

Hand of God

Free to Build

Ezra 7:8-10

If you have your bibles, open to the book of Ezra 7 as we continue our Ezra-Nehemiah series. We're going to conclude the book this morning. We are going to try to do chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10. Next week, we will pause before go into Nehemiah because Lord willing and weather permitting, we will meet down at the bottoms, which is down at the end of the parking lot, for one big service because it's the 125th anniversary of our church. We put in the bulletin last Sunday that you might need sunscreen, and looking ahead, you might need a light jacket next Sunday morning! But we're excited, and please come and be with us and celebrate. B and the guys will do Hardin BBQ. It's unbelievable! We've got some ladies who will do beans and slaw, so all you need to bring is a side dish, a dessert, a lawn chair, and yourself. We're going to have about an hour and fifteen minute service that will orally review the history of our church with worship and a devotional thought here or there. Then we will have an old-fashioned Baptist dinner on the ground, and we will have a time of fellowship in the afternoon. Please come and be with us all day or part of the day, but we want to make sure you're there for the celebration starting at 10 a.m. If it's raining, or it's ten below zero, we'll have all three regular service times here. It will be on our website or you can call the church office, and we will see what the Lord wills and how the weather permits.

Before we read, let me just ask you a question. Have any of you ever been doing something and you needed another hand? Yes. If you've ever been in that situation, you are so thankful when you're doing something and someone comes up and ask if you need a hand. Because of that, many times, you're around other people seeing them doing something, and you ask, "Do you need a hand?" The moment they say yes, you jump in to give

your hand to them. Have any of you ever been in one of those projects where there are many hands involved because you needed them, but then suddenly, you realized you weren't carrying your share? You just realized this is too light for me to be doing my part, so you look around and realize somebody else has the load. You've been there, done that, right? That's what we're going to be talking about this morning. Ezra had something that he couldn't do on his own. He needed a hand, and the hand that he needed was God's hand. When God gave His hand, it was almost as if He carried the full load. I pray we realize as a church that we desire and we need the hand of God upon us. As individual Christians, as a father, as a husband, a wife, a mother, a student, a business owner, and a worker, we need God's hand on us. We are going to read a few verses, but we are going to try and cover the last four chapters of this book.

Scripture

"And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 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. 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."

(Prayer)

Father, thank You for the opportunity, one more time, to feed your people. They didn't come to hear my word; they come to hear Your Word, so Father, I pray for Your anointing. I pray for Your hand on me as a speaker, and on us as a congregation that we would not be a speaker only or hearer only, be we would be doers of Your Word. Open our eyes, touch our hearts, captivate us this morning so that when we leave here we don't leave here just informed, but we leave here transformed. Thank You Father for what You are going to do in our lives with Your Word. It's in Your precious Son's name we pray, amen.

Just so you understand the context, between chapter 6 and chapter 7 in the book of Ezra, about fifty-eight years have passed. We're getting ready to meet the main character in the book of Ezra, the person whom the book is named after. But before we start hearing from him personally where he shares firsthand what he was thinking, firsthand what he was doing, firsthand how he felt, the writer continues to talk about him in the third person. King Artaxerxes the first is now sitting on the throne. It's the seventh year of his reign, which is the year 458 BC. It's the springtime of the year, roughly our April/May. Notice how chapter 7 begins. It begins identifying who Ezra is. It names Ezra, and then it starts giving his genealogy. It starts saying he's the son of, who is the son of, who is the son of, who was the son of, until finally it traces it back to the son of Aaron, the chief priest. Before we go any further in our study, let's make sure, before we learn anything else about Ezra, we understand the Bible is wanting us to know. That is who Ezra is. I just have to remind us of this. It's so plain to me in the Scripture. Before Scripture ever really talks about behavior in a person, the Bible usually talks about the identity of the person. Scripture would teach that identity determines behavior; behavior doesn't determine identity. So, what Scripture wants us to be settled in is who we are. So before we ever hear these great things about Ezra and desire to be like Ezra, the Bible wants us to make sure we know who Ezra is. Ezra is a priest of God. His particular function as a priest is that he is a scribe who is skilled in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel gave to him.

Could we just call a time out? Do you know who you are? Does your bloodline trace back to Jesus Christ? Have you been born again? Have you been adopted into His family? As a child of God, please pinch yourself, make sure you know this truth; you are a believer-priest of His. Wow! See, we're not going to take this passage and just apply it to me as a pastor of a church because Ezra was a leader of his people. No, we're going to realize that in the New Testament, each one of us as children of God is individual believer-priest before God, and we've been ordained by Him to offer spiritual sacrifices to him. We are a holy and royal priesthood, and we are to proclaim the excellences of His name, who translated us out of that kingdom of darkness into His marvelous light.

