. Why not soldiers? When we move on in this historical account into Nehemiah, which is really part of the same period, Nehemiah asked for soldiers and was given soldiers for his journey. So, did that show that Nehemiah lacked faith, whereas Ezra was much more dependent on God than Nehemiah? I think not. His concern, I don't think we need to decide that Ezra was right or wrong in asking or not for soldiers, but what we can draw from this is Ezra's passion for the honor of God. This is his great concern. How will God be seen by Artaxerxes if I ask for soldiers?

And so he says, well, I could ask for soldiers, but because I don't want God's name to be questioned, I don't want his reputation to be sullied in any way, I won't. And I will rest on him to provide protection. Now, that feature of Ezra's faith I think is one that we do well to maybe dwell on, not spend time doing that this evening, but just to consider that matter. Are we as concerned about God's honor and reputation? In what ways can our conduct reflect badly on God? I wonder if in the life that we live, in what way does the manner in which we live reflect badly on the reputation of the God we serve and profess? Maybe if we're constantly worried and stressed out and just fearful of what tomorrow holds. Now, we're human and that's part of who we are, but how does that reflect on the one that we speak of, who we say that we trust in, who we say is powerful and provides for his people? Are we concerned about God's reputation? Ezra is concerned for God's reputation. This doesn't really matter whether he could have or shouldn't have asked for soldiers. I'm sure he could have.

It wouldn't have been wrong, but his concern is for the honor of God, and that we can certainly drive and be challenged by. And then finally, and I'll just mention that we don't even need to read the verses. But at the end of the journey, we have this same expression found on two occasions, in chapter 8 and verse 31, in reference to the way in which God did protect them on the journey, protected from enemies and from bandits on the way. They had all this gold that they were carrying. It was a very attractive, what can we say, group of people to steal from and to attack. Any bandits who knew all the gold that they were carrying, what better than to attack them? No soldiers, no guards, and yet the hand of God was on them. And so, they arrive in Jerusalem untouched, unscathed. Not a single coin had been lost, as we're told, when they were all counted out there in the temple in Jerusalem. Why? Because the hand of our God was on us. And then on arrival in Jerusalem, we're told about that in chapter 7 and verses 8 and 9. Again, the same truth is stressed. We arrived in Jerusalem because the hand of God was on us.

And what does that all tell us about God and about Ezra? Well, it tells us that God's hand is indeed a protecting hand. But it tells us about Ezra, that his was a grateful heart, because when he arrived in Jerusalem, having made the journey, having arrived safely in Jerusalem, what does he do? Well, we're told that he rests. They all rested. We read in chapter 8 and in verse 32, so we arrived in Jerusalem where we rested three days. And this is a grateful rest, having made this great journey. Grateful to God for having brought them to where they were. There's a curious symmetry between their fasting for three days before the journey and then resting for three days on arrival in Jerusalem. He was grateful to God. And that gratitude finds expression in resting for these days. It finds its expression in the integrity with which he then ensures that the gold that he has brought is delivered to the temple and counted out every single coin delivered to those to whom it had to be delivered. And then, of course, the account ends with the exiles who have returned worshipping God. In verse 35 of chapter 8, then the exiles who had returned from captivity, sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel.

And then we're given the details of that act of worship. This is how Ezra's grateful heart finds expression in these ways. And even as we look at this act of worship, we began by noticing how all of this story needs to be seen in the big picture of God's redeeming purpose as well. Even in this act of worship, when it speaks of the sacrifices that were offered for us in the light of the coming of Jesus reminds us that all of this is pointing forward to the coming of the one who would offer himself as a sacrifice for sinners. And so, this journey from beginning to end, from the palace in Babylon to the temple in Jerusalem, punctuated by this wonderful reality that the hand of God, the gracious hand of God, the powerful hand of God, was on Ezra, was on his people, and leading them home. As he had declared at the very beginning in testifying to Artaxerxes, the gracious hand of our

[31 : 10] God is on everyone who looks to him. But then also note what he went on to say, but his great anger is against all who forsake him. And so, the challenge to us is that we would be among those who look to him, that we would look to him. Ezra, in so many ways, looked to God. And as he looked to God, so the hand of God was on him. But if we fail to do that, if we go our own way, then we have these words of solemn mourning, but his great anger is against all who forsake him. Well, may we all live our lives looking to him and experiencing what he experienced, the hand of God upon him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your gracious hand that ever rests upon those who look to you. Help us to look to you in every circumstance and on every occasion, looking to you, trusting in you. And as we do, so we might know and enjoy your gracious hand upon us. And these things we pray in

Jesus' name. Amen.