

The Remarkable Case of the King of Persia

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles to the book of Ezra, chapter 7. Our passage for study this evening is going to be verses 11 to the end, but I'll read the whole of the chapter just so that we can get the context clearly in our minds.

You'll find this on page 393 in our big church Bible if you have a copy of that. The book of Ezra, chapter 7 and verse 1.

The date is 458 BC. Now, after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Saraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shalom, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meriath, son of Zerahiah, son of Uzi, son of Buki, son of Abishur, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, son of Aaron, the chief priest, this Ezra went up from Babylonia.

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 there 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.

[1 : 30] 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, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel.

Artaxerxes, king of kings. To Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, peace. 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.

[2 : 48] With all the silver and gold that you shall 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 with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and 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 to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem.

And 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.

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 one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cores of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much.

[4 : 05] 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 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, 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.

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.

[5 : 20] 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. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us this evening. Well, let's turn again to Ezra, chapter 7, page 393.

And as I said earlier, our passage for tonight begins at verse 11 and runs through to the end of the chapter. My title is The Remarkable Case of the King of Persia, but really it's about the relationship between church and nation.

William Shakespeare has been very much celebrated in the last few weeks because the 400th anniversary of his death, as you know, fell about a fortnight ago. And Shakespeare has been celebrated from every angle you could think of.

Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare in London, Shakespeare in jazz music, Shakespeare in America, Shakespeare in China, and so on. But my attention was caught by a little item on Radio 2 the other day.

[6 : 40] I think it was part of the Simon Mayo show. And the presenter had two or three guests with him in the studio. And a string of very well-known, famous phrases from the English language, everyday phrases, was being read out.

Phrases that we constantly use in our ordinary speech. Phrases like, parting is such sweet sorrow. You might not say that every day, but you're familiar with it. Or a phrase like, how are the mighty fallen?

Now, about a dozen well-known phrases of that kind were being read out. And the presenter's guests were asked, does this phrase come from Shakespeare or from the Bible?

Now, the guests made a bit of a pig's ear of it, and they got most of them wrong. But the point came across that the English language over the last 400 years or so has been hugely shaped and influenced by the works of Shakespeare, who died in 1616, and by the authorized version of the Bible, which was published in the year 1611.

One or two other important people like Charles Dickens and perhaps Churchill may have added the odd colorful phrase which has become part of our language heritage. But the influence of Shakespeare and the authorized version massively outweighs every other influence, which means that the authorized version of the Bible was deeply woven into the very fabric of British life and thought for hundreds of years.

[8 : 10] It fashioned people's language. It gave them a framework of how to understand the world and how to understand human life. And this was equally true both sides of the border.

Scottish writers like Sir Walter Scott and John Buchan quote the authorized version on almost every page of their action-packed novels. And clearly they assumed that their readers would recognize where the quotations came from.

Until about the middle of the 20th century, the English Bible and the thought life of the English-speaking peoples of the world had many profound connections. Now that's not to say that half of the people of Britain were truly Christians up to 1950.

It was never like that. But there was a broad acceptance that the Bible had a right to speak to the nation and not least in matters of state and government and a right also to speak to the monarch.

Here's a short excerpt from the official prayers of the Church of England for the monarch. This is addressed, of course, to the Lord, but the prayer is for the monarch. That it may please thee to keep and strengthen in the true worshipping of thee in righteousness and holiness of life thy servant Elizabeth, our most gracious queen and governor.

[9 : 27] That it may please thee to rule her heart in thy faith, fear, and love and that she may evermore have confidence in thee and ever seek thy honor and glory.

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord. And so it goes on. In the official coronation service, the archbishop presents the newly crowned monarch with a copy of the Bible saying, we present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.

Here is wisdom. Here is the royal law. Here are the very oracles of God. Now, we're well aware that in the last few decades, this powerful connection between the Bible and the nation has been greatly weakened.

Royal weddings and big state funerals like the funeral of Princess Diana and Lady Thatcher are still carried out in the great London cathedrals in Westminster Abbey or perhaps St. Paul's Cathedral and the Prime Minister is asked to stand and read a reading from the Bible.

