

God's Good Hand (Ezra 8)

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- [0 : 0 0] These are the family heads and those registered with them who came up with me from Babylon during the reign of King Artaxerxes.
- Of the descendants of Phinehas, Gershom, of the descendants of Ephema, Daniel, of the descendants of David, Hattush, of the descendants of Shekhaniah, of the descendants of Parash, Zechariah, and with them were registered 150 men.
- Of the descendants of Pahav Moab, Elihaniah, son of Zerahiah, and with him 200 men.
- Of the descendants of Zatu, Shekhaniah, son of Zahaziel, and with him 300 men. Of the descendants of Arden, Abed, son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men.
- Of the descendants of Elam, Jeshariah, son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men. Of the descendants of Zephathiah, Zebediah, son of Michael, and with him 80 men.
- [1 : 1 5] Of the descendants of Joab, Abediah, son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men. Of the descendants of Bani, Shalemith, son of Josephiah, and with him 160 men.
- Of the descendants of Bebi, Zechariah, son of Bebi, and with him 28 men. Of the descendants of Asgard, Jehanan, son of Hakatan, and with him 110 men.
- Of the descendants of Adonikim, the last ones, whose names were Elaphilet, Jehul, and Shemamaya, and with them 60 men.
- Of the descendants of Bebi, Ufi, and Zakur, and with them 70 men. I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days.
- When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there. So I summoned Eliezer, Ariel, Shemamaya, Elnathan, Joab, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Mishulim, who were leaders.
- [2 : 3 4] And Joab and Elnathan, who were men of learning. And I ordered them to go to Iddu, the leader in Kershephir. I told them what to say to Iddu and his fellow Levites, the temple servants in Kershephir, so that they might bring attendance to us for the house of our God.
- Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mali, son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Zerubbite, sons and brothers, 18 in all, and Heshabiah, together with Jashiah, from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 in all.
- They also brought 220 of the temple servants, a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name. There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed the fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God, and ask Him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.
- I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to Him, but His great anger is against all who forsake Him.
- So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and He answered our prayer. Then I set apart 12 of the leading priests, namely, Sherebiah, Heshabiah, and 10 of their brothers, and I weighed out to them the offering of silver and gold, and the articles that the king, his advisors, his officials, and all Israel present there, had donated for the house of our God.

[4 : 22] I weighed out to them 650 talents of silver, silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold valued at 1,000 derrick, and two fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold.

I said to them, You as well as these articles are consecrated to the Lord, and silver and gold are a free will offering to the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Guard them carefully until you weigh them out in the chambers of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, before the leading priests and the Levites, and the family heads of Israel.

Then the priests and Levites received the silver and gold, and sacred articles that had been weighed out to be taken to the house of our God in Jerusalem. On the twelfth day of the first month, we set out from Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem.

The hand of our God was on us, and He protected us from enemies and bandits along the way. So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested for three days.

On the fourth day, in the house of our God, we waited out the silver and gold, and the sacred articles into the hands of Miramoth, son of Uriah, the priest.

[5 : 35] Eleazar, son of Phinehas, was with him. And so were the Levites, Jezebeth, son of Jeshua, and Noadiah, son of Benui.

Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time. Then the exiles who had returned from captivity, sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs, and as a sin offering, twelve male goats.

All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. They also delivered the king's order to the royal satraps, and to the governors of trans-Euphrates, who then gave assistance to the people and to the house of God.

And that's the word of God. Well done, Angel. And well done for tracking along, most of you.

I think, yeah, you're forgiven for struggling through that. It's quite a long passage, isn't it? Yeah, especially if English isn't your first language. So thank you for joining in as well.

[6 : 48] Do keep it open, because we will track through briefly what this wonderful passage has to say to us. What this good and gracious passage has to say to us.

So keep that open in front of you, and we will be looking at this together. Let me open up with a question, and it's a very simple one. Has anyone read this book before?

Who's heard about it? Yeah? It's been a while, so this may be something that your parents might have read. Okay? It might be on their shelf still. It used to be very, very popular.

As you can tell, it says more than 10 million copies sold. So this book is based on 1 Chronicles 4.10, and the author claims that readers who commit to offering the same prayer as this prayer of Jabez, if they pray this prayer 30 times, they will find themselves extravagantly blessed by God and agents of His miraculous power in everyday life.

