

God's Prescription for a Backslidden Church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 January 2025

Preacher: Paul Brennan

- [0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to come now to the scriptures, to our Bible reading for this evening, which you'll find in the Old Testament, in the book of Ezra, in Ezra chapter 7.
- And if you don't have a Bible, there's some at the side, some at the back, and do pick one up. You'll find on those red or blue Bibles, I think it's page 393.
- And Paul Brennan's been leading us through this fascinating historical book of the Old Testament, about the return of God's people from exile to rebuild the temple which had been ruined in Jerusalem.
- And we read last time about all that went on of that rebuilding in the time of Darius the king. And now we're many decades later and reading about what went on during the reign of another king, Artaxerxes.
- So chapter 7 begins now after this, after all this. In the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Saraiah, the son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shalom, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Merioth, son of Zerahiah, son of Uzi, son of Buki, son of Abishu, son of Phinehas, son of Eliezer, son of Eliezer, son of Aaron, the chief priest, this Ezra, went up from Babylonia.
- [1 : 2 9] He was a scribe, skilled in the law of Moses, that the Lord the God of Israel had given. And the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.
- And they went up also to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, the king, some of the people of Israel and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers and the temple servants.
- And he 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.
- This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra, the priest, the scribe, of the law of the God of heaven, peace.
- [2 : 4 5] And now I make a decree that any one of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom who freely offers to go to Jerusalem may go with you.
- For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold that you'll find in the whole province of Babylonia and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem.
- With this money then you shall be with all diligence buying bulls, rams, lambs with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem.

Whatever seems good to you and your brothers do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do it according to the will of your God. The vessels that have been given to you for the service of the house of your God you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem.

Whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury. And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river.

[4 : 10] Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence. Up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cores of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing.

How much? Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons.

We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on any one of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that's in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province beyond the river.

All such as know the laws of your God, and those who do not know them you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.

[5 : 23] 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, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, good evening. Please do have your Bibles open to Ezra chapter 7, which Willie read for us a little earlier.

Please do turn it up and have in front of you. I want to take you back a few years to 1967.

The U.S. president was Lyndon Johnson. There have been 10 U.S. presidents since. The U.K. prime minister was Harold Wilson. There's been 13 prime ministers since.

[6 : 44] The minister of the Tron Church was George Duncan. There have been three ministers since. That was 58 years ago. A lot can happen in 58 years.

And churches that once flourished have dwindled to nothing. Others have continued to flourish and thrive almost six decades later.

58 years. That's the length of time between chapter 6, we're in last week, and chapter 7 this evening. 58 years in the space of a verse have passed.

We left chapter 6 in the sixth year of the reign of Darius. The year was 516 B.C. And chapter 7 begins, as Willie pointed out, in the reign of Artaxerxes.

The year is 458 B.C. 58 years later. A lot happened in those years. We left in chapter 6 a vibrant, worshipping community of God's people.

[7 : 46] They just rebuilt the temple. Great rejoicing and celebration. They celebrated the Passover together, end of chapter 6. But 60 years later, the picture is very different for the church in Jerusalem, as we'll see in future chapters.

What Ezra discovers as he arrives in Jerusalem is a church not flourishing, but backslidden. It is a church very much in decline.

What Ezra saw when he arrived in Jerusalem greatly distressed him. We'll see that in chapter 9 and 10. He was absolutely devastated what he saw with the church in Jerusalem.

If the first six chapters were about the restoration of the temple, the final chapters of Ezra are about the restoration of the Torah, of God's word, the restoration of God's people.

And these next chapters are about a church very much in need of reformation, of renewal, of repentance, urgently.

[8 : 52] How was that going to take place? How was this church that had declined so rapidly over a number of years, how was it going to be restored?

How was this backslidden church, this group of God's people, how were they going to be restored, and once again take up their role as a bright witness to the watching world?

How was that going to happen? Well, to put it more positively, what is God's plan for a flourishing church? What does it take not only to reverse decline, but to ensure flourishing in the church?

Not just over one year or five, but over six decades. What will it take? What needs to be in place? Well, chapter 7 shows us what is necessary.

We see here God's prescription for a backsliding church. We see the key elements that are needed for renewal. If a church is going to be reversed from walking away from God's ways to being turned around, and once again following Him with all their heart, soul, and mind, chapter 7 outlines exactly what was required.

[10 : 03] And there are two key elements we see in this chapter. And these elements must always be in place, not just in Ezra's day, but today. For the church to thrive and flourish, two key things must always be there.

