

God's Great Provision in Great Adventures of Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Paul Brennan, one of our ministers, is going to be preaching God's Word to us shortly, and he's continuing our studies in the book of Ezra. So do grab a Bible. If you don't have one, we have visitor's Bibles spread around at the front, at the sides. If you wave your hand, one of the welcome team would be glad to bring one to you, I'm sure. So do grab a Bible, follow along, and we're going to be reading Ezra chapter 8. And if you're using one of the church visitor's Bibles, that's on page 394. Ezra chapter 8.

These are the heads of their father's houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia in the reign of Artaxerxes the king. Of the sons of Phineas, Gershon. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush. Of the sons of Shekhaniah, who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered 150 men. Of the sons of Pahath-Moab, Elihoiaini, the son of Zechariah, and with him 200 men. Of the sons of Zattu, Shekhaniah, the son of Jehaziel, and with him 300 men. Of the sons of Adin, Ebed, the son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men. Of the sons of Elam, Jehoshiah, the son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men. Of the sons of Shephethiah, Zebediah, the son of Michael, and with him 80 men. Of the sons of Jehob, Obadiah, the son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men.

Of the sons of Bani, Shelomith, the son of Jehoshaphiah, and with him 160 men. Of the sons of Bebi, Zechariah, the sons of Bebi, and with him 28 men. Of the sons of Asgard, Juhanan, the son of Hakatan, and with him 110 men. Of the sons of Adonachan, those who came later, their names being Eliphelet, Jehuel, and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men. Of the sons of Bigvi, Uthai, and Zechariah, and with them 70 men. 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. Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarab, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshulam, leading men, and for Joerib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, and sent them to Iddu, the leading man at the place Kasaphia, telling them what to say to Iddu and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Kasaphia, namely to send us ministers for the house of our God.

And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mali, the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherabiah, with his sons and kinsmen, 18. Also Hashabiah, and with him, Jeshiah, the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20. Besides 220 of the temple servants whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites.

[3 : 37] These were all mentioned by name. 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. 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 good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him. So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty. Then I set apart 12 of the leading priests, Sherabiah, Hashabiah, and 10 of their kinsmen with them. 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 their present had offered. I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 directs, and two vessels of fine bronze as precious as gold. And I said to them, you are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a free will offering to the Lord, the God of your fathers. Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of the father's houses in

Israel at Jerusalem within the chambers of the house of the Lord. 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. 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. We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days. On the fourth day within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Merrimoth, the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eliezer, the son of Phinehas, and with him were the Levites, Jozabad, the son of Jeshua, and Nuadiah, the son of Binwi. The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded. 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 meal goats. All this was a burnt offering to the

Lord. They also delivered the king's commission to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province beyond the river, and they eared the people and the house of God. Amen. This is God's word.

Well, please have Ezra, an open review there, Ezra chapter 8, which Josh read very well for us. Thank you, Josh. Lots of tricky names, rather you than me. So please turn that up, Ezra 8.

Now, this chapter, Ezra 8, charts for us a huge adventure of faith. Do not imagine this to be a small, easy journey. This was a venture fraught with risk and danger, as Ezra led another wave of returners back to Jerusalem. One and a half thousand people on a 900-mile journey, which took four months, all the while carrying millions and millions of pounds worth of gold and silver and precious things.

[7 : 42] It's a major venture, full of risks, a significant gospel project. The great goal of this, the reason why Ezra is returning, the purpose of that journey back to Jerusalem, look at the very last verse we read, the very last couple of words. When these returners got back to Jerusalem, they aided the people and the house of God. They were there to see the encouragement of the saints in Jerusalem to help them in their task of worship in the temple. They were going to establish and strengthen the right worship of God so that God would be glorified and that his people would shine as a light to the surrounding nations. That was their great purpose from the very beginning, to be a light to the nations. So Ezra is returning to Jerusalem to aid the work in the house of God in Jerusalem.

