

God and His Servant

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of July 2004.

The preacher is Peter Adam. His sermon is entitled God and His Servant and is based on Ezra chapter 7 verses 1 to 27.

Well, it's great to be with you again tonight. Last night we had a family birthday party at my place, my stepmother's birthday, and my two brothers and my sister and their spouses came.

And I always pick up new jokes when we have family parties, because I don't hear many jokes being in a theological college, but in family parties I hear lots of them. And my brother John, who plays tennis, heard this one at his tennis club last Wednesday.

Don't stop me if you've heard it. There was an 85-year-old man who decided he wanted to go parachute jumping, which means, in theory, jumping with a parachute from an aeroplane.

[1 : 09] Well, his family tried to dissuade him, but eventually he insisted, and up he went in his aeroplane and jumped out of the aeroplane. And he'd been told that there was the cord you pull to make the parachute para or shoot or whatever it is.

And if it doesn't work, there's another cord you pull, and that will certainly make the para chute or the chute para, whichever you wish. So he pulled the first cord and nothing happened, except that he kept on falling to the ground.

And he pulled the second cord and nothing happened, except that he kept on falling to the ground. And he was getting near the earth's surface when he met somebody up in the air who was not falling down but going up.

So he said to the man, Do you know anything about parachutes? No, said the man. He said, Do you know... But the man who was coming up said, Do you know anything about gas stoves?

Yeah, I thought you'd like that joke. It took me a while last night, too. It was only when I was doing the washing up that the funny side of it got to me. So go home, do some washing up, and you might start laughing.

[2 : 15] Well, the Bible is a wonderful book, isn't it? Because the Bible is a book about God. If you want to know God, the best book to read is the Bible. I was brought up in a non-Christian home, and I remember going to Sunday school for the very first time when I was 10 years old.

And I had a new Bible that I'd been given, especially go to Sunday school. And the Sunday school teacher said that God didn't like new Bibles. God liked well-used Bibles. So, being a literalist, even at that early age, I took my Bible home and scribbled in it, tore pages out, threw it around the room a few times, thinking, Now God will be pleased with me!

But, of course, they were right, weren't they? God likes a used Bible, because when we read the Bible, we're going to meet God on its pages. But if it's true that the Bible is a book about God, the Bible is also a book crammed full of people.

It's hard to find a page of the Bible without lots of men, women and children on it. And we learn about God when God talks about God.

We also learn a great deal about God when we find God working through people in the Bible. And if you want to think about all those people in the Bible, you can think, Well, some of them are causing problems.

[3 : 32] And some of them are providing solutions. Or, to put it more theologically, some of them are under the judgment of God, and others are those through whom God is working to solve the problems of the world.

For God, as we know, is a saving God. And when we're in a mess, God acts to save us. Here in Ezra chapter 7, we find that when the people of God are in a mess, God raises up someone skilled in Bible teaching and powerful in ministry.

When the people of God are in a mess, God raises up someone skilled in Bible teaching and powerful in ministry. I love reading church history.

I love reading history of any kind, actually. But I particularly like reading church history, because again and again, you find what I've just said coming true, that when God's people are in a mess, God raises up someone skilled in Bible teaching and powerful in ministry.

I love the story of John Chrysostom, who was the patriarch of Constantinople in the days when that was a Christian empire. And he was a great Bible teacher, John, and also a very formidable person in ministry.

[4 : 49] He was opposed by the Empress Eudoxia, who was a very powerful lady, and she was trying to have him killed. So John was preaching on John the Baptist's day. He began his sermon with these words, Still she rages.

Still she demands the head of John on a plate. Well, that was a message for the Empress who was in the front row, wasn't it? She was still raging at asking for John Chrysostom's head on a plate.

If you were here last week, you would have heard from Ezra chapter 1 of the first return of the people from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem under the Persian king Cyrus. And here in Ezra chapter 7, we have the second group of Jews going back from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem led by Ezra. We learn about Ezra. We have a very long genealogy in the point of it with all those wonderful names. I wish I was called Uziel Buki or Abishua. The point is that Ezra is actually a descendant of the chief priest Aaron.

We find that in verse 5. Verse 6 explains, This is the Ezra that went up from Babylon. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, the Lord God of Israel had given, and the king granted him all that he asked for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

[6 : 15] You know, you learn so much about Ezra from those two sentences, don't you? He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses. That is, he'd done his Bible studies.

He'd read the law and meditated on the law as the law told him to do. Love the Lord your God. How do you love the Lord your God? With heart, soul and strength. The answer is, you think and meditate on the commandments of God.

He was not an ill-equipped workman. He knew his Bible, as we would say. We discover that from verse 6, the first part of verse 6. He was skilled in the law of Moses, the Lord God of Israel had given.

But also notice in the second part of verse 6, we read these words, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. Now when the Bible talks about the hand of God being on someone, or the eye of God going through and fro through the earth, it means that God is intimately involved in human life, in human society.

When we read that the eye of God runs through and fro through the earth, it means that he notices everything. He doesn't miss a thing. When we read that the hand of God is on someone, we mean that God is protecting them, that God is using them.

