**God’s Good Hand…Again!**

**Ezra 8 (ESV)**

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We’re going to be opening up the Bible to Ezra chapter 8. We are making our way in a study of this amazing book. I’m always excited to study a book that I haven’t preached on. This is the first time that I’ve taught through Ezra by way of a Sunday morning. The Bible is so full. Every time you study, you find more and more really awesome truth that God uses to feed our soul and strengthen us. I trust that your faith has been strengthened through our study and continues to. This series is entitled *Revival: Lighting the Spark* because we’re praying for a personal revival. So I would urge you to join us in praying for your own soul, that you would experience a revival from God, a renewal of the life of God in your soul. And that also you would pray for us as a community, as a family, that together, we would experience a revival and that we would be able to exhort, encourage, and strengthen one another because of this experience that the Lord might grant us, this blessing the Lord might grant us together.

In Ezra 8 I’m going to begin reading with verse 15. The first 14 verses has a whole bunch of names that are really hard to pronounce. But those first 14 verses, we’ll see, are important for good reasons. They’re describing some of the leaders of the people who go with Ezra. So chapter 8 is sort of a retelling of the story we talked about last week in Ezra 7, with some different details. But it’s the same story. Ezra is returning to the land with about 5,000 people from Babylon to Jerusalem. So we want to pick up that story in verse 15. Ezra is still up in Babylon as the story is being retold in chapter 8.

***15*** *I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi.* ***16*** *Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight,* ***17*** *and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God.* ***18*** *And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18;* ***19*** *also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20;* ***20*** *besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name.*

***21*** *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.* ***22*** *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.”* ***23*** *So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.*

***24*** *Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them.* ***25*** *And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered.* ***26*** *I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver, and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold,* ***27*** *20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold.* ***28*** *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.* ***29*** *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.”* ***30*** *So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.*

***31*** *Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.* ***32*** *We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days.* ***33*** *On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Meremoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui.* ***34*** *The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.*

***35*** *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.* ***36*** *They also delivered the king’s commissions to the king’s satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God.*

Last week in Ezra 7 we discussed the phrase “the good hand of the LORD.” The phrase appears 3 times in chapter 7 and it appears three more times in chapter 8. Let’s review those. It’s such a lovely phrase.

**Ezra 7:6** this Ezra went up from Babylonia…and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

**Ezra 7:9** …for the good hand of his God was on him.

**Ezra 7:28** …I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me,

Then as we enter into the story in chapter 8,

***18*** *And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion,*

***22*** *…we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him,*

***31*** *Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.*

What a lovely phrase; the good hand of the LORD. It describes God’s kindness, His disposition toward favor.Think of all the good that we do with our own hands that God has created. With a good hand, we might bring gifts to people that would bring joy to their hearts. With a goodhand, we might prepare food and set it before hungry friends and family. With a good hand, we may serve others by cleaning or fixing or helping. With a good hand, we might protect others from harm. With a good hand, we might console and comfort others when they are in distress. This little phrase touches our hearts because we can all think of ways that people in our lives have used a good hand to bless us. We likely can think also of people that have had a bad hand toward us and how different a good hand is from a bad hand.

When I was in high school, one of my first jobs was working at McDonald’s, the golden arches. I learned much about people and authority and employment and French fries while I was there. I had one boss who had a really good hand toward me and one boss who had a bad hand toward me. The good hand boss, Bob, would often speak words of affirmation over me. He seemed glad when I was on shift with him. He invested in my life by teaching me nearly every part of the McDonald’s business. He asked about my life. Though he was not a believer, he often asked me about Jesus and God. He advocated raises for me. He often spoke to me about going to Hamburger University and investing my life. That actually is a good career. He did that because he wanted me to experience good things in my life. He even encouraged me to ask a nice girl out on a date, thinking she would be a good match for me. To this day, when I think about Bob, I thank God for him. A person can’t have too many good hand people in their life, can we?

