

God's Hand Upon Us

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning.

As many of you know, I'm a huge fan of Les Miserables, the novel by Victor Hugo, and even more so, the musical.

The novel's great. It's a long slog, though. But in the musical, one of the beautiful characters in the story is that of Eponine.

Eponine is the woman who grew up in a terribly broken home. Who then, in the second act, you find her again on the street.

She's living with her parents, who are her father's basically become a thug, who is seeking to rob people. But she has met the dashing young Marius, the student, the idealist, the dreamer, the one who hopes that the world can be a better place.

[1 : 19] And she has, in her own heart and mind, attached herself to him and put her dreams in being with him and living in the world that he imagines.

And in a beautiful song, On My Own, she confesses how much she's invested herself into that dream, and yet how much she also knows that it's not really real.

That she had hopes that her life would be going in a great direction. But she lives with doubt. She walks along the river, says she dreams that the lights are these beautiful symbols of love and relationship and being with him.

But later in the song, she says, And in the morning, the river is just a river. Do you ever wonder if that's true in your life?

If there are dreams that you have, but they're not real? That nothing's going to happen? You face this, especially when you go through times of transition.

[2 : 38] Typically, you move to a new place. And you wonder, what am I here for? What am I doing here? It comes when we face times of disappointment.

We get laid off of work. We don't get the thing that we had hoped for in our lives. And of course, it faces us in times of real tragedy.

When we face loss that dramatically changes the landscape of our lives. And I think that there's a spiritual question in the middle of it.

Which is, is God really in this life with us? Or are we, like Eponine, on our own? Is God's power, is God's presence, is the reality of God with us or not?

And I think that as we continue in our reading of the book of Ezra this morning, that we will see an answer to this question.

[3 : 41] Or at least we'll get a view into how we might answer that question as we look at it. If you want to look with me in Ezra, we're in Ezra chapter 8.

I need someone to tell me what page it is. 367. So if you're using the Pew Bible, 367. Ezra chapter 8 is where we're going to be this morning.

We are not going to start by reading the whole passage like I usually do. Because I'm going to spare you a genealogy. So we're actually going to read it as we go through it. And we'll read it along the way.

But if you remember, if you haven't been here, if you're visiting, remember that in the book of Ezra, the big picture of this book is that God is rebuilding His people after sending them off into exile in the discipline of judgment.

The nation of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and been scattered. The temple in Jerusalem had been razed to the ground. The city walls had been broken.

[4 : 46] And now, 70 years later, God is bringing His people back and rebuilding His people. And as He's rebuilding them, what we saw in chapters 1 through 6, is God is rebuilding them by

rebuilding the temple and reestablishing their worship the way He had intended for the Old Testament nation of Israel to worship Him in Jerusalem with an altar and with a temple.

And that's what we see in chapters 1 through 6. Chapters 7 through 10 now, the end of the book of Ezra is going to be the establishment of His people and some of their spiritual characteristics.

We saw last week the establishment of God's Word. And we'll see next week the establishment of God's people in holiness. And this week we're going to look at how God establishes His people in their faith that God is truly with them.

If you have your Bibles open, you can look with me at what I see as a key phrase. And it's actually both in chapters 7 and 8.

And what we're actually seeing is chapter 7 is a decree of the king of Persia, Artaxerxes, saying, we're going to send you, Ezra, with a group of people to go back and take the next step in really reestablishing the kingdom.

[6:07] And chapter 7 is mostly about this decree and how he's putting his hand on Ezra to say, you're going to go and bring the Word of God and establish your people under the Word of God.

Chapter 8 is the story of this actually happening. But throughout this all, there is this phrase. Look with me in chapter 7, verse 6. Ezra went up from Babylonia.

He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. And the king granted him all that he asked for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.

The end of verse 9 of chapter 7. For the good hand of his God was on him. If you skip to the end of chapter 7, you see it again.

