

## The Hand of Our God Is Good - Week 2

Ezra 7-10

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57 years later, we see Ezra leading the next wave of returning exiles to Jerusalem. But by the time Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, God's people had yet again fallen into sin. What will see is how God used Ezra through the preaching of God's word to lead them to repentance.

Ezra 7 opens with Ezra the priest, and the specifics of his lineage – we know exactly who Ezra was, a real man who was called by God to remind and reach the exilic community what God had already told them in the Law.

<sup>6</sup> This 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.*

<sup>7</sup> And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. <sup>8</sup> And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. <sup>9</sup> For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, *for the good hand of his God was on him.* <sup>10</sup> For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

(Ezr 7:5–10)

- The good hand of his God was on him.
- Ezra - set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, to do it and teach it.

<sup>11</sup> This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: <sup>12</sup> “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now <sup>13</sup> I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. <sup>14</sup> For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand, <sup>15</sup> and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, <sup>16</sup> with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. <sup>17</sup> With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. <sup>18</sup> Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. <sup>19</sup> The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. <sup>20</sup> And

*whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury.*

<sup>21</sup> “And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, <sup>22</sup> up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. <sup>23</sup> Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. <sup>24</sup> We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

<sup>25</sup> “And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. <sup>26</sup> Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.”

#### **Then we see Ezra's response to these decrees from King Artaxerxes:**

<sup>27</sup> *Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, <sup>28</sup> and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.*

*(Ezr 7:11–28)*

- The Lord - The God of our fathers - did this.
- The Lord moved in the king's heart to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem
- The Lord - The God of our fathers - extended to me his steadfast love before the king
- The Lord - The God of our fathers - gave me courage
- The Lord - The God of our fathers - His hand was on me. (7:6, 7:9, 7:28)

**The Hand of our God is good. God's covenant faithfulness will be on display as this story unfolds. The hand of God in history is indeed good. The long arc of time will tell and reveal this.**

Ezra 8 shares the story of the families returning to Jerusalem, in what will be the second wave of return by those in exile; this is about 3000 people. You may remember last week, that Zerubabel led the first wave of exiles, about 49,000 people, some 57 years before this. They were the ones that first built the altar, and completed the temple. Remember the Bible tells one long story, that ultimately points us to Christ.

*“The dedication of the rebuilt temple has all the marks of the community of God’s covenant people. The Word is central (v. 18), and worship happens according to that Word. The sacrifices (v. 17) anticipate the final, perfect sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. The Passover Feast (w. 19-20) celebrates redemption from Egypt, anticipating God’s redemption of his people through the blood of his Son. Included are not only the Jews “who had joined them” to serve and worship the one true God (v. 21): here is a picture of God’s redeemed people drawn from the nations. What an encouragement to see the continuity of God as today the worldwide church worships according to the Scriptures, joyfully exalting Jesus Christ in the sacraments given in remembrance of Him who instituted a new covenant in His blood.”<sup>1</sup>*

Last week, I mentioned that if you read the OT, you will see cycles of obedience and disobedience, where the people of God are walking faithfully, and then they forget God, forget the law, forget God’s faithfulness — and willingly step into rebellion and disobedience. One thing Ezra discovers upon arriving in Jerusalem is a lack of leadership, especially among the Levites – this tribe of Israel was in charge of Temple leadership. So he sends for the Levites. These Levites gather with Ezra at a river called Ahava.

### **Fasting and Prayer for Protection**

*<sup>21</sup> Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.*

*(Ezr 8:21–23)*

### **Ezra is leading the way in humility before God, leading the Levites to fast, pray, and obey.**

He sets 12 priests aside to protect the contents of this freewill offering for the Lord.

*<sup>28</sup> And I said to them, “You are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the Lord, the God of your fathers. <sup>29</sup> Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers’ houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord.”*

*(Ezr 8:28–29)*

### **They arrive back in Jerusalem with all things accounted for...**

*<sup>35</sup> At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. <sup>36</sup>*

*(Ezr 8:35–36)*

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<sup>1</sup> ESV Gospel Transformation Bible study notes

Every time we see the bulls, rams, lambs, and goats being offered – we need to remember that none of these offerings would last. The flow of blood from all these animals – they were a temporary solution. **All the blood and all the burned flesh point us to Jesus – and He alone is the once and for all sacrifice.**

*" And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, (Heb 10:10–12)*

So it seems that things are on track in Jerusalem – Ezra is leading the priests, calling for fasting and prayer, but the story takes a turn for the worse in chapter 9.

### *Ezra Prays About Intermarriage*

*9 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. <sup>2</sup> For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost."<sup>3</sup> As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. <sup>4</sup> Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. <sup>5</sup> And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, <sup>6</sup> saying:*

*"O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, **for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.** <sup>7</sup> From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in **great guilt.** And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. <sup>8</sup> **But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery.** <sup>9</sup> **For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.***

*<sup>10</sup> "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, " which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. <sup>12</sup> Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.'<sup>13</sup> And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that **you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities***

*deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, <sup>4</sup> shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? <sup>15</sup> O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.”*

*(Ezr 9:1–15)*

From our vantage point, we probably don't understand all that is happening – but the Israelites specifically disobey The Lord in this matter – and we see this clear instruction in Exodus 34:11-16 and Deuteronomy 7, telling the Israelites to not marry from the surrounding people groups who worshiped idols.