Now there's much to encourage us here as we read of Ezra and this journey. We are reminded about God's great provision for his people. Again and again we see God's hand upon his people, protecting them, ensuring that they get to Jerusalem safely. It's great encouragement but there's also, alongside that, great challenge as we see the response of God's people to this call to go and serve, to take this gospel risk, to travel all that way. 900 miles, four months, millions of pounds worth of gold. We're going to look at it in two parts. We're going to look at God's people who go and then secondly God's protection on the way. So looking at the first half of the chapter, it's up to verse 20, so verses 1 to 20, we see God's people and there are basically two groups, two broad categories of people that go back with Ezra. There's the broad category of all the people, verses 1 to 14. Then there's a specific area of the Levites from verse 15. But first, the people, verses 1 to 14, it would be easy to skim over these names. I think Josh probably wished we had done, but we could easily skim over them. It seems a bit boring to us. Here's a list of names, barely pronounceable. They might seem tedious or irrelevant to us, but there is great significance in their inclusion. In the case of all the groups mentioned, apart from one group, they are all drawn from the same families listed in Ezra chapter 2. They are descendants of those who 80 years beforehand have been pioneers who returned to Jerusalem in the first wave with Zerubbabel and Joshua.

And so 80 years later, here are others from those same families who are making that journey. They're following in their footsteps, generations on. And I think part of the message here of their inclusion seems to be, yes, don't trust in genetics, but don't despise them either. Don't despise genetics. After all, covenant fidelity tends, not always, but tends to run in families. We saw that last week, remember? One commentator put it this way. Even over the generations, it was particular families that were to the fore in making the journey back to the land. Reading between the lines, we may discern here an example of that faith in action transmitted from generation to generation by those families which took seriously their religion and their educative duties.

The courageous boldness of faith seen in the original Returners, Ezra chapter 2, it lived on, it seems, in their great, great, great grandchildren.

Is there not a word of hope here, encouragement for struggling godly parents, fathers and mothers, grandparents? Doesn't this help answer the question, what can I do for the kingdom of God? I'm struggling.

[12 : 15] I've got a bunch of small kids. I'm tired. What am I doing? Well, part of the answer is this.

Indoctrinate your kids. Lead a godly life in front of them. Not a perfect life, but a godly one. Now, you might cringe at that word indoctrination, but the thing is they'll be indoctrinated by something.

It's not a question of whether your children will be indoctrinated, but by what will they be indoctrinated by? Make sure they are indoctrinated by the truth, which seems to be the implication here.

Saturate them in the Bible. Indoctrinate them to the point that they are willing, like the folk listed here in chapter 8, willing to take great gospel risks for the sake of their Lord and Saviour.

That's the great hope and prayer of godly parents. Great education, great extracurriculars, they are all well and good, but they cannot distract, can they, from the ultimate great purposes that our Heavenly Father would have for our children.

[13 : 34] They would be raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. That we'd equip them, that our children would take great risks like these people did here. That they'd be willing to travel, take risks for the gospel.

They'd be willing to take great adventures in faith. That's one lesson to draw from this list. Here are the great, great, great grandchildren of those from Ezra chapter 2.

And they're still there, they're keen, pressing on in the faith. So don't despise genetics. Pray, as we saw last week. Pray for your children, pray for your grandchildren, pray for your great, great grandchildren.

Another lesson is this. The sobering reality here is that so few heeded the call to go back. In the first wave in chapter 2, about 40,000 went with Zerubbabel and Joshua.

This time, if you do the maths, it's about 1,500. A tiny fraction. They even had royal permission to go.

[14 : 41] Just cast your eye back to chapter 7, verse 13. The king says this. I now 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 king says you can go. Anyone can go. There's a royal invitation. The door swung open. How many would go? Well, not that many, it seems.

When the real moment for action arrives, were the people prepared to step out in faith? Well, only a few. And that's often the case, isn't it?

People will say they're willing. People will vocalize willingness. But when it actually comes to it, when the moment of action arrives, they're often nowhere to be seen.

James Philip comments, How few there are among those who ought to be engaged in the work of God, who really, who really take it seriously.

[15 : 48] How few. Now we need to hear and heed that challenge always. We have much to be thankful for in this church, don't you think?

There are so many who are engaged in the work of God. So many serving in so many ways. It's such a joy. But as we often talk about, we are partners here together, not passengers.

All of us are partners together. But if we had been there in Ezra's day, would we have heeded the call? Perhaps you may have been one of those keen to stay behind, to enjoy the comforts and the luxuries of life in Babylon.

It's easier to stay, hard to leave, too much to sacrifice. Perhaps you need to hear the implicit challenge here. Do you take the word of God seriously?