As a priest, he was skilled. The word, skilled, means 'to be quick.' He had so saturated himself with the Law of Moses that if you asked him a question, quickly he could give you its location. He could give you its interpretation. He could give you its meaning. Ezra was not that guy that when you called and had that question, he said, "*Oh...I've never thought about that. Umm...where is that? Oh, give me a week and I'll get back to you,*" and then he went into his office and got out all of his books because he wanted to know what everybody else said about what the Law said before he called you back. No, he was skilled because he had gotten into the Word and the Word was in him. the writer tells us that King Artaxerxes is going to free him and let him go back to Israel and restore temple worship and the Law of the Lord to the land because King Artaxerxes has seen that the hand of the LORD, YHWH, those four Hebrew consonants, the famous Hebrew tetragrammaton, the personal name of God, Yahweh, had His hand on Ezra.

It's now the first month of the seventh year, and we are just going to get a quick preview of what we're going to hear Ezra talk about, and that's how he leaves on the first day of the first month, gets ready to go to Jerusalem, and then on the first day of the fifth month, which means in four months, he's going to make a nine hundred mile journey. He is going to arrive in Jerusalem to do in Israel what is in his heart to do, and the Bible says, "...for the good hand of his God was on him." That little word, for, is a Hebrew word that's important. It's the Hebrew word, *Ki*, and it's going to give us the key to how we know the hand of the Lord was on Ezra. How do we know the hand of the Lord was on Ezra? It was because they made this nine hundred mile journey in four months. Here's the question. Why was God's hand on Ezra? Now, I want to make sure you're with me. We're not doing a history lesson this morning. This is the Word of God, and it's alive, it's sharp, and it's powerful. I told you when we started this study that I believe with all of my heart, when God penned these words through Ezra and Nehemiah for His Old Testament covenant people, He had us in mind too. He knew ultimately, Israel would not build the true house of God, an earthly temple that stood on a mount in Jerusalem, but the true house of God would be built by Jesus Christ Himself. You and I would get to be on

the biggest building project in the world, and that is building the house of God.

Can I ask you this question? Do you think others will recognize when you do what you do that God's hand is on you? Do you recognize God's hand is on you? Do you think people sense that what's happening in your life, what's happening in your ministry, what's happening in our body is so amazing that there is no way if you put all of our hands together you could attribute for, account for what's being done, so someone has to believe the hand of God is on those people? It was amazing; I got a text this morning from one of our preacher boys who have gone out from under our ministry here that said, "Hey Bro Ricky, I'm praying for you this morning. I'm praying specifically that God would do something, one thing that only He can take credit for doing and everybody will know it wasn't of you; it's just Him." Wow! That's what we're desiring from the book of Ezra. Wouldn't it be neat if the government recognized God's hand on His people?

This is important. The Bible is going to put another 'for' there. Now you understand why in the New Testament we have those big therefore's, right? It starts right here with this little Hebrew word, *Ki*, which is so important because the next verse is going to tell us why good hand of God was on Ezra. I don't want to shock anyone, but I want to make sure you understand that what this teaches is that Ezra put himself in a position for God to put His hand on him. My question is have you put yourself in a position for God's hand to be on you. "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." Do you get it? What did Ezra do? What does God want you and me to know as individual Christians, and what does God want us to know as the body of Christ? He wants us to know that we can put ourselves in a position for God to put His hand on us, and scripture would teach that you've got to set your heart.

We've seen this word, set, before. In chapter 3 when the children of Israel left exile, roughly fifty thousand people came into the land for the first time. They went to the temple, saw it was burned, still destroyed, and before they decided to lay the foundation of the temple, they built an altar. Before they sacrificed on the altar, the Bible says they set the altar in its

place. They set it. Before they could use it, they prepared it. They got it ready. That's what the Bible means by set, that you and I get our heart ready. We get our heart fixed. We get our heart prepared. We get our heart repaired. Is your heart fixed? Is your heart set? Don't look at me that way. You know what this word means. Celisa asks us all the time, "Would you set the table?" Set the table means we've got a blank table, but we've got people coming over to eat, and to set the table means whoever is asked to set the table gets the forks, knives, spoons, napkins, plates, placemats, and put the glasses out. If there are eight people eating, we set the table for eight. When you come into our house and sit down at the table, the table is ready to do what the table is supposed to do, and that is let us eat. Thursday, Kory took the camper to Hillman's and sent a picture. I called him and he said, "Dad, I got the pop-up set up." You know what that means. That means the camper was ready to be used for what they were going to use the camper for. Just this week on the farm, I went from corn to beans. I hate doing that because you have to set the combine for beans. It is the same combine, but a different header and different settings because you shell corn and you cut beans, so you have to set the combine and get it ready for what it's going to do.