But these events tend to be more concerned with pomp and ceremony and national emotion than with real gospel faith. And we're all aware that across the whole of Western Europe and Scandinavia and much of North America too, the connections between the Bible and national life have been hollowed out so that not much more than a shell remains.

[10 : 58] Now, in Old Testament Israel, the people of God would not have understood a distinction between church and state because the law of God, the law of Moses, was also the law of the land.

The national leaders, whether judges or prophets or the kings, were expected to enforce the law of Moses. the king was expected to know the law of the Lord well in real detail and to live by it.

But by Ezra's day, 458 BC, the situation had been greatly altered. Just think of what had happened to the two Hebrew kingdoms, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Israel simply no longer existed. It had been overrun by the Assyrians nearly 300 years previously and the people of Israel had been deported. And Judah, too, was in a very sorry state.

It had been conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Many of its people had been sent off to Babylonia. Now, they began to return some 50 years later when Cyrus gave the initial decree.

[12 : 01] They got the temple rebuilt by 515 BC. But they were no longer an independent nation state. They were a little handkerchief of land in the western extreme of the great Persian Empire.

And it was clear to godly men like Ezra that what the people of Judah needed more than anything else was to be retaught the law of the Lord God.

Just as we might look out across Britain today and we might see that what the nation needs far more than anything else is to be retaught the gospel and the Bible. Now, that is why Ezra so much wanted to return to Jerusalem.

He had spent years of his youth in Babylonia training himself in the law of Moses. We spent some time last week looking at verse 10 in chapter 7. Just have a look at verse 10 again, which shows just how prepared he was for the task.

For Ezra, says verse 10, had set his heart, no doubt as a young man, to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. Study, obey, teach.

[13 : 10] That was the pattern of his life and that's the pattern for all Bible teachers to follow. But Ezra had a problem. He was in Babylonia and his beloved fellow Israelites were in Jerusalem about 800 miles away and he had to get from A to B.

That wasn't easy. He couldn't just jump on a jet plane. He couldn't even drive in a Jeep across the desert. He had to negotiate permission with the authorities. And we saw last week from verse 6 that he had to take courage, he had to go to the king and ask King Artaxerxes not only for permission to go to Jerusalem but also for permission to take other people with him.

Plus all the supplies that they would need both for their journey and for their work once they'd got there. So it was a massive undertaking. 1,500 people or so went with him and it took four months from start to finish to cross the desert as verse 9 tells us.

Now our passage for today beginning at verse 11 is about the results of Ezra's negotiations with King Artaxerxes. You might say it's about church and state.

But we're no longer in the old Israel where theocracy ruled and the law of God was the law of the land. We're now in a very different political situation in a massive great empire consisting of many people groups each with their own religion ruled over by a pagan king whose every decree was binding.

[14 : 43] So what kind of response did Ezra expect to receive from the king? Well look with me at the end of the chapter verses 27 and 28.

We'll come back to verse 11 in just a moment. But let me read Ezra's prayer of thanksgiving first. 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 who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counsellors and before the king's mighty officers.

Now that prayer of amazed thankfulness because that's what it is, that shows that Ezra did not expect the king to be quite so kind and supportive. Ezra really is pinching himself.

He can hardly believe how well the king is treating him. Now think of one or two modern parallels. Mao Zedong in China systematically persecuted the churches and treated many Christian leaders with great cruelty.

Adolf Hitler in the 1930s, before the war started, bullied the German churches into some kind of submission and acquiescence to his plans. Some of them went along with him because they couldn't quite see where he was taking them.

[16 : 08] Others could see where he was going but they were simply too frightened to resist him. Only a few of the very bravest were prepared to offer real resistance and some of them, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were executed because of their courage.

Now Ezra was not dealing with a man quite like Marzitim or Hitler. But Artaxerxes, the emperor, was immensely powerful and the way that Ezra prays here at the end of chapter 7 shows that he might have expected much rougher treatment.

Now we'll return to that prayer in a few minutes. But let's look now at the king's letter, his letter of endorsement and acceptance, which runs from verse 12 to verse 26.