So that's basically what the book is about. You just pray this prayer that you find in the Bible, said by someone, for 30 days, and then suddenly your life will start to change. You'll be blessed by God.

[8 : 01] What do you guys think about a book like that? Anyone? Want to offer a thought? I'll tell you what I think later in the sermon.

But it does raise a common question, right? And this is not the only book in the world that makes claims like this. You may have heard it in other contexts, right? When it comes to God and us, often we're told we should, when we become God's people, expect God to bless us here and now.

Have you ever heard that before? Maybe through a sermon, maybe through a book or something. Follow God and you'll be blessed here and now. Your suffering will be gone. Your bank balance will be on the up.

You might get a nice partner. My family will grow and will be looked after. Is this blessing, right? Is this blessing of a good job, good family, good pay, is this evidence of God's hand in your life?

That's the question. Because actually, if you think carefully about what we just heard in Israel, it might feel that way, right? Here's a bunch of God's people.

[9 : 09] And by a king's decree, they get to make a road trip home, right? To Jerusalem from Babylon with a whole lot of bling. Did you see all those numbers?

Gold and silver and, yeah, it's not small sums. Does it mean if Christians today just do what Ezra does and pray the way he does, does that mean that we will enjoy some kind of safe, rich journey like these people do?

Will we end up healthy and wealthy like Ezra and his friends? I want to be paid attention when Angel read, and she read it so well, three times Ezra in chapter 8 tells us the hand of God was upon them.

Have a look at verse 18. You see that phrase? The hand of our God was on us, right? Verse 22, again, the gracious hand of our God is on us. And in verse 31, the hand of our God was on us.

And actually, chapter 7, verse 28, Pastor Albert was there last week, that phrase comes up again, right? Verse 28, because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, that's why he left in the first place.

[10 : 15] Four times, this phrase. Hand of God. You see, just like a master virtuoso, right? Someone who's an expert on playing the violin or the clarinet or something, they show total control on their instrument, right?

As they play with their hands, they bring music out. God shows total control. He's like a virtuoso. His sovereign hand is guiding everything, including this new group of exiles and their life journey.

60 years on from that first return journey, God is still sovereign here in chapter 8. Still faithful. Still gracious. And I say gracious because we're not just given a bare description, right?

Verse 18, because the gracious hand of our God was on us. Sometimes we throw around this idea, God is sovereign. Have you ever heard that before? Right? God's in control or something.

It's not always comforting, is it? Especially when you don't like what He's in control over your life at that point. You might say, why are you in control? Whether you have a lifelong struggle, whether you're ashamed of your past, whether you're not sure about your future, whatever your situation today, you actually need more than just God is sovereign.

[11 : 36] We need to know God is sovereign and gracious. God's good hand is guiding it all. Your family situation, the troubles you're going through, the conflict that you face.

And so look, Ezra uses this phrase four times, and so I just want to share four things that we learn about God's good hand from Ezra chapter 8. Okay? So, four things that we learn about God's good hand from our passage.

Firstly, Ezra 8 shows us how God's good hand gathers a people for mission. True to form, first 14 verses, we get a whole bunch of names again.

All right? Sometimes it feels like you're reading a Google search. But, if we note the use of the first person, right, what does it say? These are the family heads and those registered with them who came up with me.

It's a bit different now, isn't it? Now Ezra is speaking. This is Ezra's personal account of who made the journey back with him to Babylon. On his mission, remember, he's on a mission to bring God's law to the people of Jerusalem.

[12 : 47] And you know what? We don't celebrate and throw, you know, confetti over a Google search. But, look, with a list like this, God wants us actually to marvel, not to moan, that this list exists.

The writer is inviting us again to see similar patterns as last time as we went through Ezra 2. All these family names listed here, they may not, they may be hard to pronounce, you may not recognize them.

You actually find them in chapter 2's list. After he lists Gershom, Daniel, and Hattush, right, maybe up front, three main players, right, of Ezra's Bible volleyball team, or whatever, the rest of the verse is up to 14.

There's numbering, right? He's numbering and actually 12 groups of descendants. Unlike that first list, there's no mention of temple roles here at this stage.

And if you do the maths, some of you are good at this, you'll notice the total comes up to about 1,496 men added together with their families, their kids.