The bad hand boss, on the other hand, was sort of a curse upon my soul. I knew that if he were the manager, it would be a rough day. He didn’t affirm any efforts. He didn’t show any personal interest. He was often harsh and critical. One day he told me that I was to go to a McDonald’s at a different location because they needed extra staff, so I gladly went. But then the next day I came back and he accused me of stealing. He said, “I know what you did. You took $50 from their cash register.” I told him that that cash register didn’t have any security like we do here. A lot of people were in the drawer that I was using. He said, “It doesn’t matter. I know what you did.” I told him I had been working there for a year and a half. Has that ever happened at any time in my time there? “No, but I know what you did. Don’t ever do it again!” It was just a word of confrontation. I remember walking away from that conversation just feeling so heavy. Again, it’s the curse of a bad hand upon me.

It’s interesting! Here I am nearly forty years from these men and I still have emotions when I think of them. For the bad hand boss, I kind of have a sadness for him now. I recognize his life had to have been difficult to have such a bad hand. For the good hand boss, I still have thankfulness. In fact later, the good hand boss came to Bethany for a season and I had opportunity to talk to him more about the Gospel. To my knowledge, he never trusted Christ, but he was deeply moved by it. That’s why he would come here.

This morning we open our Bibles to Ezra 8 and we want to talk about the good hand of the Lord. This is such an important theme for us. It is possible for us to miss out on the good hand of the Lord and actually experience a bad hand from a holy God. But none of us need to experience the bad hand. None of us need to forsake Him and commit our way to sin and its destination. Every one of us is offered the opportunity to experience the good hand of the Lord because God is a God who freely gives His favor to every person who humbles themselves before Him and trusts in Him. That’s the theme of these two chapters.

The story here is that God in His holiness disciplined a people who had bent their lives and families away from Him toward idolatry and toward various sins. He used Babylon to do that. Babylon destroys Jerusalem. It destroys the Temple there and deports the people. There they are, underneath the harsh hand of the Lord for seventy years. They are experiencing His disciplining hand. Then seventy years later, when the years are finished for their discipline, God opens the heart of a pagan king to make an edict that any Jewish person who wants to return to the land that God promised them could. 50,000 people go with guys by the name of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. They begin the foundation of the temple and they ultimately build the temple.

Now as we enter into chapters 7 and 8, it’s been nearly sixty years since the temple had been finished and worship in the temple had been reestablished. But the people’s hearts had grown dull. They grew more distant from the Lord and less zealous for Him. So God in His grace sends the people, His people who are living in Jerusalem in Israel, a scribe, a teacher by the name of Ezra. Ezra’s goal is to teach the Word in a way that when the people would hear it and if they would receive it by faith, there would be a revival. So Ezra then gathers up what now is 5,000 people to go from Babylon and take this long, arduous journey these 900 miles to Jerusalem. It’s going to take nearly fourteen weeks. There are going to be a lot of dangers. There are kind of scary moments. But in the course of this trek and the course of the story, what we learn about God first and foremost is that

**God grace abounds**

This is the first truth we want to dig into. God’s grace abounds. We ask the question, why are the Jews in Israel after an invasion that was brought on because of their sin? After a deportation, why now are they back in the land that God promised Abraham centuries earlier to give them? Why? The answer is grace. The grace of God is on display all through this story. The fact of their return indicates that God is saying, “I am not abandoning you. My favor is still upon you. I have a hope for you, a future for you.”

I love reading Jeremiah in correspondence to Ezra for a number of reasons. In Jeremiah, before the disciplining hand of the Lord, God tells about His discipline and that it’s going to come. But even as He tells about His discipline, He tells them also about His continued favor. He is not going to forget any of the promises that He made to them. He’s going to hold onto the everlasting covenant that He made with them. He is a God who is faithful. He is going to keep every promise every time. We see that in abundance throughout this. Jeremiah 32:40-41 just fascinates me because here God is speaking to a people He has not yet disciplined and he tells them that after His discipline, He is going to bring them back into the land. This is what he says

**Jeremiah 32:40** I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them.

I’m not that kind of God. I will discipline for a time, but I am not going to deny the promise that I made to Abraham and to his people and to David. I will not turn away from them.