And I want to point out six things in the letter which would have given Ezra great encouragement. Six things which would have made him pray in the way that he does at the end of the chapter with great thankfulness.

First, the king treats Ezra with great respect. Look at verse 12. Artaxerxes, king of kings.

[17 : 17] It's a humble self-definition, isn't it? Artaxerxes, king of kings. To Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, peace. Now that is a very respectful form of address.

The king is recognizing that Ezra is not only a priest but a scribe, a man who has studied hard and long and is therefore well qualified to teach the law of God. The whole tone of the letter treats Ezra as a distinguished and worthy leader of the people of Israel.

Secondly, the king treats the God of Israel with great respect. In verse 12, he describes him as the God of heaven. Now that doesn't mean that he necessarily regards the God of Israel as the only true God to use a phrase of the Lord Jesus'.

Probably he's just reflecting back to Ezra the kind of phrase that he knew was common currency amongst the Jews. It's as though he's saying this is the way that you think of your God, Ezra and I'm happy therefore to describe him in your language.

Notice that he speaks of the law of your God in verse 14, the house of your God in verse 17, the will of your God in verse 18 and the wisdom of your God in verse 25.

[18 : 35] It's very respectful about the God of Israel. The king calls him your God and that shows that the king has a polytheistic world view. No doubt he's willing to acknowledge the gods of other ethnic groups as well, but he's being very careful not to tread on Ezra's toes.

Thirdly, the king treats the people of Israel with great respect. Verse 13, 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.

The king is pro-Semitic. He is not anti-Semitic. Now, this would have been a great joy and relief to Ezra because Artaxerxes' father, King Ahasuerus, some 20 or 30 years previously, had allowed, almost allowed, his horrible henchman, Haman, to exterminate the Jews throughout the empire and it was only the courageous intervention of Queen Esther which had saved the Jews.

Esther, of course, in saving God's Old Testament people becomes a pattern of Jesus who intervenes to save God's people of all ages. Anti-Semitism is a deeply ingrained characteristic of the human race and it keeps on rearing its head.

We've even had allegations of it in the ranks of the Labour Party this last week as you know. But bear in mind that anti-Semitism is first cousin or even perhaps the sibling of anti-Christianity.

[20 : 07] Those who are associated with the only true God will always be regarded by suspicion, with suspicion by those who are not associated with him. So Ezra must have been delighted that King Artaxerxes showed such respect for the people of Israel.

Fourth, the king treats the Jerusalem project with great respect. look at verse 14. For you, Ezra, are sent by the king and his seven counsellors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand.

The king and his seven counsellors, that's the highest authority in the empire. So it's not just about allowing the Israelites to live in peace in the Persian empire, it's about Judah and Jerusalem.

It's about refurbishing, restocking the temple with its furnishings for worship mentioned in verse 19. And then verse 17 is all about the bulls and rams and lambs and grain offerings and drink offerings to be offered in sacrifice.

And there's a further order in verses 21 and 22 for silver and wheat and wine and oil and salt. Now all these details clearly reflect the conversation that Ezra has already had with the king.

[21 : 26] Just look back to verse 6. The king granted Ezra all that he asked. So they've had a talk about this but the king is willing. He wants to see the temple worship fully provisioned and to enable it all to happen.

Fifth, the king authorizes massive financial backing for the whole expedition and project. Money talks and money has always talked.

So this is not a grudging oh alright Ezra I'll let you go if you really want to but don't you expect so much as a five pound note from my pocket. Not at all. This is riches untold.

Look at the scale of the finances. Verse 14 You're sent by the king and his seven counsellors to make inquiries etc. according to the law and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counsellors have freely offered to the God of Israel whose dwelling is in Jerusalem with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia and with the free will offerings of the people and the priests vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem.