Not just in what you vocalize, but when the crunch comes, when the moment to step out on a great adventure of faith, whatever it might be, are you willing to go?

[16 : 59] Well, there's the first group, the people. The second group, from verse 15, is the Levites. Now, the previous part of the chapter brought a mix of encouragement, I think, but also challenge.

But this next section is very sobering. Ezra's gathered together all the people. They've come to the river that runs to a harbor. And he's gathered the folk together before they set out on their journey.

Maybe something of a stock take, just seeing who we've got, counting numbers, making sure we've got provisions, making lists, and so on. But he makes a very disturbing discovery, doesn't he? Look at the second half of verse 15.

Now, you might remember from Ezra 2, that there were very few Levites then.

In that first group of returners, you would expect to see a much higher number of Levites in proportion to the priests, but it was very low. But this time, there were none at all.

[18 : 05] And the great task of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, the re-establishing of the right worship of God, those who ought to have been at the front of the queue, namely the Levites, those who ought to be most enthusiastic, were nowhere to be found.

It's astonishing. But maybe not surprising. A quick recap of who the Levites were. The book of Numbers gives us some background.

Let me read you a couple of verses from Numbers. This is about when the Levites are given their task, what they're to do. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him.

They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle.

They were guardsmen. They were there to help ensure the work in the tabernacle went ahead unhindered. They were there to serve Aaron and the priests. So might it be, as one commentator suggests, that their prideful hearts resent the unseen nature of their calling?

[19 : 29] They're not the priests. They're there to support the priests. They're not the center of the action. Theirs is more of an unseen supportive role. Perhaps their hearts weren't really concerned with the glory of God, only with their own.

Returning to Jerusalem held nothing for them, really. It would mean hard work in the temple, guarding, supporting. And the thing is, a good bit of Christian work is pretty plain and ordinary, isn't it?

Unseen. Not much drama. No flair about it. And the thing is, we're not called to promote ourselves, or to gain status or recognition.

An assisting role, perhaps, doesn't appeal to our pride. We don't want to play second fiddle. We want credit, recognition, thanks, praise. We want to be honored. Visibility.

Perhaps that is why so few Levites returned. Is that why so many in the church, in the West today, those who ought to be at the forefront, leading, serving, they keep away.

[20 : 45] It's often noted in the Western church that men have failed to step up and take the lead. That's the picture you look at in the Western church. Men who ought to be in the forefront of the work of the church and their families, they've gone missing altogether, like the Levites here.

But let me ask you, if you're here, a younger man especially, have you taken on that responsibility? Are you at the forefront of God's work? With all the gifts and time and talents and opportunities that he's given you, are you shouldering your load?

And I think, friends, to be encouraged, so many do. That's one of the great joys of serving here at the Tron Church. I look around at the prayer meeting and see lots of young fathers there.

Young men taking a lead in prayer. That is wonderful, to be encouraged, do it all the more. Leading in all sorts of ways in different teams and different ministries throughout the week. But perhaps you're not shouldering your load.

Do you need to step up? Perhaps you need, as the Levites did, a bit of non-directive counseling. Look at how Ezra responds here to the failure of the Levites to step forward.

[22 : 02] He takes decisive action. Look at verse 16. He sends for some of his best men. Nine leading men, he finds, and another two men who are known for their insight. And he selects these men.

They are men with, it seems, gravitas. These are men known in the community. He leaves nothing to chance. Ezra's pondered the problem.

We've got no Levites. This is a big issue. Their job was to guard the temple possessions. We've got all this gold. Their job is to guard it. How are we going to solve this problem? We need Levites. He's thought about it.

He's pondered the problem. He's exercised wisdom. And he gives himself the best chance of recruiting Levites. He gets his best men. He gathers them together. And he sends them to a Levite settlement called Cassiphar.

And Ezra gives them very specific instructions. Look at verse 17. He tells them who to speak to and exactly what to say. So what's this from Ezra?

[23 : 04] A gentle strategy of persuasion. Setting out the various pros and cons of coming with us on this journey. Choosing to come or go. It's up to you. What do you think? There was none of that, was there?

What does Ezra tell them to say? Verse 17. Send us, ministers, for the house of God. Ezra's message to these men as they went to recruit Levites was this.