I took courage for the hand of the Lord my God was on me. And again, we see this through the narrative in chapter 8, repeated three times in verses 18, 22, and 31, that the hand of the Lord was on Ezra.

[7:17] Now, what does this mean? It's obviously an image. It's a hand. What is this hand doing? This hand is holding. This hand is providing. This hand is protecting.

It is one of controlling even, right? In the Bible more broadly, to be given over into the hands of your enemy is a terrible thing because they're now in control of you.

But here, what the writer is reminding us about what is going on in this chapter 8 is that the hand of the Lord was with Ezra and with his people as he was going.

Provision, protection, holding on to and not letting go. What we see in this chapter is that when God's hand is with his people, it evokes faithful courage in them to take the initiative and it is proven by God's faithful provision.

So we're going to see those two aspects of faithful initiative and God's provision throughout two problems that emerge in the story. In verses 1 through 20, the problem is the people.

[8:38] What are the people that are going to go with Ezra? And then in verses 21 through 36, it's going to be the journey itself and the protection on the journey. And how is that going to happen?

So these are the two things we're going to look through and we're just going to talk through it. What we see in verses 20, 1 through 20, is that God's hand in providing, we see God's hand providing for the, providing the right people to accomplish his purposes.

So remember, we've seen the story. The king of Persia has said, Ezra, you may now go, collect people. And so in verse 8, in chapter 8, verse 1, you see, now Ezra is gathering people.

There's been some sort of summons or call that's gone out and these people have responded. And in verses 2 through 14, we have a long list of people and I'm not going to read their names.

But here's the really cool things about them. One is that it's listed by, starts with the priests. The first two people in verse 2, the sons of Phinehas and the sons of Ithamar, those are in the line of the priesthood.

[9:46] So at the very beginning, as they're returning, there's a reminder, God is providing people to continue the worship in the temple that has already begun that we saw established in chapters 1 through 6.

So God is doing that. But then we see 12 tribes, basically 12 families. If you break it down there, there's a list of 12 different people. And what is going on there? Well, interestingly, if you take these names and you map them back onto the list, in chapter 2, the people who went with Joshua and Zerubbabel in the first migration, these people are of the same families.

It seems that, particularly in the way that Ezra's recording this, God raised up people from 12 families, not necessarily from the 12 tribes, but from 12 families to continue to really spearhead this

and to be the centerpiece of it.

And it's possible that there are only 12 families listed because that's a picture of completeness, indicating the wholeness that Israel was returning to its land and returning to its people.

As the story goes on, what you realize, and we'll read this in just a second, as the story goes on, you realize they get out a few days and they stop and they kind of take stock.

[11:10] I don't know if you, when I did campus ministry, when we had a big trip that was going down to Panama City Beach to do a spring break missions project, we often didn't know who was on the bus until the first stop that we had.

Then we finally figured out who was actually on the bus and who we were responsible for for the rest of the trip. This is what happened to Ezra. They got out of town, stopped at this place along the river, and then they said, okay, who's here?

And a problem arose because of all the people who had responded, all those families, there was not a single Levite among them.

Now, it's not clear why that is. The Levites would have typically taken up about one-twelfth of the people of Israel because that's kind of how it works. And it's possible that there were fewer Levites because there were just fewer in number.

It's not clear. It's also possible. One commentator suggested that the Levites weren't really keen to go back to Israel. In the exile, they had become normal people.

[12:19] But when they went back to Israel, God would ask them to play the special role of serving in the temple. They had a highly regimented and a highly ritualized life.

It would be like you and your family saying, hey, thanks for living your life, but we're going to relocate you back to your hometown, and it's time to join the monastery.

You don't get to do your job anymore. You now have a new job because that's what the Levites did. And it's possible the Levites didn't show up because they were thinking life in exile might have been pretty sweet.

And maybe they weren't so excited. This is speculation. But whatever the problem was, it was real. And Ezra thought, what am I going to do? So read with me now, starting in verse 15.

We'll pick up the narrative and read the text. I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camp three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi.