There's firstly what we must attend to as God's people. We must have a dedication to God's Word. That's the first thing. The second element is somewhat beyond our control, but it's essential, and it's the Lord's favour.

Those are the two things. A commitment to God's Word, and the Lord's favour. So we look at this chapter under those two headings. Number one is all about God's Word.

And we see here in this chapter, a man raised up by God for the task of bringing renewal to his backslidden people. A man who was, in his Bible ministry, diligent, strategic, authoritative.

Ezra was a man careful and diligent in his Bible teaching, his Bible ministry. He was diligent. He was strategic in seeking to multiply his Bible-preaching ministry, able to see others doing it.

[11 : 19] And it was also a Bible-preaching ministry with absolute authority. So we consider those three things that we see with Ezra, this man raised up by God to be sent to his church in Jerusalem to bring about renewal and repentance.

So the first thing about Ezra is his diligence. Those opening verses, you may have thought, this is a little tedious.

All these names, the son of so-and-so. What's that all about? Well, these opening verses of verses 1 to 7, and they tell us something of Ezra's pedigree. We get his family tree.

We find out who he is. And his lineage is impressive. It's traced all the way back to Aaron himself, the great high priest. And by the time we wade through all those names, in verses 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 5, we've got the impression that Ezra is a somewhat impressive man.

Here's his family tree. I don't know if you've ever watched that program on the BBC, what's it called? You know, the one about they follow the family tree.

[12 : 26] Who are you? Or something. Anyway, some of those, you get very impressive. They take it right back to some royal king, or, you know, the king of France or something. Not so good. But maybe the king of England. Apologies if you're French.

But you get a sense of someone's lineage and heritage. But Ezra's is impeccable. For his job, being one who would teach God's word, his lineage was absolutely impeccable.

He was a man with spiritual pedigree, and he lives up to it. Now, lineage doesn't in itself guarantee anything, does it? But it is often the case that the Lord works through families.

And we can be very short-term in our thinking, but you would do well to think of the generations that follow. To think not only of your own children, but your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren.

Some of them have been baptized this evening in front of us. Pray for your great-grandchildren, that they would not only walk in the way of the Lord, but they would be greatly used by him.

[13 : 32] How many of you here today can point to parents and grandparents and great-grandparents who walked with the Lord and set an example for you?

Ezra had that sort of lineage. She could look back and see those who have been faithful before him, those who have been committed to teaching God's word, all the way up his family tree. That's a bit of a side point, but it's worth drawing out, particularly tonight, as we've seen these baptisms and these children.

Pray for them. Pray for their children. Pray for their great-grandchildren, that they would hold firm and keep on with the Lord. Ezra came from such a family.

And we're told in verse 6 that he was a scribe, skilled in the law of Moses. Now, a scribe was a man of significant influence.

As a scribe, you would be one of the few people who could write things down, and he would be there, working for the king, taking notes, taking minutes. And clearly, he was very good at his job.

[14 : 36] He gained a significant degree of political influence. It was Ezra that King Artaxerxes turned to and appointed to be his Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs. He was the one picked up and sent to Jerusalem.

It's like being chosen to be the ambassador, the ambassador to the United States. Off you go. Great responsibility. Look at verse 14. Just flick your eyes down there.

You see the degree of influence he's been granted. For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God.

It's a big job he's been given. He's going to oversee a whole province for King Artaxerxes. Great responsibility. Clearly, the Lord's favor has been upon Ezra.

And the Lord has raised him up and placed him in such a position that the king chooses him to go to Jerusalem. And repeatedly throughout this passage, we see what sort of man Ezra was.

[15 : 39] And what is clear, the picture you get of this man is that he was absolutely dedicated to God's word. He was a man careful in his study of the Lord's word.

And this is the sort of man the Lord needs to deploy if his church is to be renewed. If the Jerusalem church was to be restored and be renewed, this is exactly the sort of man that was needed.

A man diligent in his study of the word of the Lord. Look at verse 6. He was a scribe. We've seen that already. Verse 10. Ezra set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rule his in Jerusalem.

Verse 11. Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in the matter of the commandments of the Lord his statutes for Israel. Verse 12. Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Lord, the God of heaven.

Again and again, it draws our attention to the fact that here was a man who knew God's word. He was a scribe. He knew God's word. An expert in the Torah.

[16 : 46] A man who dedicated himself to careful study of God's word. A man of the book. And this is key. It's always the key foundation for any church that will flourish.