You must come. You must come. There is vital work to be done. Pack your bags. Get going. Now there are times when this sort of thing is needed.

When there's vital work in the advance of the gospel to be done and key people are not stepping forward as they ought to, then clear leadership like this is sometimes required.

Ezra knew the need in Jerusalem was great. He knew the men that would be required for the work, the Levites. He knew that he needed to do all that was in his power to recruit the right men for the job, to shake them from their apathy, to arrest them from their backsliding, get them up and serving the Lord.

[24 : 16] He had to do it. And he galvanized them into action. He sent the very best men to go and recruit them. I'm somewhat sure that if Ezra was around today and he did this, it would be labeled spiritual abuse by some.

Ezra's being spiritually abusive here. He's telling people what to do. How dare he? How dare a church leader presume to tell me how to serve the Lord and make sacrifices? But Ezra knew what was required.

He knew what he had to do. But the thing is, the reality is that although Ezra took measures, although he did all that was in his power, although he got the best guys, he made a very clear message, you must come.

Actually, Ezra couldn't make anyone come, could he? It was the Lord who moved the hearts of these Levites. And he's the only one who can. Look at verse 18.

And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahali, the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Cherubi with his sons and kinsmen.

[25 : 32] It was by the good hand of God these Levites heard the call and responded. On the human level, Ezra did all he could. But behind the scenes, God's gracious hand was at work turning the hearts of the Levites so they would respond to Ezra's call.

And that is one of the base notes throughout this whole chapter. As Bob Fyall writes, Ezra is continually calling us to look beyond the mundane and routine and see the hand of God working out his purposes as year succeeds year.

The Lord saw to it that Levites were provided. The hand of the Lord provides. In every great venture of faith, that is always the great reality.

We may do what we can. We may use exercise wisdom as Ezra does, but in the end, it's the Lord who does it. The Lord provides.

It may have seemed discouraging to Ezra as he gathers the folk there by the river to see so few relatively. Very discouraging that no Levites at all volunteered.

[26 : 43] But in the end, as they set out on their journey, the Lord has his people. The Lord provides what was needed. And that's always the way. It's always the way.

In God's task of building the church, he will always get his people. That's the first thing we see in this chapter, the Lord providing people. The second is the Lord's provision of protection from verse 21 to the end.

Now, a question arises as we consider these verses, as we look at Ezra's actions here. Here we have a group of one and a half thousand people that are about to go on this 900 mile journey with vast amounts of gold and silver.

It was a dangerous journey, a long journey. It was common in those days for thieves and robbers to set ambushes in the middle of nowhere. They would be ready to ambush those on the road.

To take their goods. And this is the definition of a sitting duck, isn't it? Here's this great train of people with massive amount of gold. Probably young families and children in the midst as well.

[27 : 52] Easy target. How would they make it there safely? Well, in the next book, Nehemiah, he makes a very similar journey and he brings with him an armed guard on that journey.

But Ezra doesn't. Look at verse 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.

Now, what do you make of that? Why does Ezra refuse the protection of the king? It seems like it would have been granted.

The king's lavished him with so many things already. An armed guard is no major deal. It would have been granted. But Ezra doesn't ask for it. Is he acting out of faith?

The Lord will protect us? Or was he being foolish? Was Nehemiah, who made the same journey, who took a different approach, was he acting out of fear, not trusting the Lord?

[28 : 59] Or was Nehemiah wise in his choice to bring an armed guard? He was using the means that God provided. What do we make of Ezra here? And his decision to risk it, to not to take the armed guard.

Here's the lesson we're to take away from this. Is it that when we're faced with taking a gospel risk, when faced with a potentially dangerous situation, we are to let go and let God? We don't rely on man's protection or help.

We just trust God to protect us. Is that the lesson? Well, the text doesn't really tell us whether one of these approaches is right or wrong.

It doesn't tell us if Ezra's the right approach or Nehemiah's the right approach. It's not quite that simple. It's not a simple here's three steps to take.

It's about our attitude. It's about wisdom. It's about the situation. But what both of these men do, as we will see in Nehemiah after Easter, but Ezra here, both of them, their instinct is to pray.

[30 : 05] With this significance, long and dangerous journey, before them, they prayed. They sought out the Lord. Look at verse 21. Ezra proclaims a fast, that they would humble themselves before God to seek for him a safe journey.