**Jeremiah 32:40** And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.

So what is there that is going to keep this people from continuing to go back into idolatry? What is going to keep the people from forsaking the Lord? It’s not the people. God says, “I in grace am going to set saving grace upon them so that the fear of me will be in their hearts. This faith, this trust in me will prevail. In the fear of the Lord, they won’t turn away from me. This is their future.” He says

**Jeremiah 32:41** I will rejoice in doing them good,

This is a people who had failed Him over and over again. Yet He says He will rejoice. It brings joy to the heart of God to bring favor upon a sinful people. It’s amazing! Then He says

**Jeremiah 32:41** …and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness,

What’s His heart? Is it a heart of reluctance? Is it a heart that says, “Well, I guess I’m going to have to plant them because I promised Abraham a long time ago”? No, He says

**Jeremiah 32:41** …and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

Every part of God’s being is expressed in joyful favor. God’s grace abounds. I wonder, friend, if you know that? Do you know God’s grace abounds toward you as you humble yourselves before Him? As you simply by faith receive all that He has for you, do you know God’s grace abounds? Many don’t. They have turned away from Him. They have taken their eyes off of Him and now they have a picture of God as sort of this reluctant God. If He gives favor at all, it’s with sort of a stingy spirit. That’s not who God is. His grace abounds.

If you were to imagine the means by which God dispenses His favor, what measure does He use? Perhaps you think of God in heaven with a little eye dropper. He takes some grace out then drop, drop, drop. Is that how you think of God’s favor? “Maybe I can just get a drop.” That would be enough. It would be amazing that He would. Maybe you think of it as a spoonful. A spoonful is more than a dropper. Maybe you think of it as a cup. Maybe it’s even one of those 7-11 cups. Maybe you think of it as a five gallon bucket. How do you think of God when He dispenses? What does He use to dispense His favor upon you? This past week in our Small Group, there is a woman in our group who said she pictures an avalanche. I love that picture! You’ve seen pictures of an avalanche. It seems like it starts small with maybe a little snowball at the top. But then as it goes, it grows and it has greater weight, greater force, greater immensity, until it’s just running down the mountain with such intensity and with such power. That’s the grace of God. That’s the picture that God provides for us of His grace.

When John opens up his gospel underneath the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this is what John says about Jesus.

**John 1:14** The Word became flesh

That’s grace. The Son of God became flesh? More than that, He didn’t just become flesh,

**John 1:14** …and dwelt among us,

He took some time here. It’s not just that He became human and then died really quickly to get off the planet. He dwelt among us. It says

**John 1:14** …and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,

What is that glory like? We think of the glory of God. It’s all that God is, all His qualities. John wraps up all of who God is by saying He is

**John 1:14** …full of grace and truth.

He is full to the brim of grace and truth. Then John would write

**John 1:16** For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

It’s like one wave in the ocean crashing upon the shore. Just as it’s sort of being released and diminishing, another wave with greater force and intensity breaks upon the shore over and over. It’s endless. Until the end of time, that wave of grace is going to continue to bring grace upon grace.

**John 1:17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Isn’t that amazing? Do you want your life to be a life just continually being flowed over, bowled over by God’s grace upon grace? Well you know the location to go is Jesus Christ.

Some may ask, why don’t I see God’s grace? If this is what God’s grace is, why don’t I see it? There are a number of reasons why you might not be seeing God’s grace right now as that immense free matter that it is. Perhaps you are presently not experiencing it.Perhaps you have not ever obtained it. Once again, God’s grace is available to everybody. It is offered to everybody. But it’s not received by everyone. It’s not experienced by everyone. In order to experience God’s grace, we have to humble ourselves. We have to recognize before the Lord that I’ve sinned against God. My biggest problem is not what someone else has done to me. It’s not my circumstances. My biggest problem is right here inside my heart. It’s my own sin. It’s my own willfulness. It’s my own self will. It’s selfishness. I want to live my own life and that’s what is keeping me from God’s grace. The first place to see the grace of God is by experiencing it through turning from sin and turning in trust and belief and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the location from which all of God’s grace flows to any person. Have you opened your heart to Jesus Christ? No one can say they see the grace of God until they see Jesus Christ as the one who is the means, the door, the source, the river from which God’s grace flows to us.