Now that is a great deal of money probably millions of pounds in modern terms and that money as verse 17 tells us is given to buy everything needed for the regular sacrifices but the king realises I guess he's shrewd with his accounts he realises that the money all this money is over and above what is just needed to provide for the sacrificial offerings so he says in verse 18 there'll be a tidy sum left over so spend that in any way that you wish then look at verse 20 and 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 carte blanche that is a blank check isn't it but even that's not all Ezra reads on and I guess pinches himself again at verse 21 and I Artaxerxes the king make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river 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 those baths of course are not for bathing in and salt without prescribing how much so we have the king's treasury shelling out money in verse 20 and now the king is commanding that the coffers of all the local town councillors in the province should be opened for Ezra to dip into but even that's not all look on to verse 24 we also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute custom or toll on anyone of the priests the Levites the singers the doorkeepers the temple servants or other servants of this house of God do you see what that's saying would you like a job that was beyond the reach of her majesty's revenue and customs of course you would a job with no income tax no value added tax no council tax no road tax no charges for water or sewerage you would love that wouldn't you but you're not going to get it unless you can go to Ezra's Jerusalem in 458 BC and become a temple servant you're not going to get it here so this whole financial package is unbelievably generous now there is of course and I expect you noticed this there is an ulterior motive behind the king's thinking and he is honest enough to tell Ezra in verse 23 what that motive is 23 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 now that's a most revealing verse and it shows that all this financial generosity is really a kind of bribe

[25 : 28] I will lay out huge sums of money says the king and it will make Israel's God I hope look kindly upon me and on my sons in other words on the future of my dynasty it will help my family dynasty to last a long time he's thinking of his dynasty he's almost like an American president or a British prime minister thinking about his legacy God bless my legacy God bless my name and reputation long may the blessing last so it's pagan thinking really that comes out here as though God can be manipulated by money and yet God in his grace is willing to incorporate even this kind of motive into the working out of his good purpose that's the kind of God that we have now a sixth remarkable thing in Artaxerxes' letter the king authorizes Ezra to teach and to enforce the law of God in the whole province of Trans-Euphrates verse 25 and you Ezra according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand that means the Bible 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 and 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 for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment so the king is more or less saying that the law of Moses is to become the law of the land at least in the province of Trans-Euphrates the judicial system the magistrates and the judges are to administer the law according to the teaching of Moses so the king is saying to Ezra in the province of Trans-Euphrates let there be no separation between church and state that's more or less what he's saying the king seems to understand the principle on which the old

Israel was run the principle of theocracy the law of God becomes the law of the land and the king thinks the whole matter through rather carefully look at the last part of verse 25 perhaps thinks the king there won't be sufficient numbers of people qualified to be judges and magistrates who are well versed in the law of Moses maybe Ezra will find there's a shortfall well in that case let Ezra recruit suitable men men of sufficient character and ability and let him teach them the law of Moses so that they too can administer justice according to the law of Moses so the king is not just saying to Ezra go to Jerusalem and form a kind of Jewish enclave or ghetto and live quietly there with freedom to worship your God in your own way while the rest of the population operate by different laws and principles no he's saying to Ezra go to Jerusalem and reconstitute Israel resurrect Israel according to its former principles teach the laws of your God to your judicial officers and verse 26 punish those who refuse to obey the law of Moses let judgment be strictly executed death banishment confiscation of goods or a prison sentence according to the seriousness of the disobedience now the more you read the details of this letter the more you can see just how big the king's vision is for a restoration of Jerusalem it may be that his unworthy and self-serving motive expressed in verse 23 is the driving force behind his generosity but the Lord has always been willing in his sovereign grace to turn unworthy human behavior to good account and to use it to serve his greater purposes think for example of the unworthy way that

Joseph's brothers treated Joseph and how God turned their aims to good account think of those who nailed Jesus to the cross and how their barbarous injustice became the means of our salvation now what would this kind of a letter look like in Scotland in 2016 imagine our minister is at home in the manse one morning and the letterbox in the front door clangs loudly so he knows the post has arrived he goes to the front door picks up an envelope made of high quality heavy paper and he opens it and there's a letter on high quality paper dear Dr.