They sought the Lord. This isn't a casual three-second prayer. Lord, please bless us on this journey. Amen, we're going. No, this is a serious undertaking. Three days.

Three days of fasting and praying and seeking the Lord. And the focus here is on prayer, a very real expression from Ezra and all the people not on the presumption of protection from God, but the realization that they depend entirely on God for protection.

Ezra's decision not to take an arm guard was as much an act of faith as Nehemiah's would be to take an arm guard, both acting in faith, trusting the Lord. As Bob Farr says, the stories of the life of faith in Scripture are not there as blueprints of how we are to behave.

Rather, they show us people of faith wrestling with the same kind of issues as us and not finding them easy and straightforward. This is not contrasting Ezra's more spiritual approach with Nehemiah's more practical one.

[31 : 28] Both men looked at the situation and took, after prayer and reflection, the cause which seemed right for them at the time. After all, both trusted in God. an armed escort was no precaution, not a guarantee against safety.

But the question still presents itself. Why did Ezra, in this instance, opt against the common sense approach? The common sense approach would be we take an arm guard.

When it comes to other big issues in this chapter, that's what Ezra does. The Levite problem, the safe delivery of the gold, we'll see in a moment. On both those things, Ezra opts for what you might call the common sense approach.

He uses the means that God has given him. He thinks, he acts, he makes decisions. He looked on the law to provide through normal means, wise planning, hard work, and so on. With the gold, Ezra took precautions.

He was diligent with accounting for the vast quantities of gold and silver they'd be carrying to Jerusalem. He charges key men to look after it, to make a careful record of every single piece of gold that they were taking.

[32 : 47] They were to guard it and keep it till they arrived in Jerusalem. There was nothing slapdash there at all from Ezra, was there? Careful accounting, careful delineating of responsibilities to named individuals, no issues for the auditors to raise the alarm about, no sitting back and saying, oh, the Lord will sort it out, it'll be fine, we'll wing it.

No, no. Ezra takes careful steps. At times, Ezra does what most of us would do, I think. He takes careful steps to use all the things he's got to make a wise choice, but when it comes to the armed guard, why does he not do that?

Why does he not opt to take the armed guard? That would seem the obvious thing to do. As Kevin DeYoung posed the question, how do we know when gutsy faith would have us fly in the face of common sense?

Common sense would say, bring the armed guard. How do we know when to step out in gutsy faith and not do what seems common sense? Well, I think we have something of the clue as to Ezra's rationale there in verse 22.

Look at that again with me. 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.

[34 : 23] See, Ezra has stood before the king, he has boasted to the king about his God, about his hand being upon all who seek him, about his care, his protection, his trustworthiness.

He proclaimed the gospel about the Lord to the king. But to then turn around to the king and say, oh, by the way, could you organize me an armed guard for this great God who protects his people and cares for them, can you just give me an armed guard?

How would Ezra look to the king if he asked for that armed guard? How would God look in the eyes of the king if he asked for this armed guard?

That seems to be Ezra's concern. Uttermost in his mind is the reputation of God. What would people say about God if Ezra had taken the armed guard, given what he had said in front of the king, given what he had said there in verse 22?

That seems to be the key factor for Ezra. That is the key thing in his mind as he makes his decision not to take the armed guard. So sometimes it is right for us to turn down the available means, such as a band of soldiers.

[35 : 42] It is sometimes right to turn that down, to trust God to work apart from that so that he is glorified, so that barriers to gospel witness are removed.

If Ezra had taken the armed guard, what would that say to the king and all those watching? It is something a bit like the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 refusing to take payment for his work.

He refused to take it, didn't he? He was perfectly entitled to a wage, but for the sake of gospel witness for the reputation of the Lord, he did not make use of the available means.

He trusted God to work otherwise, to provide for him. And likewise with Ezra here, he opted not to make use of the normal means in this case because above all, above every other consideration, he cared for the reputation of God.

That seems to be the issue here, the principle. Now, this isn't easy. As we think about our own situations and our own lives and the life of the church, it's quite hard, isn't it, when we come to these difficult decisions, when there's various options available to us.

[36 : 59] We've got the common sense. God has given us these means. Do I use them? It requires discernment. At times, Ezra does make use of normal means with the Levites, with the goals.