At the root, at the foundation, must be men who are gripped by the word of God. Men who know it and who love it.

Men like Ezra. And this is key because it is through God's word that God does his work amongst his people. His word is how he does it.

It's the instrument he uses to teach and transform his people. And the reality is, as someone put it, the limit of our service is how far we ourselves have been brought by the discipline of the word.

You see, a passing acquaintance with the word of God will produce a shallow service, feeble harvest. however, a deep saturation in the word, a deep knowledge and love of the scriptures and of the God whose scriptures they are will prove to be a rich and fertile soil, fruitful.

[18 : 08] Someone who's deep in the word, who loves it, who knows it, who teaches it. That is a way in which the church will be blessed and transformed. And a deep knowledge of the word of God was to prove absolutely vital for Ezra.

As he went back to Jerusalem, as he had to go and deal with what was going on there, he had to have a deep knowledge of God's words. It was vital then, it's vital today, a deep knowledge of God's word.

If the church is to flourish, not flounder, it's absolutely essential. And it's a deep knowledge and understanding of the word, not only for those who teach and preach week in, week out, but in every aspect of our church, family life together through all the different midweek meetings that we do.

A deep knowledge of God's word in our families led by those who love God's word. We need all of us to be those who are people dedicated to God's word.

Ensuring that we ourselves are sitting under the authority of it week by week, Sunday by Sunday, morning and evening. Pray for our leaders, those who preach the word.

[19 : 23] Pray for their commitment to the Lord and to his words. Pray that those who preach will be those who dedicate themselves to knowing and knowing the word of the Lord to do it, to teach it.

Pray that God would raise up future generations, those who will do the same in 58 years from now so that the church would not flounder but flourish because the word is absolutely central.

Ezra, it's clear, was diligent studying the words. but that's not the only aspect of Ezra and his ministry that we're drawn to look at here.

He's also strategic. He plans in terms of how that gospel ministry, that teaching of the word is to be multiplied. Notice verse 25.

Look on to that. verse 25. And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province beyond the river, all such as know the laws of your God and those who do not know them shall teach.

[20 : 45] You see, Ezra, he was to appoint others to the task of applying God's word and teaching it to God's people. It wasn't just to be him on his own. He was to appoint others.

He was to choose other people to do the same thing. There was more work than Ezra could do by himself. Yes, Ezra was obviously very able. He's very knowledgeable but he was only one man.

He couldn't do everything. There was a limitation to the ministry that he could exercise by himself. So, he had to multiply himself. He had to find others to do the same.

And if he ran out of suitable candidates, he'd have to train others. Notice end of verse 25. And those who do not know them, you shall teach.

He was to establish, if you like, Cornhill Judah. Find others. Train them up. He was to multiply himself to train other men to do the same thing.

[21 : 45] Those would be committed to studying God's word, diligently obeying it and diligently teaching it. And this is always vital in God's church.

In Ezra's day but also for us. Think on the Apostle Paul. What did he instruct Timothy to do in the early days of the church?

Well, he said, what you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust a faithful man who will be able to teach others also. He was to find others, train them up and send them out.

And so too for us today. Vital for the church is the present training of Bible teachers. That is why we as a church invest as much as we do in identifying and training and sending out men to preach God's word.

That is why we value and support Cornhill Scotland. That is why we have been running the ministry of apprenticeship for 20 odd years. That is why we have ministers in training. That is why we send out folk like Stephen Ballingall and Andy Ritson.

[22 : 57] Folk to go and do likewise. What they have seen here, what they have learnt here, they go out and they do the same. We need, like Ezra, to be strategic, to be planning for the future.

We need to put structures in place so that more and more men can be identified and trained up in order to go and preach the word. We need to plan if we're to multiply like Ezra.

And Ezra clearly didn't wing it. Did you notice those words in verse 6? Easy to miss. It says, He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given and the king granted him all that he asked.

See, Ezra asked the king for certain things. Ezra knew he was being dispatched to Jerusalem and so he considered what was required if he was going to do the job and then he asked the king for those things he needed.

He had a plan. He had thought strategy. He thought, I'm going to need to do certain things. I'm going to ask the king for those things so that I can do my job. He had a plan.

[24 : 17] I appreciate Bob Files' comments on this little verse. He says this, There is an important principle here. We must not let the great doctrine of providence turn us into passive pietists who say, If we pray, God will do all the work.

Rather, we must be ready to move when God opens the doors. In Ezra, we don't have some cloistered scholar nor a shallow activist. Rather, we have a man deeply schooled in the word of God who is also a man of planning and strategy.

