

Under God's Good Hand

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part X

Ezra 7-8

Introduction

One phrase that appears in Ezra, chapter 7, will also appear in some fashion in Ezra, chapter 8. I will tell you that, when God uses a phrase over and over again in a brief space of scripture, He is trying to get our attention. I encourage you to take your highlighter, or pencil, and underline this phrase that occurs over and over again. It occurs six times in all – nearly one time for every ten verses.

The first time is in chapter 7, verse 6b.

. . . because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

It appears again in verse 9b.

. . . because the good hand of his God was upon him.

The last verse of chapter 7, verse 28b, also has the phrase.

. . . Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me.

By the way, it is in this paragraph that Ezra begins to refer to himself in the first person. He will continue to do so for the rest of the book. That is one of the ways we know who the author of this book is.

Then, notice chapter 8, verse 18a.

And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight . . .

Also look at verse 22.

. . . The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him . . .

This, literally, means that the hand of God is upon everyone who seeks Him for the purpose of doing good.

It is seen one more time at the end of chapter 8, in verse 31b.

. . . the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy . . .

Notice the contrast here in Ezra's memoirs – the hand of the enemy was unsuccessful in stopping us, while the hand of God was successful in leading us.

Now when the Bible refers to God with physical features, or what we call anthropomorphism, we know, of course, that God, Who is spirit, does not have hands with five fingers on each hand. It is not until the incarnation that God the Son takes on human form. Before then, He, like God the Father and God the Spirit, are invisible persons, yet one God.

So, when Ezra refers to the hand of God, he is referring to, namely, God's strength; God's manipulation of events and circumstances; God's overarching control of circumstances; God's sovereignty over rulers.

In fact, what I want to do is expound on the six uses of God's hand. These uses lead us to the same conclusion as Ezra, and it was this – God is Good.

The Good Hand of God

In the sovereignty of . . .

1. First, the goodness of God was seen, by Ezra and the people, in His sovereignty over rulers.

That is brought out at least two different times – in chapter 7, verses 6 and 28.

Let us go back to verse 6.

This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because . . .

. . . Ezra was really a sharp man,

. . . because Ezra was well respected in the kingdom,

. . . because Ezra really did a sales job on Artaxerxes, King of Persia, and Artaxerxes just could not refuse!

No. The last part of the verse delivers the punch line. The king granted him all he requested because,

. . . the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

Period.

Notice, in verses 27 through 28 of chapter 7,

Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, and has extended loving kindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

No wonder Ezra was encouraged – chapter 7 preserves for us the king's letter of approval. Look at verse 20.

And the rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.

Talk about a blank check, this is nothing less than miraculous!

Imagine our governor saying, "Listen, forget the pledge campaign. Whatever you need, you have the financial assets of the state at your disposal."

That is like giving the checkbook to your wife, or daughter, and saying, "Go to the mall and get everything you would like to have."

That would be a miracle too.

Well, the king is telling Ezra, "Whatever you need, you have the financial assets of the kingdom of Persia at your disposal."

Oh, and by the way, when it does come to our pledge campaign, God has already given us all the money we need for the project – now we just have to give it back to Him. And, do not ever forget, that giving money away, even for the believer, is the miraculous work of God that overrides our human nature.

Now, was Artaxerxes becoming sympathetic toward the Jews? Was he experiencing a moment of religious humility? No. The letter begins, in verse 12, with,

Artaxerxes, king of kings . . .

There was no humility here. Why has this king of kings acted with so much generosity and support for the work of Ezra? Because the King of Kings is sovereign over the circumstances of life.

. . . the hand of the Lord [Ezra's] God was upon him.

In the initiation of . . .

2. Secondly, Ezra recognizes the good hand of God, not only over the decrees and decisions of rulers, but in the very initiation of God's work through believers

Notice chapter 7, verse 9.

For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.

This statement sort of summarizes Ezra's feelings and convictions about the entire process. The good hand of God is seen in the goodness worked in and through His willing servants.

Ezra never said, or even implied, "I made it all the way from Babylon to Jerusalem because of my faith."

Instead, he said, "It was because of the goodness of God."

Ezra never took any of the credit for the work God initiated through him. It was God, alone, deserving of the praise.

Have you ever wondered why we will one day, at the bema seat, take our rewards and give them back to Christ? Because the bema seat is simply the place where God rewards His own works. He wills it, He initiates, He performs it through us, and He blesses it. The bema seat will be the place where His works are evidenced in and through the lives of believers. It is no wonder that we will respond by giving our rewards back to Him.

In the recruiting of . . .

3. There is more, thirdly, the good hand of God was responsible for the recruiting of additional workers.

In chapter 8, verse 15, Ezra assembles the Jews at the river where they camped for three days. During those three days, Ezra is not only cataloging the vessels to be used in the temple, he is taking note of the people who will be serving.

He discovers that Levites had not volunteered to go back. Now, while the Law said nothing about this particular situation, Ezra knew what God had prescribed in Numbers, chapters 1, 3, and 4 – the Levites handled the sacred objects. So, Ezra forms a party of men to go and recruit servants for the work of God.

I can tell you that one of the critical needs in any ministry at any time, is the need for volunteers. In this ministry, three hundred volunteers are serving every month.

It is a crying need. The question is, to whom do we cry? Jesus Christ knew the great need the church would have for workers and volunteers. He gave the solution to His disciples when He said, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 9, verses 37 through 38,

. . . The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.

Imagine that, beg the Lord; pray to the Lord for helpers.

And, would you notice what God did? Look at verse 18. “And according to the good recruiting methods of the team?” No.

And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men

Eighteen fresh volunteers from the tribe of Levi to oversee the sacred vessels of God’s temple.

Thank God for his provision of help, at just the right time.