Philip he reads I've been so delighted to follow the progress of the work of the Tron Church in recent times I note that you have opened a second center for teaching and worship and that new people including many from Iran are finding as it were a refuge beneath the wings of your church this is so encouraging I'm coming to see with increasing clarity that our cities need what only the gospel of Christ can bring that is hope an eternal perspective on life moral transformation and a sense of purpose a renewal of marriage and family life an understanding of forgiveness and peace with God in short salvation it is my determination therefore to offer to your church and to others like it that believe the teaching of the Bible very substantial assistance we will from now on undertake the maintenance of your buildings the provision of Bibles and Bible teaching literature we will pay the salaries of your members of staff and will provide comfortable housing for all of them all your leaders and workers will be exempted from every form of taxation and it is my particular wish that you appoint and train a great number of evangelists and Bible teachers who will in due course be able to visit every home every corner every highway and byway of the city so as to proclaim and declare and share this good news of

Christ and you are to understand that from this day forward every additional expense incurred by your work either planned or unforeseen expenses will be funded by my staff with my very good wishes yours sincerely Nicola Sturgeon our minister reads the letter and sits down heavily Rebecca he shouts bring me water I'm fainting bring me brandy now I can only imagine that Ezra's initial response was something like that but once he got over the shock he responded by praying one of the most delightful short prayers in the whole Bible and there it is in the last two verses of the chapter let's notice five things about it first his heart rises up to the Lord in thankfulness and praise verse 27 blessed be the

[32 : 46] Lord he cries 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 one of the things that Ezra's lifelong study of the Bible has taught him is that thankfulness to God is the only right response to blessing from God his heart has been trained in thanking God and that's the theme of these words of joy and praise that's why they come tumbling out of him so let's allow Ezra to be a great example to us when blessings come to us great ones or small ones let's turn aside and worship him for a moment and thank him for being so generous and so good to us we need to train ourselves to be thankful because we aren't naturally our default position is naturally to be grumpy and grumbling but gratitude is the great God-given antidote to grumbling secondly Ezra shows how deeply he understands

God's historical faithfulness to his people look at how he addresses him blessed be the Lord the God of our fathers by which he means Abraham Isaac and Jacob and all that long line of those who went before him so Ezra is showing us that it's good to rejoice in the long history of God's faithful dealings with his people Ezra takes the long view now the apostles had exactly the same historical perspective for example in Acts chapter 5 Peter and the other apostles are holed up in front of the Sanhedrin the high council of the Jews it's one of the earliest scenes of confrontation between the Jewish establishment and the gospel and Peter says to them the God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree now there's a great weight of understanding in that phrase the God of our fathers and we need to think of him like that and as we learn to our trust in

Christ will grow immeasurably stronger because we will be realizing that God's purpose God's great story runs from Genesis to Revelation it's not just about 2016 not just about our brief few years on the earth to be a Christian is to belong to the God of our fathers to Abraham's God to Ezra's God thirdly Ezra understands that God rules the world and politics and history including the policies of pagan or secular governments he says that verse 27 blessed be the Lord the God of our fathers who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king it was God who took hold of the mind and the will and the pen of Artaxerxes and caused him to write this astonishing letter the first verse the the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the

Lord he turns it wherever he wills now of course there are mysteries here the Lord allowed some of the early Roman emperors to persecute the church viciously he allowed the great tyrants of the 20th century to cause great suffering he allowed Satan to torment the innocent and faithful Job but Ezra knows and teaches us that the Lord will sometimes guide the heart of a ruler in a most remarkable way to bring blessing to the people of God the apostle Paul also teaches us to pray for kings and those in authority fourth Ezra teaches us to appreciate that the work of the Lord is beautiful what did the Lord put into the heart of the king the desire to beautify the house of the Lord now what do you make of that does that sound silly or girly or precious well it's not it's very wonderful

Ezra was thinking of the beauty of the temple as a reflection of the glory and beauty of the Lord himself worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness as the work of the gospel is a beautiful thing yes it's all about truth but the truth is beautiful because the truth beautifies God's temple on earth which is the people of the Lord Jesus so as you and I are being put back together again through trusting in Christ as our brokenness is gradually healed and our minds are reconstructed something emerges which is really beautiful let's pray that the beauty of the Lord's people will increasingly be seen in the city of Glasgow then fifth Ezra delights that the Lord gave him credibility in the face of the pagan authorities this is what verse 28 is about and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counsellors and before all his mighty officers now this takes us straight back to verse six and Ezra's visit to the king to bring his detailed requests to him and I think you can imagine this kind of scene the kind of thing that you see in films about