[13:29] And then I sent for Eleazar, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jerib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshulam, leading men, and for Joerib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, and sent them to Ido, the leading man at the place, Kasipiah, telling them what to say to Ido and his brothers and the temple servants at the place, Kasipiah, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God.

And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Molly, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely, Sherabiah, with his sons and kinsmen, also, Hashabiah, and with him, Jeshiah, and the sons of Merari, who, with his kinsmen, and their sons, twenty, besides, two hundred and twenty of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites.

These were all mentioned by name. Okay. We didn't get to avoid all the names, did we? But here we go. What happened? Ezra looked at this problem and he said, this is not good.

As we go back and as we continue to build the people, we need Levites. We need to have those who are specially tasked by God to serve in the temple. And so he delegated, he chose twelve men and he sent them as a delegation to a place that historically has, we have no corroboration or understanding of what this place was, except that it seems that it was a place where probably there was a bunch of Levites.

or some contact with the tribe of Levi. So he sent this delegation of twelve leading men plus two others who were particularly interpreters of the law.

[15:21] That might be a way to describe men of insight would also be those who particularly knew the law. And he sent them and asked for them to come. Send men, ministers of the house of Levi, the house of God.

Send us provision. Now look, these men already hadn't showed up. They already hadn't responded to the call. It would have been very easy to think, hey, they knew the call.

They're not coming. Why are we even asking? But Ezra believed that the hand of the Lord was on him. You see that in verse 18.

By the good hand of our God on us, they brought us response. He took a step of faith to say, I can't make anyone go, but I'm going to take a special step.

I'm going to step out in faith and say, will you come with us to serve in the house of God? And as he was doing that, he asked the Lord to provide. And the Lord did.

[16:30] Ezra was intentional. He was thoughtful. But he was also dependent. And God showed up and responded. And as these men, Sherebiah and his sons and Hashabiah and others, 38 Levites and 220 temple servants were provided to go with the people and to serve in the house of God.

What a great thing. God provided the people. Ezra couldn't do this. Ezra had the decree from the king, go and take anyone who wants to go.

But Ezra couldn't make anyone go. And yet God raised up these people to repopulate the place that God had intended for his people to dwell and to continue the worship in the temple that God had rebuilt in Jerusalem.

So what do we think about this today? Well, in the church we don't need Levites anymore.

Thankfully.

We don't have a temple. We don't have an altar. The Old Testament system was meant to point us not to the way that the church now should worship but to point us to Christ and all that he had done has done for us.

[17:51] All that he pointed ahead to what he would do and now for us we know what he has done so that we might truly be the people of God and so that we might truly worship him.

And yet God is still raising up the people to do the work that he wants to do among us. Is he not? This is what Paul refers to in Ephesians or in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 where he says the church is the body of Christ the relationship the group of people who are in Christ and every single one of them God has raised up not simply to be a member but to be an active participant in the body of Christ that each person has a particular role that God has designed for them to play in his church. And some may have greater honor and prestige and some may be more behind the scenes and less visible but everyone has one. Have you found yours?

And are you being faithful to respond? We also see that in Ephesians chapter 4 God raises up men and women in leadership roles particularly who may have these abilities apostles prophets pastors and teachers particular gifting to build the church so that we may all do the work of the ministry.

As I was praying and just thinking about this passage I just want to say how thankful I am for the elders that I get to serve with for the deacons that we get to work together with and even more broadly than that for the godly people that he has raised up in this church to do the work of ministry and to train others.

[19:58] What a privilege it is to be in this with you and to see God continue to do this. I pray that we might be thankful to God for his provision.

I pray that we might be active in faithfully playing the role that he has called us each one to play. And you know finally I pray that we'll be active in asking God to continue to provide that we would be a church that prays hard that prays consistently that prays dependently that God would continue to provide for this church the people to do what he wants to do in us and among us and through us. So God's hand has raised up the people to do what he wants to do. We see in the rest of the story that God's hand protects them while they're on their journey.