[13 : 50] that's far fewer than the 42,000 odd that came in that first journey. Okay? So we're talking about a much smaller number now. Again, we don't moan that there's a list like this.

We marvel that here's another group willing to go on God's mission. This is all under God's good hand. There's people, they could have been wiped out.

They nearly were. And yet they're not. And in fact, they are gathered together, saved by grace, families continuing on, surviving exile, and God's good hand is gathering a new group of them for mission.

And I was reflecting on this. One point to realize is that if Ezra and his friends are returning now, 60 years later, what that means is that actually Ezra's parents, their grandparents, back at the start of the story, they did not make this trip.

They actually stayed in Babylon. Right? That first migration, Ezra's parents didn't go. That's why Ezra can go now. And our text doesn't scold them, doesn't second-guess them, doesn't say this is like the remainder, the ones that didn't get tickets the first time around.

[15 : 05] It treats these people with just the same honor. This is all part of God's plan. Again, God's good hand, his sovereign grace. He deliberately held back Ezra's forefathers in Babylon so that 60 years later, Ezra gets to lead this group on this mission.

I love how a former pastor scholar, he used to study and teach in Taiwan, Dean Ulrich, he puts it this way, God is not a God who watches the clock to see who comes late. What matters is that people come.

Doesn't matter when you came. First wave, second wave, doesn't matter. God is gathering a people for himself, is he not? Over time and space. Think of the Lord Jesus. He offered his nail-pierced hands to all people.

And so now God is gathering an even greater people for himself. We're not to moan that, oh, those people, they just became Christians. I've been here for so long. No. No. We marvel that anyone should come to God.

As of Ezra's story, when Jesus says, follow me, it doesn't matter whether it takes you 60 seconds to do that or 60 years to make that choice. It matters that you come to Jesus.

[16 : 25] You take up your cross. You follow him. Will you come to him? Will you trust God's good hand? He's gathering a people for mission. Just as in Ezra's day, he does it today as well.

But let's share another thing that God's good hand is doing in this chapter. Secondly, God's good hand is equipping his people for service. Right? So after this long list, the camel train arrives at the Ahava Canal and Ezra discovers there's a problem.

There's no one to make the coffee. No. There's no Levites among them, right? But it's as if there's a really serious thing missing.

Why is this a big deal? We're not sure, right? In this day and age, we don't have Levites among us. We don't need them among us. It may seem an odd thing to stop all the buses at first.

But let's remember how critical God's temple was to this mission in the first place. Do you remember why they went back to that first group? To restore worship in Jerusalem.

[17 : 30] To get that temple rebuilt, right? Remember how many temple-related roles were listed among that first group. So I think one commentator is right in saying that their role, the Levites' role, in carrying holy objects is probably what's going on.

So here's a whole group of people and we're going to hear there's a lot of gold and silver to bring back and they don't have someone that's kind of set apart to carry all this stuff.

Yeah, so just like every good Baptist, Ezra calls a church meeting, verse 16, right? Summoned a whole bunch of people. Sends these leaders to go search out for the right kind of people.

Okay? To Edo. And Edo seems to be running a bit of a makeshift temple in Kasaphir and asks him, Edo, have you got any Levites? Why, yes.

I so happen to have Sherebiah, verse 18. Merari's got 20 guys too, verse 19. We've even got 220 temple servants. Here's some we prepared earlier.

[18 : 34] And here's the paperwork to prove that they're Levites. That's amazing, isn't it? Again, God is showing us how miraculous some of this stuff is. Not just chance or coincidence or potluck.

This again confirms that God is gracious. His hand is guiding his people. Not just gathering them but equipping them with the very people they need. And when we find what we need, we're not just meant to pat our own backs.

Oh, I'm glad you did that search. No, we praise God for his good, hand. We praise him that he equips Ezra's people, he equips our people with exactly what we need at the right time.

I mean, think of it from the Levite's perspective. Imagine you were one of Merari's kids, right? Just working in that makeshift temple. Imagine you've just grown up going to church.

You've been learning Bible stories. You've been moving chairs. You've been cleaning dishes in a makeshift building. Thinking, what's the point? And then God calls you and you realize, ah, all that stuff I was doing before, it mattered.