Perhaps you have trusted in Jesus Christ at one time in your life and you one day saw the grace of God. You experienced it. But now, you’re not seeing it anymore. You’re living below your privilege. Perhaps you’re living below your privilege because there is part of this world and part of your sinful self that has risen and taken control. You’ve forsaken the Lord. Once you were humble. Once you were following and trusting. You were looking to Him for direction and saying, “Wherever you lead, that’s where I’ll go.” Now you’re saying, “No, I think I have a better path. I know a better way. I know that path is good for many people, but for me, this is my path.” Of course you will not see the grace of God when you forsake the Lord.

Perhaps though, and there are some in this condition, you have experienced the grace of God and you actually are experiencing the grace of God. But your eyes are kind of blind to it because you’ve allowed your eyes to not see the grace of God and look for the face of Jesus. You’re looking at all the difficulty and darkness of this world and the brokenness that is bringing pain and suffering upon your life. It is the easiest matter of all to be blind to the light of God’s favor and only see the darkness that this world presents to us. But here’s the thing. If we fix our eyes upon Jesus, He is the Light of the world. Light will absolutely drive darkness away every time. We need not live below this privilege. We need not live as though the grace of God is not true for us. God says that when we come to Jesus Christ, we become children of the light. We don’t have to live as though our lives are dark and doomed and despairing. So let’s open up our hearts to Jesus Christ every day and let His light shine upon us. Awake sleeper! Arise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you.

So here’s the application. Let’s give God praise for His abounding grace toward us. Let’s speak of His grace. Let’s sing of His grace. Let’s rejoice in His grace. That’s what Ezra does at the end of chapter 7.

**Ezra 7:27-28** 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, 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,

Again, what he does is he gives verbal expression to what is real and what is true. That’s so important for us. That’s one of the reasons why it’s so important to gather together with other believers on a Sunday morning and sing, so that we’re acknowledging the grace of God. It’s the easiest thing, again, to experience God’s grace and then to turn from it and look for the next door of grace. It’s going to be there. That’s the wonderful thing. But it’s right for us to take a moment when we look ahead for the grace that we need in the future, to look back and say, “Thank you God for the grace you’ve given.” That’s the strengthening of our soul in worship and the strengthening of our confidence in the grace of God. His grace abounds to us.

**Psalm 89:1** I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.

I love that because he’s saying that when we experience the abounding grace of God, it’s right to sing. I know we have a moment of singing, but I know some of us are not singing during the moment of singing. That’s why we say, “Sing!” Be like the psalmist. You might say, “Singing might not be my favorite” or “I don’t feel that confident in the quality of my voice in singing.” But God’s grace has abounded toward me and the best expression of experiencing the joy and expressing my joy in the Lord is to sing to Him. So I’m going to participate when your people gather together to sing about your grace. I’m going to participate in it. Then he says

**Psalm 89:1** …with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.

Think about that! Who do you have in your life that represents all generations? Do you have people younger than you? Do you have people older than you? Do you have people that is your same age? Do you have any of those folks in your life? I think most of us, if we raised our hands, we would say, yes, I have some folks I know who are older than me. I have some folks I know who are younger than me. I have some folks that I know that are in my same age group. Well, with your mouth, let them know that God and His grace has abounded in lovingkindness toward you. Let them know that. That will strengthen your soul, but it will also strengthen their soul and the community together for worship.

So it’s really important not just for us to sort of listen on a Sunday morning and then leave. It’s important for us to listen, receive by faith, and then leave and talk about it to every generation. I’m going to look for a little child and I’m going to talk to them about that. “Here is what God in His grace has done in my life.” I’m going to look for someone who is my peer. “Do you know what God in His grace has done for me?” I want to look for someone older. I’m going to say, “Could I tell you for just a moment what God in His grace has done for me?” That’s such an important response in abounding grace in our life.