*<sup>10</sup> Then the Lord said (to Moses)... “I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you. <sup>11</sup> Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. <sup>12</sup> Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. <sup>13</sup> Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. <sup>14</sup> Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*

*<sup>15</sup> “Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. <sup>16</sup> And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same. <sup>17</sup> “Do not make any idols.*

*(Ex 34:10–17) (NIV)*

It's very clear – do not marry people who worship other gods — or they will lead your sons to do the same. DO NOT make any idols. We see the same thing in Deuteronomy 7.

*<sup>3</sup> You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, <sup>4</sup> for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. <sup>5</sup> But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.*

*<sup>6</sup> “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. <sup>7</sup> It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, <sup>8</sup> but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, (Dt 7:3–9)*

To be clear – this is not about ethnic elitism - but about clear instructions from God to Israel. Ezra's burden was the glory and honor of God, whose chosen people had chosen to worship other gods. While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly.<sup>2</sup> And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this."<sup>3</sup> Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law.<sup>4</sup> Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it."<sup>5</sup> Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.

(Ezr 10:1–5)

Even now there is hope. Even now... Ezra says — because he knows that repentance and obedience demonstrate faith and trust in God.

<sup>6</sup> Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.<sup>7</sup> And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem,<sup>8</sup> and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles.

<sup>9</sup> Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain.<sup>10</sup> And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."<sup>12</sup> Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, "It is so; we must do as you have said."

(Ezr 10:6–12)

### What are we to see in this story of Ezra?

Ezra was a priest from the line of Aaron – and much like Moses led the Israelites from captivity and gave them the Law, Ezra now is reminding those returning from exile, about the very same Law given by God. Ezra was respected by King Artaxerxes, and his courageous leadership in Jerusalem helped bring the people back to a place of repentance and obedience to the Lord. The good hand of God was on Ezra.

**Ezra was calling the people to demonstrate trust through obedience.** God used this one man – to lead thousands of people to repentance. Even today, God uses Ezra to point us to Christ, who has redeemed, and paid the penalty for our disobedience.

**Ezra was elevating God's Word above culture and behavior.** Ezra - set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, to do it and teach it. History shows that knowing the Law was never enough to help people keep God's law. Simply put, they could not and we cannot. We need Jesus. .

As followers of Christ, we live according to the Spirit, who points us to Christ and God's Word. Romans 8 says this, <sup>3</sup>"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup>in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup>For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit."

(Ro 8:3-5)

**Are you living according to the Spirit?** Be warned – you can still resist the Holy Spirit, grieve the Holy Spirit, lie to the Holy Spirit — and your emotions DO NOT equate to the Holy Spirit in your life. The Holy Spirit will point you to Christ, prompt you to obey, convict you of sin, remind you of truth from God's Word, and always will glorify Jesus. The Holy Spirit will NEVER lead you to do something contrary to God's Word. The Holy Spirit will NEVER lead you to sin.

I cannot say this more clearly – you are not your own highest authority. If you profess faith in Christ – if you say that you are a Christian, then **Jesus is your highest authority**. But let me ask the Christians in the room... is He?

In your heart, do you love Him? Do you choose to seek Him? Can you say you trust Him? Do you tremble at His Word? Just as Ezra said... **EVEN NOW THERE IS HOPE**. Repentance and obedience demonstrates faith and trust in Jesus. **Do you trust Jesus?**

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

(Mt 5:3-9)

### What does Jesus say about lust?

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Mt 5:27–28)

### What does Jesus say about people you don’t like or don’t like you?

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Mt 5:43–44)

### What does Jesus say about forgiveness?

<sup>44</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>45</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Mt 6:14–15)

### What does Jesus say about money?

<sup>24</sup> “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Mt 6:24)

### What does Jesus say about worry?

<sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. <sup>34</sup> “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Mt 6:33–34)

Jesus says much more – about many things – and my point today is **EVEN NOW, THERE IS HOPE FOR YOU**. But your hope is not in your performance or prominence, your hope is not in what other people think of you or how successful you are. Your hope cannot be in future circumstances.

**Your hope is in Jesus – He alone is worthy of your hope because He alone has paid the price for ALL of your disobedience. The way you demonstrate your trust in Jesus – is through obedience.**

Disobedience says Jesus I don’t trust You.

Disobedience says Jesus I don’t trust your words.

Disobedience says Jesus I don’t trust your way is better .

Disobedience says Jesus I don’t think You are better.

Disobedience says Jesus You are not my highest authority.

Faith says – Jesus I do trust you. Even now there is hope.

Faith says - Jesus I have sinned against You and repent before You. Even now there is hope.

Faith says - Jesus I do need You and by grace receive the mercy You give me. Even now there is hope.

Faith says - Jesus help me obey, help me believe, help me be faithful. Even now there is hope.

Faith says - Jesus your grace is enough, your love is enough. Even now there is hope.



<sup>5</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— <sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

(Ro 5:1–8)

Even now – we have hope. Our hope in Christ does not put us to shame but reminds us we are loved, and the Holy Spirit has been given to us, that we should walk by the Spirit, and walk in fruitful obedience before God and one another. Jesus is our hope today.