He plans, he ponders, he acts. But with the armed guard, he comes to a different conclusion. In all these things, in all these decisions, he is trusting the Lord.

In all these ways, he is acting in faith. In all these presenting problems, with the Levites, the journey itself, the goals, the outcome in every instance is due to the Lord.

Notice the repetition of that phrase, the good hand of the Lord. On all three of those big issues, the Levites, the journey, the goal, on all three of them, it is the Lord who provides.

The Levite problem resolved, verse 18, by the good hand of the Lord. In terms of the journey and the goal, look at verse 31. Then we departed from the river Ahab on the twelfth day of the first month to go to Jerusalem.

[38 : 12] The hand of our God was on us. He delivered us from the hand of the enemy. And they brought the gold, safely delivered.

So whatever we decide to do, whether it's to use the means God provides, or whether we, for the sake of the gospel witness, opt what seems to be foolishness, it's the Lord who gets the glory.

It's the Lord who provides. Now as we read over this chapter, as we see these folk arriving in Jerusalem, it kind of sounds like no big deal, doesn't it?

A safe journey. We do that all the time. But for a defenseless group of Jews, exposed to daily danger over four months, by foot, this was proof of the protection of God.

the words that we read there at the end, we came to Jerusalem. That for them, that was the great moment of their lives. That was their great adventure of faith as they went on that journey.

[39 : 22] This was the huge moment for them. The moment when they could most clearly testify to God's provision and his protection. The Lord's hand of favor was upon them.

And so, in whatever ways God provides for us, whatever ways he protects us, whether we've used the means available to us or whether we've shunned those means for the gospel reasons, whatever we've done, the glory always belongs to God because his hand has been at work.

That is the great reality in this chapter. It is the God's hand who delivers his people. Yes, Ezra and the people take great risks as they go on this great gospel adventure to serve God's purposes in his temple in Jerusalem, but it's the Lord's hand who's upon them at every stage.

Yes, Ezra had to exercise wisdom. He faced various issues and problems, but regardless of what he did, no matter what we do, as we step out on adventures of faith, we are always dependent on God's hands of grace upon us.

opting to use ordinary means, making use of practical solutions is no guarantee of success, nor is avoiding the use of ordinary means and being spiritual.

- [40 : 44] We are always in everything dependent upon him. This great journey was the greatest privilege of their lives. the stories of the great exodus back to Jerusalem would be told down through the generations of their children, of how they heeded the call of the Lord through Ezra, how they left behind the comforts of Babylon, risked everything, traveled 900 miles so that the worship of the God's house could be maintained and continued and would thrive.

God delights to use his people today to the same ends. Will you heed his call to serve him, to serve his church?

Will you be willing to take great gospel risks, stepping out in faith, seeking his help? Will you trust him when things seem possible, 900 miles by foot to Jerusalem?

With no armed guard. Will you trust him then? Ezra spoke these words to King Artaxerxes.

Hear them again. Verse 22. 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.

- [42 : 08] So will you seek him or will you forsake him? Will you seek him for your salvation? Will you seek him for your daily bread?

Will you seek him for your future? Will you seek him for your children? Will you seek him for the salvation of your family, your friends? Will you seek him in the use of ordinary means?

Will you seek him when by faith and for his reputation you refuse to use ordinary means and be derided as a fool? Will you seek him?

Or will you forsake him? Jesus is building his eternal church. Are you with him? If you are, then you can know his protection now and for all eternity.

The good hand of the Lord is on his church. church. And you can join your name to those on this list here at the start of chapter eight. Whose names are in the Lamb's book of life.

- [43 : 17] Will you join your name to theirs and hear the Lord's well done, good and faithful servants when we see him face to face? Will you trust the Lord?

Will you seek him? Amen. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, keep us from self-centeredness.

Keep us from seeking glory for ourselves. Keep us from thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to. But Lord, give us a great vision of who you are.

Give us a great vision of your provision, of your protection for your people and your great plans for all eternity. So Lord, help us to see afresh your great plan of building your church for all eternity.

And Lord, would you help each of us to be those who respond to your call to serve with humble and glad acceptance, a willingness to go, to trust you.

- [44 : 41] So please help us to be a people who live, not by what we see, not by the opinion of other men, but live by faith, we ask.

Help us to that end. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.