The second idea that we’re going to trace this morning is that

**God’s grace abounds in many diverse ways**

God is infinitely creative and He loves to express His favor in multi-colored, multi-faceted ways. To begin a list of God’s grace toward us is to fail before one begins. We’re not going to ever get to the end of it. It’s a list that goes on and on and on. His grace abounds in ways that are too many to name, but that should not put us off from beginning a list and actually being conscious about it.

The Apostle Paul begins his book to the church at Ephesus this way.He is giving praise. He’s communicating to all generations through a letter.

**Ephesians 1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

Blessed be God! God, I praise you because you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Then Paul begins a list. He doesn’t complete it because he knows it’s every spiritual blessing. The list is endless. But then he begins this amazing list in Ephesians chapter 1 that begins to unfold some of the graces of God that he is acknowledging.

Here in the story of Ezra, let’s think of some of the graces that we see right off hand. The first grace that we see in the story is God’s kind invitation.

**Ezra 7:13** 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.

The Persian ruler makes the decree that everyone is invited. Every one of the Jewish people who are in Babylon, are allowed to go back to Jerusalem to live back in the land that God promised them and to start rebuilding the temple. Well, how did this come about?

**Ezra 7:27** Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king,

Artaxerxes is giving this invitation by way of the Lord. The Lord Himself is giving the invitation through the king. What grace! God invites a people who have been disobedient and who are under discipline to come and receive the full measure of His goodness. He invites them to come and inherit land that was promised to Abraham and also to become a worshiping people in a temple where God Himself will meet with them. Isn’t that amazing? It’s an invitation to anyone.

Most of us have had perhaps the painful experience of not being invited to a party that we wished we could have attended. It’s kind of painful. Most of us in life have experienced that. Perhaps there are some of you that have never experienced that, but most of us have. I remember when I was a little boy, we had one swimming pool. It was a built-in swimming pool in our neighborhood. The neighbor would occasionally invite us over to swim. Those were great days! Some days, they didn’t invite us. I would look across the street and there were other children playing in the pool. I would wonder if she was going to invite us today. I would stand at the edge of my lawn just looking so hot and forlorn. I was hoping they would have pity on me. (Laughter!) Some days they did and some days they didn’t. Now as an adult, I understand that they wanted to be generous to everyone in the neighborhood. They couldn’t invite all of the neighborhood every day. That wouldn’t leave any room in the pool for anyone. But on the days that I wasn’t invited, I would think, “How come I didn’t get invited today?” I would feel bad. It seemed like those days were particularly hot and humid. (Laughter!)

God always invites us to His party! His resources are infinite and He doesn’t have to ration anything. Do you know that you’re invited to receive the grace of God every day? What an invitation! A day that we do not receive God’s grace is a day that we refuse the invitation because the invitation is given every single day. You may have refused the invitation for the last ten years, yet you still get an invitation from God today. He doesn’t say, “Well, you didn’t acknowledge the invitation. You refused the invitation for ten years. I’m done! There will be no more invitations.” You are invited every day that you are alive in this world, to receive the infinite grace of God, His favor, His good hand. I think of some invitations as they are expressed. So many of them are beautifully expressed.

**Matthew 11:28** Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,

You’re just weighed down by life.

**Matthew 11:28** …and I will give you rest.

**Revelation 3:20** Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

I want to have dinner. I want to have fellowship. I want to have a real relationship with you that is deep and amazing. That’s grace! The church, as recipients of the invitation, get to also extend the invitation to others.

**Revelation 22:17** The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

Come! That’s the invitation. Isn’t that beautiful? How do you respond when God invites you to a thriving living relationship with Himself? How do you respond?

The second grace here is God’s holy community. What a gift these Israelites had in each member and in the whole nation. Each person who stepped out in faith was a gift to the whole. So the invitation was given, but what if it was just Ezra and maybe one or two of his friends going? “We’re going to go down to this big city of Jerusalem that is really lethargic. There are 50,000 or more people now in Jerusalem. We’re going to create revival.” Wouldn’t that have been depressing? “Ezra, you’re going to go down there and

there are only two or three people with you and you have this huge work.” It would have been depressing.