Look with me at verses 21 and following in chapter 8. Then I and that I is Ezra then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves our children and all our goods for I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way since we had told the king the hand of our God is for good on all who seek him and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.

So we fasted and implored our God for this and he listened to our entreaty. So the second problem having now provided the Levites in a record time by the way it takes a total of about 12 days for them to get out of town realize their problem send this delegation and have people can you imagine that call people just picked up their lives and said sure we'll move to a place we've never been and live our lives there but they did.

[22 : 16] So anyway so God provides his people and now they're about to embark and they realize okay this is a large group of people probably thousands of people and they're carrying a lot of stuff.

If you look at the story if you look back at chapter 7 and then if you look in the next section chapter 8 verses 24 and following I'm not going to read all the details but goodness gracious the king of Persia was saying as I'm sending you I'm going to send you with a lot of supplies basically a lot of money and a lot of a lot of valuable things for you to use in the service in the temple.

Now historically one of the interesting things we know is that Artaxerxes was ruling over the Persian Empire at this time when it stretched all the way from Greece to modern day India.

So it was Greece to modern day India. There we go. And it was a huge empire and we know that Artaxerxes had just gone through a time where there had been multiple rebellions against him and it's very possible that God in overseeing all of this had moved Artaxerxes to want to reestablish or strengthen his ties with a strong ally in the middle of particularly the Greece and Egypt part where they were actually where the rebellions were happening.

And so this may have been the motivation behind some of the support that Artaxerxes was giving and yet God using the global movements of socio-political power to provide for his people and so he was sending them with all this stuff so that they might be well established and flourish in Jerusalem.

[24 : 16] but they didn't want to take soldiers with them. Did you see how interesting it was?

Verse 22 for I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen and ashamed is an interesting word. I'm not sure if English has the right connotations for what's here because do you see what he did?

He went to the king and he said listen we serve a God who is able to protect his own that those who God has favor with that God is a powerful force and he might have said it to say hey we're going to be a good ally to you if you honor our God we're going to be a good ally to you.

However he said it he said very strongly we believe in a God who is going to take care of us who will protect us against our enemies and in light of that testimony he didn't feel like he could then say hey our God can protect us and oh by the way can you send us some soldiers to protect us while we go?

He said no I think we need to step out in faith and so he called the people to fast and to pray one side note this is not the way we must always respond to such situations we'll find out in just a few chapters in the beginning of Nehemiah when Nehemiah brings another delegation back he has an escort from the king of Persia there might be good reasons for that Nehemiah's mission is a little more political Ezra's is a little more religious but I want you to see that it's not a given that this was the only way to act in faith but it was very clear for Ezra this is the way that we ought to do it and so he stepped down in faith and he called the people to fast and pray that they would recognize their dependence on the Lord that they would reaffirm their allegiance to the Lord after remember part of the reason for the exile was that rather than trusting in the God who had called them and established them in Israel to protect them they ran after all sorts of political alliances to try to save themselves and so Ezra was stepping in saying no we are going to trust God so he called the people to this act of consecration to this act of dependence and this bold ask

[26 : 57] God will you keep us safe and in verses 24 through 34 we see basically they arrived they made it God protected them all the way through Ezra took a big step by not asking for that protection and by calling the people to fast and pray God showed up and delivered his people to Israel with all the stuff and those Levites that had been raised up they were the caretakers of the riches and they had to count it at the beginning and then count it at the end to make sure all of it was there that not only was it not taken by bandits and thieves but it wasn't taken by people internally God brought them through and God brought this second wave then of people to Israel to establish his people again and to rebuild them

I think the question you know as I think about the writer of this why was this being written down it was being written down so that the future generations of Israelites would hear the words the hand of the Lord was with us and God was faithful and because God was faithful we took great steps of faith to honor him and to pursue him and to be his people and to be to do what he called us to do and we saw him provide and the question that I think this chapter puts before us today is do we believe that God will be the same for us are we willing to take bold risky moves of faith with the spirit of Jonathan and his armor bearer let's go up and maybe the Lord will give them into our hands we don't have to have this arrogant faith that says we know what

