

The Gracious Hand of God 9-29-02

Ezra 7:6-10; 9; 10:1-12; Ephesians 5:5

If you can start the day without caffeine; if you can get going without pep pills; if you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains; if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles; if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it; if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time; if you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you when through no fault of yours something goes wrong; if you can take criticism and blame without resentment; if you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him; if you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend; if you can face the world without lies and deceit; if you can conquer tension without medical help; if you can relax without liquor; if you can sleep without the aid of drugs; if you can say honestly that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, or politics; then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog.

Fallen man has a tendency to minimize his weaknesses and overestimate his real spiritual condition. That bit of humor might bring us down to earth. Sometimes it takes something a great deal harsher like defeat and captivity, which was the case with the nation of Judah. But God, through the prophet Jeremiah, gave them hope by foretelling the exact duration of the captivity – 70 years. Zerubbabel led the first group that returned. Ezra led the second group. Nehemiah led the third group. Today we will be drawing some lessons from Ezra. As we begin our passage we find the favor of the king was toward Ezra, but the reason for that was the gracious hand of God was upon him.

Ezra 7:6-10 (NIV) 6 This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. 7 Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. 9 He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. 10 For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

Ezra must have really made an impression on the King of Persia, to receive anything that he asked for. We get a hint later on that Ezra had been witnessing to him about Jehovah. He must have been convinced of Ezra's sincerity and integrity. Ezra was a real man of the Word. He is probably the author or 1 & 2 Chronicles, Psalm 119, and Ezra. In fact, if you look closely at verse 10 you can see that this was the reason the hand of God was on him. The word 'for' refers back to the gracious hand of God. That hand of God was upon Ezra because he devoted himself to three things: studying the Word, observing or keeping it, and teaching it.

If we look through the Bible to find out why a person lays a hand upon another, we find that it is to give a blessing, anoint for ministry, or to ask for healing. David prayed in Psalm 139 saying the knowledge of the hand of God upon him was too wonderful for him, too lofty to attain to. When an Apostle laid hands on someone it was representative of God laying His hand of anointing or healing upon them. Think of the times Jesus reached out and touched the leper or the paralytic. The results were instant wholeness. The touch of His hand on the funeral bier brought the young man inside to life.

When I think of God's hand upon me it sends chills down my spine. Not because I seek a sensation, but because I realize the awesome privilege and power that comes with His touch. It caused the Persian king to give Ezra all that he asked for. I ask again, why was God's hand upon Ezra? He devoted himself to study, obey and teach the Word of God. It wasn't just a knowledge pursuit that drove Ezra, but a desire to know and obey His Maker. God rewards that kind of a seeking heart with the touch of His hand. God can invest some of His power in a man like that, because the power will be used for the glory of God. Ezra didn't use his favor with the king to become wealthy, but to restore the Temple treasures and teach the Word of God. The things of God were foremost in his heart and life.

We desperately need the gracious hand of God upon us. We need His touch so that our witness is received in the community. We need the favor that the touch of His hand brings. We need His touch to convict us of sin and draw us continually closer. God's hand was upon Ezra because of Ezra's devotion to God and to God's word. For many of us it is a daily chore instead of a sacred privilege, a daily duty instead of a holy honor in which we meet with our Lord. The gracious hand of God was upon him, for he was a man of the Word.

Ezra 9:1-6 (NIV) 1 After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. 2 They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." 3 When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice. 5 Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God 6 and prayed: "O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

The leaders came with a confession. They had intermarried with the heathen of the land. They knew the law of God had forbidden it, but they made excuses to do what they desired to do. God had told them not to intermarry because the religions of the land were disgusting and vile. The powerful influence of those wicked practices had opened the way for all kinds of demonic destruction and finally the destruction of the

nation. When Ezra, a man with a heart for the things of God, heard they were started down that path again, he ripped his tunic and cloak. You have to understand that many people could only afford one cloak because they were so costly to make. Today it would be like driving your car into a rock wall. He was so heart sick, so upset, that he then began to pull his beard and hair out. You might think this man was over-reacting. Not at all! He had God's perspective of sin. He saw the devastating power, the destroying touch that disobedience to God had on the nation. He dropped to his knees and spread out his hands to God but was so ashamed he could not lift his face.

Why was he ashamed? He didn't do it. Yes, but he was a part of the nation. The wrath of God would affect everyone in the nation. They were a body of people and when one sinned all were affected. We don't see that as clearly as Ezra did. The nation of Israel learned that lesson early on with Achan after the battle of Jericho. One man disobeyed God and the whole nation was defeated in battle and came to a standstill. If God is going to use this church as a body, we all need to be right with God, yielded to His Spirit. What a frightening thought to consider our individual rebellion against the Holy Spirit could stifle the effectiveness of Wayside to reach out to the world in Sedona. What a motivating factor to get right with God!

Ezra goes on to pray about how they deserved the captivity. God allows our enemies to have success to turn us back to Himself. Man's inclination is to believe God should always hand us all that we want regardless of what we do with all His goodness to us. And then he prays, "Just when you were giving us another chance, we turn our backs and headed down the same road that brought us to rebellious ruin before. What can I say? None of us can stand in Your presence." Some of us here are beginning to come under this conviction of sin. God deserves our all, and we give Him leftovers. What can we say? None of us should be able to stand in His presence.

Ezra 10:1 (NIV) 1 While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites--men, women and children--gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.

If we will allow God to convict us the conviction will spread. If we will let our hearts be broken over sin, others will too. It just took one man, Ezra, to see things as they were, and be sick over it, and then others followed his godly lead. Are we sick over sin? We have to treat sin like a life-threatening wound, because it is. The sin was letting the world's detestable practices sneak back into Israel. You might think you can't relate. 1Jn. 1:8 tells us if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If you are saying, "I have no sin", you are deceived.