And that's right, isn't it? We do need to think and plan and make preparations. For a church to flourish, for a church to be renewed, God's word must be central.

Of course it must. We need to find those who are careful and diligent in their study of God's word so they can teach the church. But that also requires strategy and planning so that there will be more in the future to do that work.

But there's another aspect of the ministry we mustn't miss. Yes, careful, diligent teaching. Yes, careful planning, strategy, and so on. But also there needs to be preaching and ministry that comes with real authority.

[25 : 39] That's the third key aspect we see about Ezra and his teaching of God's word. It was a teaching with authority. Ezra is given substantial authority here by the king.

Cast your eyes over these verses. Verse 14, we see the kind of things that the king sends him to do. He's sent by the king himself and the seven counselors. He's given a particular task there in verse 14, great authority.

Look on to verse 21. I, Artaxerxes, the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river. Whatever Ezra, the priest, the scribe, the Lord in heaven requires of you, let it be done.

And then again, verse 25, we've seen already. He's given great authority to go and appoint others. Ezra's been sent by the king to undertake certain tasks and he's got the authority to undertake those tasks.

Whatever resources Ezra needs, you give it to him. But what is at the root of that? Why does king Artaxerxes give Ezra such authority?

[26 : 46] Why has the king chosen him? Well, I want to zoom in on one verse in particular that gets to the very heart of who Ezra was and why the king sends him.

Look at verse 10. This is a key verse. 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.

So Ezra was a man who taught God's word with authority but there's a considerable hinterland to Ezra that meant he was a man of depth and substance.

He didn't just decide one day I'm going to teach God's word. No, no, there was a lifetime of study, a lifetime of obedience that gave his ministry real depth and authority.

Three things were told in this verse about Ezra. One, he set his heart to study the law of the Lord. Number two, he did it and number three, he then taught it. So before the communication of God's word in the public arena, there was the concentration in the study and the consistent living out of what he saw in the study in his own life.

[28 : 06] That is what gave Ezra authority, gravitas. Here was a man who gave all of his being to the word of the Lord. It wasn't mere intellectual study, although it certainly began there, it certainly included that.

No, what Ezra encountered in the study was not dry doctrine. It was the living word of God. It touched his heart, transformed how he lived.

It was this that enabled him to go and preach and teach that word with authority. real authority in preaching doesn't come through the accumulation of qualifications and PhDs.

Real authority in preaching doesn't just arise because somebody's read the right books. Real authority in preaching doesn't magically descend upon somebody because they've been through Corn Hill.

Real authority in preaching is not a mere intellectual exercise, although it certainly includes the intellect. Real authority in preaching does often involve careful reading of books and diligent study in the Bible and the help of Corn Hill and so on.

[29 : 25] But it must challenge and transform the man himself, mustn't it? Clearly, Ezra, as he wrestled with and understood God's word, he responded appropriately. He did it.

He read God's word and he did it. That is, Ezra knew that the study of God's word is not an end in itself.

God's word is the revelation from almighty God to his people. It is a message calling for a response, a response of worship, a response of repentance, a response of rejoicing, a response of obedience.

Ezra knew that himself. And a church sitting under the preaching of a man who knows and obeys the word of God will be a church sitting under authoritative teaching because it will be preaching with a message, a message to challenge sometimes, a message to make us uncomfortable, a message that makes us think, I wish he hadn't said that.

But also a message to bring encouragement to God's people, to tend wounded hearts, yes, to unsettle, but also to comfort.

[30 : 55] Preaching is not just mere intellectual entertainment. No, preaching comes with a message that transforms. God's tongues. Because in preaching, we're not just hearing the word of a man, but we hear the word of Christ himself.

John Calvin wrote this. He said, one of the most remarkable gifts God has given is that he deigns to consecrate the mouths and tongues of men to his service, making his own voice to be heard in them.

So when God's word is proclaimed, Christ is in the midst, speaking. It is his voice that is heard, not just the preacher speaking about Christ, no, no, it's Christ himself.

It's the point the apostle Paul makes in Ephesians 2. He said, for he himself is our peace, who has made us both one. He came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who are near, for through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So while it was Paul who preached, the deeper reality was it was Jesus himself who was present in their gatherings. It was Jesus who was speaking to them. Preaching, teaching of God's word with real authority, that will transform the people of God.

[32 : 28] And Ezra was a man with real authority because he was one who knew not just the word but the God whose word it was. He knew God. He read the word and he did it.