Is your heart set? If your heart is not set, you'll never have the hand of God on you. In Hebrew thought, heart is the seat of the emotions, the seat of affection, of desire. One Hebrew scholar calls it the control tower of the inner life of a person. It is the control center. It's that part of you that makes the decisions. It's that part of you that desires to do certain things. That's why in the Old Testament, God got sick and tired of Israel bringing all those things to Him because He knew their heart wasn't in it. Have you ever seen somebody do something and you could tell their heart wasn't in it? Have any of you ever done something because you knew it was the right thing to do and you did it but your heart wasn't in it? There is a big difference, right. God wants you to set your heart. If He is going to put His hand on you, He wants your heart to be ready. This is why the Bible talks about guarding your heart in proverbs 4:23 says, "Guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life." I don't know if you know this or not, but I've had three uncles have heart attacks, and my mother had a heart attack. So Celisa believes I could have a heart attack one day, so she

makes sure I guard my heart. I take care of my heart. She is constantly telling me to watch what I eat, watch what I do. She's got this believe that I can't live without her, but she can live without me. She doesn't want to live without me now; she wants it to be a long time down the road, so she wants me to guard my heart. Every time she talks to me about my heart, that physical organ that I have, that if I eat certain things it can clog certain arteries, and something could happen to shut my whole body and lifestyle down, I think, what about my spiritual heart? Not just what controls the outer me, but what controls the inner me. What things am I doing? What things am I letting in that could cause a blockage to where the blood of Jesus doesn't flow as it should and it gets restricted and I just might have a heart attack? I might need a stent; I might need triple bypass surgery! Some of us this morning need to put ourselves on the operating table of God and lay in His presence and say God, fix me; I can't set my heart because I'm broken! I'm hurting! Get your eye off the shame. Get your eye off the sin. That part is over. It's time for us to look to the divine physician, who if necessary, can take out that heart of flesh, that heart of stone, and put in a spiritual heart and give us a heart that beats to build the house of God. Set your heart. Ezra set his heart. He set his heart on three things.

- 1. Study the Law**
- 2. Do the Law**
- 3. Teach the Law**

Study

This word, study, is an interesting word. In the Hebrew language, it literally means 'to enquire about, to search for as if something was lost, to seek, and to find, to investigate; to study.' It's used in Leviticus 10:16 because Moses has just, under God, set up the Levitical offering system in the tabernacle, and he thinks maybe it wasn't done right so he's questioning the priests. He wants to know where the goat is; did they eat it in its entirety, did they burn it? He won't quit his investigation. He just keeps checking it out. This word is also used in 2 Samuel 11:3. One day,

King David studied somebody he shouldn't have studied. He investigated somebody he shouldn't have investigated. He enquired about somebody he shouldn't have enquired about. He studied Bathsheba. I want to say, are you kidding me David! You are the king of Israel, you know everything rises and falls on leadership, and you studied another man's wife, and then you take her! See, Ezra talking, when he talks about this man, he enquired into the Law, he investigated the Law, he checked it out, he studied, he turned over every word. He had God's hand on him.

Is that like you? Do you study God's Word? Now we're so blessed, we don't just have a Pentateuch, five books in the old, we've got sixty-six books. I get tickled because I hear a lot of people always challenging the church why we don't read through the Bible in a year. Most of us can raise our hands that we've done that. I've never heard anybody challenge anybody with this; study through the Bible in a year. Can I tell you why? They couldn't do it. There's a big difference in reading our bibles and studying our bibles. Can I tell you what one of the biggest differences is in reading and study? It's just a notepad, an ink pen, or a pencil, and as you read, you investigate. You make notes. You study. You think on paper. You think on a computer screen. One of our favorite authors as a church is John Piper. I ran across an article by John Piper this week where he says he no longer asks preachers how many books they have in their library. Preachers are notorious for libraries and books by other people about the book. Preachers and Christians sometimes so read what other people say about the book, that they don't actually read the book themselves. He says not he asks not how many books you have in your library, but how many notebooks do you have in your library? Can I ask you that question? How many notebooks do you have where you've studied God's Word?