Eph. 5:5 (NIV) Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater -- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God"

Today our idols are the same as those mentioned by the Apostle Paul. Immorality! Internet porn has ensnared so many, including pastors. Several years ago the Dean of Religion at Harvard was dismissed because his computer was so overloaded with pornography. It is an addiction. It is an epidemic, and it ends in destruction. We wonder why so many news stories are of kidnapped and molested youth. It doesn't take much to figure it out. If you are involved in it and think it is not harming anything you are only deceiving yourself. Forsake it in all its forms. If it has your thoughts on lust it is destroying your spiritual life.

A dear mentor, Brother David Turner, told me of viewing a film slide rack in a gift shop. When he came upon one row of slides with scantily clad women he immediately turned away. A woman saw him do that and asked why he reacted that way. He was able to share Jesus' saving grace with her. You might think he acted rather prudish. I think he acted in wisdom and the fear of God, and because he did, he received an opportunity to be a witness.

Idol #2 Impurity - Mixing the things of God with a little of the world. Compromise! Enjoy the things of God but let the world system and its pleasures capture a part of your heart. Pride in possessions, in looks, in taste, is all of the world. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God and He will exalt you in due time. The opposite is purity. God wants His people to be wholesome and whole. Compromise with the world was Israel's downfall. Impurity in your life says you have not decided about the value of what Christ has done for you. Impurity is subtle and devastating. Impurity will dilute your testimony in an increasing way. God calls us to increasing glory, which is just the opposite. You are moving forward in glory or backward into impurity. Which way are you headed today?

Idol #3 Greed – If you have to have more, and more, and more, your priorities are in this passing world. Things and wealth will never satisfy you. The Bible tells us to save so that we can give. It teaches us to be generous. Jesus was generous with you, are you with His children. Greed keeps you from presenting the unconditional love that God has for others. In other words, it stifles your expression of the life of Christ. I can't forget the Proverb that is so descriptive, *The horseleach hath two daughters crying, "Give, give."* (Proverbs 30:15a) Gimme Gimme! Greed is the opposite of the Spirit of Jesus who gave Himself for you. Greed is the flesh expressing itself in fear and self-fulfillment. Smash that idol by being generous and learning the liberating pleasure of giving. I have a challenge for us. Let us, from this month forward, because of the goodness of God in saving Wayside from closing, have a positive balance here at Wayside. We've grown enough that we don't need to rely on the surplus from the past. If we use the surplus let it be for other struggling churches or for outreach. When the temple was restored the people gave generously and all the needs were met because the priests were ministering according to the word of the Lord. If you think that is true here then let's together meet our monthly budget. Give to the Lord out of a heart of gratitude, Amen? Are you thankful that God spared this house of worship from closing? Are you grateful for the new spirit, a spirit of forgiveness and joy? Then let's show our gratitude by giving back to God of our time and finances.

With the remnant that had returned to Judah, idol #2 was the idol of choice, impurity. It brought all kinds of actual physical idols with it. They had blended with the world. They didn't want to stand out, they wanted to blend in. Instead of changing the world around them with their godly standard, they let the world change them to its impure standards. God had called them to represent Him to the world. He set them at the crossroads of the world. But instead of changing the world around them they let the world change them. God placed us right here in uptown for a reason. We've inherited this great location to bring glory to God. Let's get at it!

Do you look more like the world than you look like Jesus? Sedona needs the testimony of Jesus. In our Bible study this Wednesday night we saw Daniel's prayer in Daniel

Commented [Q1]: 15a The horseleach hath two daughters, *crying*, Give, give. Prov. 30:15 (KJV)

chapter nine. He was concerned with the testimony of God that was going out to the world. The remnant was about to return, to become a nation again, and he cried out for repentance. He was worried about one thing, the testimony of the people to the nations around them. Are we as concerned about how the world sees God through us? We get wrapped up in the pettiest of things, thinking things should be done this way or that, personal preferences and personal power. The world doesn't see Jesus in that. Until we get our eyes focussed on Him and He becomes all we are concerned with, they are not going to be attracted.

One reason the world dreads an invitation to church because they are afraid they are going to get wrapped up in some political structure that makes demands on their life and ends in people fighting with one another for power and position. Can you blame them? I dread that! But I dread it not because of what it costs me but because it misrepresents Jesus! We need to see us so caught up in love with God that He is our whole focus. I long to see us with such a hunger for God that that is the only reason we gather – to know more of Jesus. I'm praying for Wayside to be insatiably hungry for the word, uncompromising with sin, and boldness to be beacon of light that is totally different from the world, like Ezra was. I long to see us so led by the Spirit we forget about who has what position. We just know Jesus is head and He is leading His church.

Complacency and apathy have dominated the ungrateful church of America too long. We give money to missionaries to sooth our conscience because we do not live as missionaries in our own land. God have mercy on us, and give us a desire to let Him have His unhindered way in our lives. Then the gracious hand of God will be upon us and we will see God at work starting right here in our own town.

But let's finish Ezra's story. What did the people do?

Ezra 10:2-6 (NIV) 2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. 3 Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. 4 Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it." 5 So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath. 6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

Ezra 10:10-12 (NIV) 10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt.

11 Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."

12 The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: "You are right! We must do as you say.

They heard. They were convicted. They repented. They did God's will. Should we do any less? Is there compromise with the world in your heart and life? Repent. Do God's will. Let God change you for His honor and glory, for the lost in Sedona, and because of God's great love and mercy upon us. Then let us be people devoted to the word of God that the gracious hand of God might be upon us!