In the promise of . . .

Now I want you to notice a very transparent notation from the quill of Ezra, in verses 21 through 22.

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 us, our little ones, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.”

4. The phrase is used once again here. The good hand of God, fourthly, was observed in His promise of protection over evil doers.

I love Ezra’s openness, “I told the King that God was able to keep us safe. Now, how could I ask for an escort from the king?!”

“But, man, was I scared.”

Courage is not the absence of fear – it is faithfulness to God in the face of fear.

Now, if you calculated the amount of gold and silver Ezra was taking to Jerusalem, you might better appreciate why he fully expected raiding bandits and thieves to swoop down upon them. They are carrying, in today’s economy, around five million dollars worth of gold and silver. And, without any armed guards. They might as well carry a sign that said, “Over here – free money.”

Ezra and his company were sitting ducks. But, Ezra just could not bring himself to ask for the king’s help, because he had already said THE King would help them.

Do you understand what Ezra’s priorities were in this? Ezra was more afraid of losing his testimony than he was in losing his life. His back was against the wall. He would either cave in and tell the king, “Well, okay, I need some protection after all.” Or, he would take his convictions with him – to the grave, if necessary.

Go back to verse 21 and feel his concern.

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 us, our little ones, and all our possessions.

In the completion of . . .

5. Now notice, fifthly, the good hand of God was seen in the completion of the journey.

Look at verses 31 through 32.

Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way. Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.

They made it. I can just hear the cheering crowds as Ezra and his band of followers made their way up to the temple. Verses 33 and 34 record their deposit of all the gold and silver into the temple vaults.

What more could they do than celebrate through offerings unto God, as verses 35 and 36 tell us. And, how had they made it? In case anyone dared to miss it, in verse 31,

. . . the hand of our God was over us . . .

Over us, around us, underneath us, in front and behind us, and upon us – by the goodness of God, they made it!

I happen to believe that I will spend a good deal of time at the outset of eternity jumping up and down for joy and saying things like, “I can’t believe I’m actually here. I really made it. Wow!”

You might say, “Now that doesn’t sound very spiritual. I would have expected more out of you.”

Well, let me illustrate it this way. Have you ever wanted to go somewhere and, when you finally arrived, you say to your friend, your wife, your husband, “I can’t believe we’re actually here!”?

I said that to my wife, when we cashed in our special ten year anniversary gift from the church to go anywhere in the world. My wife went to the library and checked out books on Switzerland. We looked at pictures. We looked at maps. We talked to people who had been there before. We emailed friends in Europe with questions. Finally, there we were, in Switzerland – Interlachen to be exact. It is a beautiful village in a lush valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Sitting at a sidewalk café, sipping coffee, which, interpreted, means ten gallons of caffeine compressed into one little cup, we said to each other several times, “Can you believe we’re actually here?”

Every graduate will feel that way, standing in line to receive their diploma. They made it. Some of them do not deserve to be there and it is a miracle they are in that line, while others have studied hard. But, they all feel somewhat the same, “I can’t believe I’m here.”

You get to the end of the journey, some milestone in your spiritual life, ultimately, the new heaven and the new earth, and you will say, “We made it! Oh, the good hand of God was upon us.”

Application

Let me give a couple of applications.

The goodness of God may . . .

1. The goodness of God may, at times, be a mystery.

When we say that God is good, we mean that He cannot be improved upon. God will never have to learn to be good – He is good. And anything that God is, He is infinitely.

God is infinitely good. He will never have to work on His personality, improve His character, or erase any flaws. God is good.

You might ask, “But haven’t you read the newspapers? Look at all the bad things that are happening to people. If God is good, why do bad things happen?”

That is a sermon in itself, but let me answer that quickly with two statements:

- Bad things happen in the world, not because God is not good, but because the people are bad.

It amazes me how God rarely gets the credit when society is flourishing, but He always gets the blame when things go wrong. “Look what God did. Why didn’t God stop that?”

Well, there are a lot of things that are happening in our world that are not good, but it is not because God is not good, it is because man is not good. God has allowed mankind to act sinfully ever since the fall.

Now this second point is critically important.

- Bad things happen in the world, but for the believer, bad things do not have the last word.

Even when your world is falling apart, the story is not over. The reason for that is that God is steering and shaping it for your ultimate good.

Joseph was sold into slavery. When reunited with his brothers, he said, in Genesis, chapter 50, verse 20,

. . . you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good . . .

Frankly, one of the tragedies of not belonging to God as his child is, that the bad things of this world do have the last word. But, for the believer, God, Who is good, can take that which is bad and, out of it, shape that which is eternally good. A good God promised that in Romans, chapter 8.

The goodness of God will . . .

2. So, while the goodness of God may, at times, be a mystery, for the believer, the goodness of God will, at all times, be a model.

Have you ever thought about the fact that you are to be good, to do good, to be thought of as a good person, not so you will be accepted by God, but so that you will remind people of the God to whom you claim to belong?

Let me read several scriptures on this:

Galatians, chapter 6, verse 10,

So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 7 through 8,

With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord . . .

Colossians, chapter 1, verse 10,

So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work . . .

If you want to please God and, even more, if you want to be like God, then be good – be a good employee, be a good boss, be a good father or mother, be a good student, be a good mechanic, be a good doctor – simply be a good person to be around. It reflects the attribute of your infinitely good God.

Let me give you two closing exercises:

- Reflect on the goodness of God – as one of His attributes; as the operative word in His actions. God is good!
- Remember to say, “Thank you!”

You have probably taught your children to say, “thank you,” right? Did you teach them to say thank you once a week; once a month; whenever they felt like it? No, you are teaching them to say, “thank you,” as a way of life.

May we say the same. We also happen to live under the good hand of God.