[19 : 46] All the fights and arguments and the conflicts, wow, now I see what they were for. It was for this mission at this time. Can I say, in God's economy, your experiences, your gifts, your struggles are not wasted.

And I think we also need to learn as well from this section, Ezra was so careful, wasn't he, to stay faithful to God's word. We've done the memory verse.

He observed, he did, and he taught God's law. So one of the things he has to observe is to make sure the right people serve in the right places. Particularly in his time.

After all, the Levites, a bit of history, the Levites came about because God did this amazing thing when he led his people out of Egypt, right? Do you remember what the cost was to set his people free?

It was a firstborn, right? Those who weren't Israelites, they all lost their firstborn when the angel of death passed over, right? And then for those who had the blood of the door, on the doorposts, they were spared.

[20 : 53] But yet, the Lord said to Moses, Numbers 3.11, I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman.

The Levites are mine. The Levites were meant to be a continual reminder that God has rescued this people. And corporately, you are to set apart this group of people because I have redeemed you and saved you.

So Ezra knows this. It's part of his thinking because he's immersed himself in God's law. So he knows to go back to Jerusalem and not to bring any Levites is to forget the costs of God's Passover.

It's like going, it's like bringing a football team to the Euros without a striker. You just can't do it. Ezra patiently waits until God equips them with Levites and then goes forward.

So tempting in leadership though, isn't it, to just push forward, right? Ah, ah, no, we've been waiting too long.

[21 : 52] Let's just go. Let's just go with who we have. Yeah, just leave the rest behind. Okay? So tempting to push forward before you're permitted. Let's try this new idea. Oh, by the way, I spent \$10,000 on it.

Let's do it. Waiting for the right timing, the right people, can be hard sometimes. Waiting for the right decision can be, yeah, time consuming.

It can test the patience. Think of how long it took to even have an English service, right? I know some of you waited a long time and you worked hard at this. Maybe some of you are still waiting for things that you want at PCBC today.

But when we remember God's good hand is behind every decision and every delay, we can learn to trust His timing rather than rush ahead with our own plans.

Because Proverbs 19.21 says, many are the plans in a person's heart, but it's the Lord's purpose that prevails. Can you see so far?

[22 : 52] God's good hand, right? Gathers a people for mission, equips a people for service. And then this is the part that we all want to know about. God's good hand seems to bless His people with great riches, right?

What's going on here? I did the calculations so you didn't have to. Verses 26 to 27. Fun job, right? Counting the money. There's a lot of silver and gold and bronze here.

Your footnotes might say something like, mine says, 22 metric tons of silver. Cars about a ton. So 22 cars worth.

3.4 metric tons of gold. In today's sums, it's nearly half a billion New Zealand dollars. That's like more than the GDP of half the world, right? These are larger numbers than the generous offerings actually from the first wave.

Do you remember that wave? They had money too. They were very generous. But here's more money from fewer people. God's good hand seems to have abundantly, abundantly provided for a smaller group of people.

[23 : 55] What's going on here? Are we meant to draw a lesson from this? Well, let me just say as well, as an aside, don't just think that when you're a smaller bunch of people, you have less to contribute, right?

Because it's clearly not true. It's not true then. It's not true now. I know sometimes we look around and we're like, oh, yeah, we got 40, we got 50, that's right. Doesn't feel like the Sunday morning crush, you know, as you walk through the front door.

But hey, sometimes how long it's taken us to get here maybe means we're granted more wealth, more passion, more service, more good ideas.

Sometimes we have more because our parents didn't. There are lots of facts that's taken into account. All of this is part of God's good hand. We want to remember that. Now look, Ezra is more than just doing accounts here in this passage because actually he doesn't count the money.

What did he do a few verses before? Verse 21, right? By the Ahava Canal he fasted, right? Humbled himself. Notice his attitude when it comes to getting immense wealth.

[24 : 59] Humility. Repentance. There is no Kardashianing all this cash and flaunting it on IG or whatever. He actually says, verse 28, he consecrates it to the Lord.

He sets it apart. He instructs his people, guard it, every piece, carefully because it all belongs to Yahweh, not us. Can you see that?

That's a different attitude to money, isn't it? When you realize that God's gracious hand has blessed you and all of us probably have more ability to pay for stuff than 99.9% of the world.