God allows 5,000 people. They stop at the river Ahava. They look at who they have here among the 5,000. “We have no Levites! We need Levites in order to do this because Levites are central to temple worship. We need Levites and we have no Levites. Let’s go out and see if we can find some.” There are 18 from one family. There are 20 from another family. What does Ezra say? The good hand of the LORD was on us in providing these. There are 220 temple servants now. So now, we have enough. It’s still a small group. It’s still not overwhelming, but it’s a group and they’re going together. What an encouragement that now they are not alone on the mission of God, but they’re together in their connection, in their relationship, in their commitment to the Lord. Why were there 5,000? The answer is because God set fear of Him in their hearts. That’s why so many came. It’s the Lord. It wasn’t because there was some natural goodness in these 5,000 who went. It’s because God in His grace is showering the people with the community to live their life for the glory of God together, to be a worshiping community, and to fulfill the mission that God has given them together.

In verses 1-14, we have this big list of names. We didn’t read it all in our reading prior to the message this morning, but let’s look at a couple of them. There is Adin and there is Ebed and there is Parosh and there is Jahaziel. Is anybody naming their kids after these folks? Why are they named? These are the heads. They’re not all named, but the heads of the families are. Why are they named? It’s because God is wanting us to know that each individual person is a gift of God’s grace to the whole and the whole is a gift of God’s grace to each individual person.

Not one of these guys are going down saying, “Okay. I know I’m going to go with y’all, but I’m going to kind of have the sidecar over here. I’m going to do my own thing when I get there. Here’s what I’m going to be about.” There is not one person like that. They know we’re part of the community. The community is important and we’re going to strengthen this community for the glory of God. That’s what is important. That’s the call of the Lord. Then the whole of the community looks at each individual and they look at these people like Shelomith. He’s important! The grace of God is bestowed upon a worshiping people who are given a really eternally meaningful commission through individuals who are committed to the community and then through the whole community that is created by God for the good of the individual to fulfill God’s eternal purpose. It’s remarkable!

You might say, “Maybe that’s an Old Testament thing. The nation of Israel is separate. Maybe that’s an Old Testament thing.” I would urge you to just jot down Romans 16. In Romans 16, you have a whole bunch of people listed by Paul. He greets them. There are people like Apelles and Ampliatus and Urbanus and Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Is anybody naming their kids after these folks? Yet their names are important. Why? It’s because God is saying that His grace is displayed not just through sort of providing in general, but providing in specifics.

I think we are right to make a parallel that becoming a member of Jesus’ local church, this group that is bigger than us, just like the nation is bigger than any one individual, is not our obligation. Well, I guess I ought to join a local church. When I join a local church, God will somehow give me favor and kindness because I did what He wanted me to do. That’s not the way this in Ezra’s story is told or the New Testament story of the church is told. Our becoming a member of Jesus’ local church is God’s grace. It is God’s gift for us to receive. I get to be part of something bigger than myself. I get to be part of a people who are committed to one another to strengthen the whole so that we might bring greater glory to God. He is a God who is abounding in His grace toward me. Committing to use our gifts for God’s purposes in His church is not our contribution to God. Committing to use our gifts for God’s purposes in His church is God’s contribution to us. That’s the issue. It’s God’s grace.

So some applications are let’s devote ourselves to brotherly love. Let’s commit ourselves to relationship with one another. Let’s ask ourselves the question: How might I strengthen my own local church? I think that’s such a central question. It’s as central as asking: How am I strengthening my relationship with Jesus? How am I strengthening my relationship with my own local church? It’s just as central because the moment we ask, “How can I strengthen my relationship with Jesus?” Jesus says we do that by committing ourselves and by being part of this precious gift that He grants us to be part of a community greater than ourselves, so we might lift up His name throughout our life.