God had His hand on this man because he set his heart to study. He wanted to get in the Word, but he wanted the Word to get in him. The Word was so in him that it made the difference in King Artaxerxes' life that he saw the good hand of God on Ezra. As this is being written long before it starts giving us first person information about Ezra, the writer is telling us in third person about this guy before we ever hear his heart! The Bible is telling us to get ready for this man's heart because his heart was set on

studying God's Law. You know how I like to use my sanctified imagination and using my sanctified imagination when I read chapter 7, I see Artaxerxes with a letter that he give to Ezra and he tells Ezra when you get back to the land, set up everything in the life of your people in the nation according to the Law of your God that is in your hand. Right before the letter ends, he tells him that I'm even giving you the authority as the king to set up civil government, and know that if anybody rebels, you have the right to take all of their property away from them. He said do all of this according to the wisdom of your God that's in your hand. I think that means here is Ezra, a priest, a scribe who studies God's Law, and as he stands before King Artaxerxes, he has the first five books of the Bible in his hand. Their just in his hand, it's just a natural extension of him, so Artaxerxes says I see you've got the Law of God in your hand. Then he says I see you've got the wisdom of God in your hand. Where is your Word? Is it on the coffee table? Is it by your nightstand? Or, is it in your hand? If we want God' hand on us, we must have His Word in our hands. We must have our hand on His Word.

Do

We don't just study it; we do it. We practice it. We life it out. Please hear me say this; Ezra never studied God's Word for information. Ezra studied God's Word for transformation. If you come to Hardin and continue to come to Hardin, you will never attend one of our Sunday school lessons or teaching times to where the point of our teaching is to inform you with biblical facts. We want to teach biblical facts in such a way that it transforms your life and you leave here inspired to not just hear the Word of God only, but actually be a doer of God's Word. We've been praying for years for God not to let us be a speaker and hearers only, but let us be doers of His Word. Please hear me; before we actually start doing what God has ordained us to do, what He put in our heart to do, and what our heart wants to do, we've got to get to the point that we life out what we know God's Word says. I believe with all of my heart that we behave what we believe. Don't tell me you believe adultery is wrong and then you go and have an affair. You just lied. Don't tell me you believe gossip is wrong and then you go gossip about a friend. You just lied! You don't believe it's

wrong to gossip. You think it's ok to gossip, or you wouldn't do it. Our behavior says what we believe. Our beliefs must come from the study of God's Word. The reason the majority of the church is paralyzed, the reason the majority of the church doesn't have the hand of God upon them is because we read, and in reading, we never do, we never live it out; we never practice it. Yes, we're reading before we start our day, but before 10:30, we're already in the flesh again. We're not opening the Bible to read words on a page; we're opening the Bible to get into the Word so the Word can get into us, and so the Word helps us navigate our life all day long. We've got to live this thing out called the gospel. We've got to let people see it. Long before the Bible says Ezra understood the hand of God was on him, it says Artaxerxes knew the hand of God was on him. If I can be totally honest with you, it really doesn't matter what you think about the hand of God on you, what really matters is what other people think about you and the hand of God. God wants us to study.

Teach

He wants us to get into His Word, then He wants us to put His Word into practice, then as we put His Word into practice, He gives us the liberty to teach His Word. This word, teach, is interesting. It's not the word that means what I'm doing right now in teaching. I do not consider myself a preacher; I've always told you I'm a teacher. This isn't talking about what some of our Sunday school teachers and small group leaders are going to do this morning, and that is stand in front of a group of people and teach. This word that is used here for teach actually originally meant 'to beat.' That's right...to beat. It involves suffering. Think about this; don't be confused. Have any of you as a parent ever so wanted your kids to learn something and they weren't learning it, and you said to them, "If you don't learn this, I'm going to beat it in you"? Whoa! I remember some of those lessons, amen, not by choice, but by force. The teacher decided I'm going to get this. But that contradicted what I was taught in school. I would have teachers stand before me and say things like, "Now I can teach you, but I can't learn for you." "I can teach you, but I can't make you learn." Do you know what this word means in the Hebrew? It means 'to cause to learn.' The reason the word originally meant 'to beat,' is because Bible scholars

believe this word came right out of the agriculture life of Israel. Not the sheep, not the goats, but the cattle, and that this word, teach, actually means 'to prod, goad, to cause you to change direction.' Not going the way you're wanting to go, but the way I want you to go. If you were to come to our farm while we're working cattle, Celisa has this animal IQ that is amazing. She believes that you never yell at cattle, never. You come to our farm and yell; you'll have to step outside. She'll get on to you harshly, to the point that you will think she loves the cattle more than she loves you. She will hurt your feelings. She will let you know that you don't yell at her cattle. She's just got this believe that cattle don't understand English, and you raising your voice only shows that you're panicking and they will panic more, so she doesn't allow that. She doesn't allow this either. A lot of people do this when they're herding cattle, now you've got to understand cattle are usually bigger than us people, and Celisa just goes ballistic if you come and help us work the cattle and you start waving around saying whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! You do not raise your hands, ever. You stay calm. Therefore, anybody that comes into our corral will have a cattle stick. Some people call it a cattle prod, but we call it a stick, and we work cattle with a stick. This stick is an extension of you, so when a cow gets in a corner, you can let the cow know where you want the cow to go. When the cow starts coming at you, you can use the stick and that will tell the cow not to approach you in the speed that the cow is approaching you. This prod is an educational tool. It's a training tool. That's what this word to teach means. It means to train, to educate. On our farm, if you happen to make it into the show ring, and this doesn't work, you get the iron halter. You do not want the iron halter if you're on our farm.