[7 : 33] You might remember from the story of the Exodus, when God's mighty right arm acts, then the people are delivered from Egypt and brought to the promised land. So the right arm of God, or the hand of God, marks the work of God, the detectable, obvious work of God in the world.

Now these are two extraordinary things about Ezra, aren't they? He was skilled in the law of Moses, and the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

We would say, he knew his Bible, and he was powerful in ministry. He knew his Bible, and he was a powerful leader, a powerful minister.

Not enough in Ezra's day to be skilled in Bible teaching without being powerful in ministry, without having the hand of the Lord his God upon him.

Not enough to know the Bible unless God was also working through him. But very dangerous to be powerful in ministry and not know his Bible.

[8 : 53] God raises up someone skilled in Bible teaching and powerful in ministry. The great dilemma of the church today, I think, is that there are many people who are powerful in ministry that aren't skilled in knowing the Bible and in teaching it.

And others, perhaps fewer, who are skilled in knowing the Bible but are not powerful in ministry. But when the people of God are in a mess, God raises up someone skilled in Bible teaching and powerful in ministry.

Not enough to be skilled and not powerful. That would be to be orthodox but to be impotent. Not enough to be powerful but not skilled in Bible teaching. That would be to be influential powerful but have no stability to be blown to and fro.

It's a bit like the message from last Sunday night, as a matter of fact, from Ezra chapter 1. When the people of God are in a mess, God fulfills his word.

God works by his power. The power of God achieves the words of God. The word of God is powerful through his ministers.

[10:12] We find that, didn't we? Last time we found the king was as King Cyrus.

And we read that God stirred up the spirit of the king to send the people back from Babylon to Jerusalem. And this was to fulfill the word of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah.

So too, in chapter 7, we have this description of the power of the scriptures. Ezra was skilled in the law of Moses but also that God's power, God's hand, was upon him.

So, Ezra was skilled in the law of Moses. That means that he knew it. He could remember it. He knew how to apply it. He wasn't devising a new religion.

He was teaching the old-time religion, the religion of Moses. He was, as we see in verse 10, a person who'd set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach the statutes and ordinance in Israel.

[11:20] So when we read that Ezra set his heart, we then know that he's a man of determination and purpose. What you set your heart to do is what you achieve in life. What Ezra set his heart to do, why he was now skilled, because he had set his heart to study the law of God, that is, the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, and to do it, that is, he's going to study it and do it and he's also going to teach these statutes and ordinance in Israel.

That gives you a great prayer, as a matter of fact. When you're studying the scriptures. Dear Heavenly Father, today as I study the Bible, help me to study it, do it, and teach it.

Because what you study, you learn most deeply when you do it, and what you study and do, you learn most deeply when you tell somebody else.

Let me tell you, I find again and again when I find something in the Bible, the very next day there's an opportunity to tell somebody about it. It's wonderful, isn't it? So you study it, do it, and teach it to others.

Well, that would be a great thing for you to pray for this week, wouldn't it? That what you've studied from the scriptures today, you would do, and God would give you an opportunity to tell somebody else, even in a very simple way, about what you've found.

[12:46] Study. Studying the Bible means that our lives are saved from unreality and superficiality. Doing what we study, that is, putting what we read into practice, means that our lives are saved from hypocrisy.

And teaching what God has told us from the Bible means that our lives are saved from selfishness. So Ezra was skilled because in verse 10 he'd set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Now, I know that Ezra had a special job. He was a leader. He was a person you read about in the Bible. He was somebody important. And you might think, well, I'm not an Ezra.

My great-great-great-grandfather wasn't Aaron, Moses' brother. I'm just an ordinary believer. But the great thing, of course, in the New Testament, in the New Covenant, is that we all know the Lord, don't we?

For God has put the knowledge of himself in our hearts. And from Acts chapter 2, God has put out his spirit so that all of us are prophets.

[14:04] that is, those who speak the word of God to others. God raised up Ezra.

He was skilled in Bible knowledge and powerful in ministry. He was powerful not because he had a powerful character, because he was a strategist or a politician.

He was powerful. Verse 8, verse 6 rather, the end of verse 6, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. We find the same phrase in verse 9.

On the first day of the first month, the journey up from Babylon was begun. On the first day of the fifth month, he, that is, Ezra, came to Jerusalem for the gracious hand of his God was upon him.

We find it also at the end of the chapter in Ezra's little prayer. We find Ezra's prayer ends the chapter. Verse 27, Blessed be the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, and who extended to me

steadfast love before the king and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty officers.

[15 : 24] I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me. So, Ezra knows that God is working in him. Ezra can see signs in his life of God's preserving and enabling power.

A few weeks ago I was walking my dog George, who's a stupid poodle, and to show how stupid he is we passed a very big black truck, gleaming duko, with two big black dogs tied on the tray at the back.

They looked evil, they looked mean and nasty. What does my dog George do, an elderly arthritic poodle at the age of 11? Leaps towards the truck, trying to get up to them, you see, and attack them.