And so his preaching came with absolute authority because it's preaching with a message. Ezra was the man that God identified to go back to Jerusalem and to call back his people.

They drifted and Ezra was the one to go back and call them to return to the laws. God to God to God to take.

To renew a back certain people. Well, Ezra 7 shows us the exact sort of ministry that was required. God knew what sort of man was needed.

A ministry centered on God's word, one who is diligent in his study of God's word, one who would be careful to teach it and to multiply, to find others, to be strategic in how he went about it, but also one who would teach with absolute authority.

[33 : 41] That is what the church then needed. It's what the church now always needs. Careful, diligent, strategic, authoritative teaching. But that's not the only aspect that this chapter draws out.

That's not the only thing that a church needs if it's going to be renewed and remaining faithful and flourishing. We've thought about the human responsibility side of it, but there's another side to it.

There's a danger that we think is only down to us and what we do. And so we can't miss the drumbeat of God's sovereignty in this chapter. Again and again, we are pointed not to Ezra, but to the Lord.

For a church to flourish, we need, yes, God's word preached faithfully, but also we need God's favor. We need God's favor. We need God's favor. There can be no presumption upon God's favor, only dependence upon it.

There's a brief phrase that repeats again and again throughout this chapter. The hand of the Lord. The hand of the Lord. It's there in verse 6.

[34 : 53] The king granted Ezra all that he asked for. The hand of the Lord was on him. verse 9. 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. And I look down to the end. Verse 28.

The very last sentence. I took courage for the hand of the Lord my God was on me. The hand of the Lord. Yes, Ezra was a brilliant man, obviously.

He was diligent and skilled. He made plans and thought carefully, but ultimately, Ezra is dispatched to Jerusalem with the king's blessing and all the resources he could possibly need because the Lord's hand was on him.

That is the ultimate reality for Ezra and for every church that flourishes. it's the Lord's hand. And remembering that, remembering God's sovereignty, remembering his gracious hand upon us, that very helpfully pricks our pride, doesn't it?

[36 : 11] Whilst the Lord does call us to play our part, to work hard, to make plans, the fruitfulness of our ministries, the growth of a church, the joy of seeing men and women profess faith in the Lord Jesus and grow as Christians, that is not ever down to you or me, is it?

It is the Lord in his sovereignty who does it. It is only and always down to the Lord. And Ezra knows that.

In that final paragraph, we hear Ezra himself, we hear his voice for the first time, reflecting on all that's happened. And let's listen again as we close.

He's very clear about where the credit should go, isn't he? Look at verse 27, 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 to extend to me his steadfast love before the king and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty officers.

I took courage for the Lord, the hand of my Lord was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me. When the Lord seeks to call back to himself away with people like the church in Jerusalem, or when he seeks to see his church flourish, he can move the heart of a king, he can stir the heart of a Babylonian Jew like Ezra, he can say all the things so that Ezra finds himself sent back to Jerusalem in order to call his people back to repentance.

[37 : 56] And that is the ultimate explanation then and today, the hand of the Lord. And that reality, that must, as well as drive us to seeking diligence in preaching and careful ministry, it must also drive us to prayer, mustn't it?

it is because the Lord is sovereign that we pray to him, to have mercy upon us, to help us in the task of making and growing disciples of Jesus.

This should always be our first port of call, to cry out to the Lord, to ask for his hand upon us, to help us, to cry out to him for the salvation of men and women in our city.

it's the Lord who builds his church. It's the Lord who does it. So what does a church need if it's backslidden?

What does a church need if it's to flourish? What ought we to focus on? Well, no surprises, but Ezra 7 tells us two things, the centrality of God's word and prayer.

[39 : 08] prayer. That's it. God's word and prayer. So let's pray as we close our time together and ask for the Lord's help.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that there is nothing more precious in your sight than your church, your people, the church for whom you sent your own son to bleed and die for, to purchase for yourself a people forever.

And thank you that you can move kings and men in order to bring about the restoration of your church, even when they have slidden away.

You are able to raise up men for the task. So Lord, help us as we look to the future, not just in terms of the next years, but in decades. Lord, we pray in your mercy that 58 years from now, the pulpit in this church would be one where your word is authoritatively proclaimed, where it's led by those who are diligent, strategic, men who love your word, who obey your word, and teach others.

So Lord, have mercy on us. Help us as a church to remain faithful to you, and help us now and always to trust, to depend on you always for everything.

[40 : 43] May your favor be upon us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.