God is going to do and he we don't have to be arrogant in it but the question is are we willing to be faithful even when it seems risky even when it seems unsafe it's very easy to both be impetuous and assuming on God but it's also very easy for us to shrink back in self dependence and in fear and you know one of the things that's striking in this is that when they get there in verses 35 and 36 what do they do they worship God they bring the offerings they bring the sacrifices they carry out some other things they distribute some of the notices to the local believers but they came and they worship God and I think they worshiped

God because they had trusted God and I know Greg did this just a few weeks ago so I'm not going to recount the whole story of this church but this church has seen seasons of real real faith stepping out beyond what would be humanly reasonable whether it be a pastor moving from England sight unseen to help a struggling small group of people whether it be buying a large building that was beyond the church's budget to buy and seeing it paid off in five years whether it be stepping into a co-pastorate which everyone has said won't work and us working together this church has taken risky steps at times and it's been beautiful to see

God's hands when people ask me about this church and what have you done to make it so successful I usually just shrug my shoulders and say you know I just feel like God is going ahead of us and we're just trying not to mess it up because I've seen God provide and I've seen God's hand and we do need to continue to be humble to be dependent and we need to continue to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and what God has called us to that we would continue to make the good news about Jesus central gospel not only what we do here as we gather and as we interact with one another but as we live in this city that we would continue to make the gospel known do you believe that God's hand is on us and are you acting in faith as a result and let me be really clear on this because I can do this today especially well this does not mean that I'm asking you for more money for our capital campaign if that's in your brain just please remove that that is not what I'm saying we just heard a report that

[32 : 43] Sarah gave about how God has provided for us in an amazing way to move ahead and praise the Lord for that right what looked honestly to me two weeks ago like I don't know if we're gonna make it I don't know if this is really gonna work and God just said oh no I am here with you what we as the elders have prayed from the very beginning as we've thought about this building campaign and in our hopes that by doing it it might establish a base of ministry for 50 100 200 years in this city but that most of all that our congregation would see the see the hear the call to be taking up the mission of our church in this city and around the world that we would be saying God how do you want to use me what's my place in this how do you want me to step out in faith to get involved in what

God is doing in Trinity and through Trinity in this world how does God want me to reach out to one another and getting involved in the ministry to one another within the church how does God want me to take a step of faith and talk to my co-worker my neighbor about Jesus how does God want me to step out in faith by being more regular in praying and fasting and asking God to bless and continue to multiply the ministries of this church not that Trinity would be seen to be great but that Jesus would be great among us for you know friends this is the good news of the gospel and this is how we know that God's hand is with us as his children it is because God himself has come to be with us in the person of Jesus and this is our great confidence and you know what we may build a building and it might fall down tomorrow and think okay well that wasn't what

God was with us in but God is always with his people because he has come in Jesus he said that he will build his church on the rock of Jesus Christ that he will build his church on the proclamation of what he has done in Jesus that Jesus by his life and death and resurrection has established a new people by taking the pain and the penalty of our sin upon himself by rising from the dead to defeat sin and death he is able to establish a new people who will be his forever and this Jesus now calls us to be those who live with great faith that he who is able to save us from our sin will he not be able to deliver us from all things that he who did not spare his son but gave him for us all will things all the things that he wants so that we might glorify him all the things that he wants so that we might worship him and be to the praise of his name let's pray

Lord thank you for this encouragement this reminder of how you have been faithful to your people in the past Lord thank you for the ways that we have seen your faithfulness in our lives God I pray this morning that you would Lord help us to be women and men of faith who believe and trust that you are with us that we are not on our own in this but that you are with us and that because you are with

us we can step out in faith and trust you we pray these things in Jesus name Amen let's stand and
sing together let's stand and sing together round put gé Jegja■■■ 10 10ene Marshall 1annon 1 2 3
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