Stupid dog. They're fortunately tied with several chains to the truck, so that's okay. But I, thinking to rescue my little friend George, lean forward to pull George back and stop him wrecking the duko, because I imagine the kind of person who owns a big black gleaming truck with two big black gleaming dogs is not a person to be trifled with.

And, I've actually got the shirt on tonight just to show you. One of the dogs went like that with his mouth and went through the shirt and through the singlet and missed my flesh.

[16 : 41] Isn't that extraordinary? Amazing. I hadn't thought the dogs would love it, because they're broadly dogs to me, it doesn't worry me, but wow, like that. A few days later I was using a chainsaw.

It's a great thing, a chainsaw. You can cause lots of trouble with a chainsaw. And I'm not always very good on the safety things about chainsaw. Anyway, that's not how I lost the hair, that was another thing.

Anyway, I was sort of chaining a saw, sawing a chain, and it slipped, needless to say, and the chainsaw went through my sock, through my trousers, through my other sock and missed my flesh. Wow, somebody's looking after me today. Isn't that right? And I've been very encouraged reading Ezra and Nehemiah this year, because again and again we find reference to this gracious hand of God.

Now, I think it would be a very good exercise for you to spend a few moments now thinking about how you've seen the gracious hand of God in your life. How God's protected you from your own stupidity, or from a big black dog, or how God's shown you something recently.

[17 : 54] Say, yes, well actually, now I think about it, God must have done that. God's gracious hand is upon me. Something he's shown you, something he's done for you, something he's taught you. A way in which he's used you, a prayer that you've prayed and he's answered it because God's gracious hand was upon you and his ear was open to your prayer.

Ezra knew his Bible and God's hand was upon him.

I can imagine the debate between two imaginary people. Let's call them Eric Evangelical and Chris Charismatic. Eric Evangelical says, in our church we know the Bible.

Chris Charismatic says, in our church we have the power of God. I want to say to Eric Evangelical, you may have the Bible, do you know the power of God?

I want to say to Chris Charismatic, you may have the power of God, do you know the Bible? I want to say Jesus puts the power of God and the Bible together when he's talking to the Sadducees in Matthew chapter 22.

[19 : 25] You might remember they ask him a question about the resurrection, about this poor woman who has seven husbands, seven brothers and they ask the question when everybody's dead then whose wife will she be because she's had the seven brothers in succession as her husband.

Jesus gives a brilliant reply. He says, you're wrong, which is always helpful and then he says, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. Isn't that interesting?

Jesus puts together there, he says, you're wrong because you don't know the Bible and you're wrong because you don't know the power of God. You're wrong, you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

we should be leaders who know our Bibles and know the power of God and we should pray for our church leaders that they will know the Bible and know the power of God.

for we find this same theme in the New Testament don't we? Paul wants Timothy for example to guard the good treasure of the gospel and what you've heard me say before many witnesses and trust to faithful people.

[20 : 42] Present yourself to God a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed rightly handing the word of truth. He tells Timothy to convince, rebuke and encourage with patience and careful instruction.

He wants Timothy to know the truth. He wants Timothy to know the scriptures which are able to make him wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and he wants him to be formed and made useful for every good work by the Bible.

A Bible-less minister is a waste of space. But if Paul wants Timothy to know his Bible and be formed by it he also wants him to know the power of God.

Fan into flame the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of my hands. A spirit of power and love and self-control stability self-discipline.

Paul wants Timothy to be a person of the Bible and a person of power God's power to make him useful for ministry. When God's people are in a mess God provides the solution for God is a rescuing God.

[21 : 59] When God's people are in a mess God raises up the leaders they need and the leaders they need are skilled in the scriptures and powerful in ministry.

the Bible you see is a book about God but it's also a book about us. It's a book in which we can read about God and also a book in which we can see ourselves read about ourselves.

We can see ourselves as those Jews in Babylon about to leave with Ezra to return to Jerusalem. What kind of people will we be when we get back to Jerusalem?

Will any of the buildings be still standing or will we recognise any of that from the stories that our ancestors have told us about Jerusalem? What kind of people will we be?

Well God has a very definite idea about what kind of people he wants his people to be. He wants them to be formed by the scriptures and formed by his power to know his truth and to know his power in their lives.

[23 : 08] For to know God's truth without knowing God's power is to have the right ideas and the wrong life. And to know God's power without God's truth is to be dangerous to ourselves and to others.

For every problem God has a perfect beautiful effective and lasting solution. and the solution that God has for his people in Ezra's day is to send them give them the great gift of Ezra skilled in the law of Moses and one on whom God's hand rests for blessing and for effective ministry.

Praise God. God, let's pray. God, our world is in a mess in many places, that's obvious, and our church in many places is in a mess and needs encouragement.

Please raise up godly men and women who know the Bible and know your power to provide leadership for your people. And please provide in every congregation and every church all around this globe men and women and children who know the scriptures and who know your power that the name of Jesus Christ might be known in the churches and that the name of Jesus Christ may be known in the world.

We ask this in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Amen.