[38 : 18] Henry the eighth or one of the early British kings where you have the king with his court surrounding him there's the king sitting on his throne looking powerful and slightly bored and he's surrounded by his dukes and earls and the great officers of state the generals and the admirals of the fleet and a humble supplicant is announced and shown in your majesty cries the herald mr.

joseph pettigrew of motherwell has a request for you no step forward pettigrew kneel and kiss the hand and anxious mr. pettigrew steps forward makes his request which is either granted or denied and that's exactly the kind of scenario that verse 28 is painting do you see it ezra went anxiously to the king who was flanked by his most powerful senior officials the king's counselors and mighty officers and what did god do for ezra in that frightening situation the verse tells us he extended to ezra his steadfast love in the face of these powerful people in other words god honored him god enabled him to speak well and clearly god caused these mighty men to look with favor on ezra and his petition they didn't respond by saying away with this troublesome jew let him not bother the king's majesty with this footling petition no they and the king were impressed with ezra's integrity with his vision of restoring the teaching of the law of moses in jerusalem and ezra left the presence of the king with the mighty men turning to each other and saying this is a fine son of israel he deserves our backing and our protection and the king calls for his secretary and the astonishing letter is quickly written thank you lord ezra is saying for extending your steadfast love to me as i stood before the king and his counselors and all his mighty officers so the interview was concluded the letter was written and it led finally to action 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 to jerusalem the hand of the lord was on ezra that's the key to the events of this whole book god's hand upon the work gives god's people the courage to undertake the work the same today isn't that good to know well two questions briefly as we draw to a close first should ezra have tangled in politics like this well of course he should that's what the book is telling us loud and clear the good hand of the lord god was upon him as he took courage and went to the king it was god's will that he enlisted the king's help it was god's purpose to put into the king's mind the desire to help the people of israel over the centuries christian churches have taken different views on how the church relates to the government so at one extreme churches have withdrawn from the world because the world is so unpleasant and nasty we could do this we could buy a tract of land somewhere out in the countryside we could build a tronite christian community think of it one of those islands in loch lomond or maybe somewhere up beyond the trossacks we could buy a tract of land we could surround it by a high fence to keep the world out we'd build our own school to educate our own children we'd produce our own food i'd provide the eggs richard henry i think could milk the goats and alison hair would organize with superb efficiency the production of vegetables and willie philip would teach the bible every morning before breakfast for 40 minutes now church groups have done exactly this kind of thing in the past withdraw entirely from the world so that the world cannot get at it but that can't be the right thing to do because jesus commands us to go into the world with the good news of the gospel which the world needs to hear now at the other extreme christians have

become so enmeshed in politics that they've simply been swallowed up by the political machine and have lost the ability to critique the government the great old testament prophets critiqued the government to put it mildly jesus critiqued the powers of rome and jerusalem in the first century and we too must be willing to critique the powers that be and indeed we must be willing to serve in politics to become mps and so on and in local politics if we're able to as long as we don't lose our distinctive witness to the values of the bible then second question is it possible that our 21st century churches could ever receive the kind of government approval and backing that ezra received from king artaxerxes that imaginary letter from nicola sturgeon to dr philip could that kind of thing ever happen in a society like ours where the bible is treated with such neglect and often contempt well it happened in ezra's day in a profoundly pagan environment ezra was astonished at the king's response his astonishment is palpable as you read those final two verses of the chapter he could hardly believe that god had so deeply affected the heart of the king and his counselors and is god not able to do wonderful things in 2016 friends let's avoid cynicism we believe in god let's wait on him and trust him let's pray for the queen and her continuing influence let's pray for her heirs and their true conversion let's pray for our government in westminster and edinburgh who knows what it may please the lord to do in answer to the prayers of his people is the hand of god not still mighty has his arm lost its power let us pray 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 it 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 have mercy upon us dear heavenly father have mercy upon your people in our country today help us to be wise bold courageous faithful and prayerful and may your good hand be upon your work to bless it and greatly to strengthen it we ask it in jesus name amen