Then secondly, let’s thank God for His provision of qualified and committed laborers. Ezra is a gift. Every one of these people named, every person who goes is precious. Let’s name them one by one as they come to our mind. Let’s name them before the Lord, but let’s also go out and tell one another, encourage one another. You’re a gift to us. Thank you for being a gift. I thank God for you.

I’m kind of one of the more public servants at Bethany. It’s a great privilege to have the role I have, but I’m just one of the servants. I’m a more public one, so people may come up to me more often. This morning, there was a precious woman in our church who came up to me. She said, “I want you to know that I thank God for you.” Do you know what? That strengthened my heart. I need to hear that and I imagine you do too. If you do, then someone else sitting near you does. Why don’t you become the instrument by which God gives that encouragement to strengthen the whole for the glory of Christ?

Then third, we pray that God would send more. That’s what Jesus says. The field is white with harvest. There is so much that could be done, but we need not just people. We need servants of God who are revived and zealous for the name of the Lord and gifted by God. That’s what we need. So let’s pray that God would send more laborers.

The other various ways that God’s grace is on display is through His protection. Again, this is a long trip and verses 21-23 talks about this. It’s a long trip and there are all kinds of bandits and marauders. Think of this. This is not a military group of people. They’re not fighters. They’re carrying literally millions of dollars of gold and silver through 900 miles of tough terrain. In fact, Ezra even makes mention that he was tempted to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect them. The king likely would have granted that.

***22*** *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 to Ezra, it seems a bit out of line to tell the king, “God’s got this, but could we have some of your soldiers?” So he didn’t ask. Now, it’s not wrong for Ezra to ask for soldiers. Nehemiah is going to ask for soldiers later. He’s going to receive soldiers. He was thinking, what is going to most glorify God? I don’t think it’s going to glorify God the most by asking the king for soldiers. So what did they do?

***23*** *So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.*

***31*** *…The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.*

**Ezra 7:28** I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me,

Brothers and sisters, have you ever been in a time in your life when you were really scared about what’s going to happen next? You felt unprotected. You felt very vulnerable. God often puts us in those circumstances and He does so, so that we would petition Him. Sometimes it’s such a vulnerable state that it’s right to even fast for a time in seeking the Lord. But I want you to know we don’t need to fear any threat because our God is a God who abounds in grace. He invites us to receive the good hand that is able to protect us.

The fourth grace of God is His Word. We see His Word being prominent throughout chapter 7. Ezra set his heart to study the Word of God and then to obey the Word of God and then to teach the Word of God throughout all of Israel. All of that is a grace. We sort of take for granted that we have the Word of God. But it’s the Word of God that is life-giving seed that planted in good soil, springs and produces a harvest. It produces fruitfulness. So the seed of God’s Word is as much a gift to us as a farmer who lacks seed is given an abundance of seed to plant in the spring. So they know that without planting any seed, there is no life. So what are we going to do? God in His grace sends us His Word.

This is really important for us because I think sometimes the spiritual discipline of reading the Word and meditating upon the Word is communicated in a works orientation, that if we read the Bible every morning, then God is going to have His good hand of favor upon us. But it’s really the opposite. It’s really God’s good hand of favor is on us so that He gives us His Word and we want to read His Word. So rather than being a means by which we obtain the favor of the Lord, it’s evidence that the favor of the Lord is on us. If we are reading the Word out of sort of cold obligation, out of some compulsion that we expect God then to do something because we sort of merited His favor now that we’ve been in His Word, we’re mixing up His grace all together. The Word is such a precious gift from the Lord. It’s evidence of His favor.

God’s Word is a gift that brings comfort in our sorrows, strength in our weakness, hope in our despair, direction in our confusion, correction in our failings, rebuke in our sin, a weapon in our warfare, a hammer in our hardness, instruction in our ignorance and light in our darkness. All of that is found in God’s Word. I just want to encourage us, let’s be people of this book. Let’s be people that when we open the book, we open it with faith because it is absolutely true. There are many people who know this book backwards and forwards, who have meditated on it, studied it, have sat under its teaching for decade upon decade of their life and have no benefit from it. None! In fact, it’s the opposite. There has been a curse upon their life because they have studied the Bible so much without faith. The only way we benefit from the gift of God’s Word, again, is through a broken and contrite heart and through faith.