But the point is you can, with diligence, teach somebody and cause somebody to learn. That's what Ezra wanted to do. He wanted to cause people in Israel to learn the Law of God. Because he wanted to cause people to learn the Law of God, God put His hand on him. It was obvious. Wow! Is your heart in this, really? Because it would kind of just be obvious that some of us are more into building our own lives, our own empires, our own world, and our own kingdom than the kingdom of God. So what's the Bible trying to tell us? The Bible is trying to tell us that we need to set our heart to study, to do, and to teach. The next thing you know, Ezra makes a

nine hundred mile journey in four months, because when he recognized the hand of God was on him, (five times it will be said in chapters 7 and 8) he decides to gather a group of people together and they got ready to leave. They had to be delayed for twelve days because when he looked in the group, there was no one of the Levites there, and they had to have Levites. So because God's hand was upon him, two men step out and there are one hundred and something Levites who are ready to go with them. Listen, the king has given them so much wealth that scholars say there were tons and tons and tons of gold, silver, and products, and you are going to make a nine hundred mile journey. Does anybody see a problem here? What Ezra really wanted to do was to ask Artaxerxes for an armed guard, but then he thought whoa...I just told Artaxerxes when I was in his presence that if you seek God, you have His good hand on you. He realizes if I ask for an armed guard, he's not going to believe God has His hand on me, or my God is big enough to guard us, so he doesn't ask. He leads the people to sit down by a river, fast, and pray to make sure they have God's hand. They start out this journey, and when they get to Israel, every nickel is accounted for.

He begins to teach, and all of a sudden, there is a problem. We will address this in the book of Nehemiah because he deals with it too. The problem is some of the exiles who left Babylon and came back to the land intermarry with people of the land. They were pagan, so the holy race was mixed. If you're sleeping...wake up right now. I don't want to be misquoted. Listen to me. When God forbade interracial marriage in the Old Testament, it was not because of the color of skin. It was because the color of the heart. Did you hear me? As a Christian, don't ever judge somebody by the color of their skin. Don't you ever make that judgment, but we are to judge according to the color of a person's heart. What you ought to be concerned about and what God is concerned about is when a Christian marries a pagan. It was so bad here that when Ezra heard the news, he knew that's what caused God to take them into captivity in the first place, so he sits down and starts praying. He pours out his heart to God, and says we've sinned. We don't even blush at sin anymore. He said we are up to sin over our heads. He sat down, pulled out his hair, and tore his clothes! The people around him started seeing his reaction to sin. He

didn't picket, he didn't organize a movement; he fell on his face before God! When is the last time we fell on our face before God, not because of the sin in our nation, but because of the sin in our church? When they say the leader so tore up over sin, they understood the heartbeat of God that He is holy, holy, holy! Someone stepped forward and said, Ezra, let's deal with this problem. But it was coming a monsoon rain and it took over three months to deal with all of the people who had married outside the holy seed. Do you know how they dealt with it? They divorced. This is going to hurt. We're not going to understand this, but where there was a father who had married a woman who was pagan and had given birth to kids, they put the wife and the kids both away. That's not our New Testament example. But the Bible is trying to tell us that we're supposed to be in the world, but not of the world. God saved us and brought us out of sin, and the last thing He wants us to do is to have friendships where we go back into sin. We have friendships with people who are sinners, but friendships with sinners is so that we who study the Law, the Word, and do the Law, can now teach the Word and influence them, not them influence us. The world must see God's hand on us. They'll never want what you've got until they see what you've got is from God.

Please, can we put ourselves in the position for God to put His hand on us? I just had a thought. Grilling season is about to come to an end in Kentucky. Do any of you ever marinate what you're going to cook before you cook it? Have you ever noticed when you marinate something that the marinade starts on the outside and gets on the inside, and when you actually cook it and taste it, you taste what it is marinated in? Bear with me. If someone bites into you this week, what will they taste? I pray they taste the Word of God because you so marinate in the Word, you have so soaked in God that they taste Him, not you.