These young people are new down here on the first rows. At least you’re new to sit down here on the front row. Do you know what I love about some of the young people that God gives to our church? There are also some young people who are not so new. You guys have been there and you’re always an encouragement to me. If you could see them, their Bibles are open and oftentimes their pens are out. They’re listening and they’re receiving. I don’t know what’s going on exactly in their hearts, but when I talk to them, it gives evidence of real faith. Something really dynamic is happening in their lives. I’m picking on them because they’re closest to me and I can see them the best. I know that happens out here. But I also know there are folks that come for decade after decade here to Bethany Baptist Church and leave without any benefit. I pray that the good hand of the Lord would be upon every one of us every day, and I know that’s possible.

The last gift that I want to talk about here is the gift of salvation. It’s the greatest gift of all! They get into Jerusalem.

***35*** *At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel,*

It’s the first time they’re back in Jerusalem at the temple after being a part of the deported captives in Babylon. Think of how much blood there is. Think of the visual.

*twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering twelve male goats.*

All the sacrifices that we ever read about throughout the whole of the Old Testament point to one person, and that person is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s grace to us. He is our Passover lamb. He is the sacrifice. Hebrews writes about it this way.

**Hebrews 10:11** And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

That’s what we need. We need our sin taken away from us.

**Hebrews 10:12** But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,

That’s what happened on the cross. There was a single sacrifice, once for all time, never more to be duplicated.

**Hebrews 10:12** …he sat down at the right hand of God,

The sacrifice was complete. The work was over for atonement.

**Hebrews 10:13-14** waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

The Jews in Ezra’s day had the good hand of the LORD upon them. They were giving sacrifices which pointed forward to the Messiah. But how much more do we have the good hand of the LORD? We have experienced the fulfillment of all the sacrifices and the fullness of the salvation. There is no more work to be done. The work is complete. It’s in Jesus that the grace of salvation flows into the heart that is open to believe Him, to receive Him. Our ability to experience the good hand of the LORD depends upon our present, vital, active connection to Jesus! So let us receive with great joy, the benefit. How do we do that? We always run out of time at the end here, but I want to share this one simple truth that rolls through the Gospel presented to us in the Word.

**God’s grace abounds to all who humbly seek Him**

We never merit His favor. We never earn His favor. Not through church attendance, not through Bible reading, not through prayers and fasting, not through service to God. We never earn His favor. How can we obtain it? Look at verse 22.

*“The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him,*

Underline that verse and mark it. It’s a promise, and God fulfills every promise every time. The hand of our God is for good upon all who seek Him. Do you have a seeking heart today? To have a seeking heart, number one, we have to know that the present course we’re on is not good. Our own way is not leading us toward life. We have to turn from that way in order to seek the Lord because the way we’re on in our sin and selfishness is away from the Lord. If I want to seek the Lord, the first thing I have to do is humbly acknowledge that and turn to seek the Lord.

Then in order to seek the Lord, I must believe that if I obtain Him, I obtain everything I need in life. He is the rewarder of those who seek Him. His reward is so great and so immense that I would be willing to give up all to find Him and to obtain Him as the source, the treasure of everything good. Now I’m set upon a path where moment by moment I fix my eyes upon Him and I seek to embrace Him. I seek to obtain from Him all that He offers me, all that He promises me in Jesus. That’s what it means to seek the Lord.

If you have never begun the process of seeking the Lord, today is the day. Seek the Lord while He is near. If you sense His calling upon your life, seek the Lord while He is near. Call upon Him right now. If you have begun that journey but have grown distracted, come back and fix your eyes upon Jesus and seek the Lord. The good hand of the Lord is extended and offered to every one of us and we obtain it just through simple seeking. Let us be among those who seek Him with all our heart and find Him.