He has blessed you richly. If you know that this is from God's good hand, you won't cling to your cash so much. You won't complain and gripe over one penny, one dollar.

You won't obsess with trying to maximize your paycheck every time you get to a performance review. But all this talk again leads to a different question. Verse 22, is this money safe?

[26 : 06] Listen to Ezra. He said he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road. So naturally, this is, you know, back in the days, things, it's not New Zealand, it's not as safe, you know, I think we're the fourth safest country in the world apparently.

Smaller group, more loot, no armored car, it's a robbery waiting to happen, isn't it? And yet, Ezra's confidence in God's good hand gives his people the boldness just to press on with the mission.

Yes, they're carrying a lot of money. Yes, God has blessed them with physical wealth and they're willing to carry it every step of the way, 1,600 kilometers from where they are all the way back to Jerusalem.

It's one thing to profess that God is sovereign, right, and just believe it as a head thing. Sometimes he has to make us live it out. You think I'm, you think my good hand's on you?

Well, go for a walk. Let me show you. Show it to everyone else around you. Remember, Ezra's on a mission. So in a sense, he's a missionary. He's declaring God's goodness and who is the prime audience?

[27 : 17] Who sent Ezra on this mission in the first place? Yeah, the king, right? Artaxerxes. This unbelieving king says, oh yeah, go pray to your gods, give lots of money because surely that will bless me as well, right?

He's probably got mixed motives. But how will Artaxerxes then know about the true God? Right? There's no record that he's ever going to visit Jerusalem himself. He's too busy running the Persian Empire.

More likely, Artaxerxes is going to know that God is true. This true God is true and real and gracious and good through Ezra's life and testimony, isn't it? Yeah?

As Ezra trusts God and says, no, thank you king, but we'll look after ourselves. Actually, God will look after us and makes it there. Yeah, that's a wonderful testimony to the secular king at the time.

Through Ezra trusting God's grace, through us trusting God's grace and our workplaces, the people around us that don't believe can get a glimpse of God's good hand. Do you see that?

[28 : 22] Now, one time, Cheryl and I, we were house hunting, right, as you could do back in the days, and the guy said, look, your offer is okay, but it's pretty low, like, I'll bring it to the vendors, and then, like, the next day, I got a call and he's like, oh, your God is amazing because they just accepted your offer.

Yeah. Sometimes God tests our faith. He sends us out there so that as we respond with faith, not recklessness, but faith, we show his good hand to people outside our church.

If Ezra's risky caravan ride could help a king to see the true God, imagine what risky faith step that you could take your workplace to your family.

I didn't volunteer myself to be Julianne's brothers celebrant last Sunday, and yet God, you know, as we talk, changed my mind with this question, right, this similar question. What if a risky step stepping into a stranger's wedding and trying to share graciously the love of Christ, what if that risky step might show God's good hand to Henry and you, right?

Well, as we just heard from Mona's testimony, what if a risky question to a client at work might bring a suffering woman to Jesus? What if you take that risk?

[29 : 43] Loving your children, inviting a friend to church, sharing a Bible verse, offering a prayer. These are risks worth taking, isn't it? Because we know as believers our reward is far, far greater than half a billion dollars of gold and silver.

I know, I know, it sounds crazy. Our reward is far greater because Paul, the apostle, tells us in Ephesians 1, verse 3, and this is one worth memorizing.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ. You see, because of Jesus, our view of blessing and wealth is transformed forever.

Yes, God's good hand blesses his people with great riches. We have so much that we don't deserve. But the riches he offers you in Christ are eternal. They'll never perish, they'll never fade.

First Peter says this, far better than money in the bank. It's far better than a healthy life even. It's the blessing of being adopted into God's family. The blessing of being risen forever in the new heavens and earth.

[30 : 54] Being adopted into God's forever family through Jesus. This is a blessing, isn't it? This is true blessing. Full and free access to the King of Kings. You can talk to him anytime.

Why wouldn't we share this? Can you see? When your view of blessing is transformed, when you know you have great riches, you'll speak differently, you'll talk differently.

Finally, let's see how, briefly, God's good hand protects his people all the way home. So I'm just covering the rest of the verses we haven't talked about, very briefly. Ezra sounded a bit shameful in verse 22, right?

I won't request an armed escort. And so the Jews have to actually journey, right? Make every step with no help from armed forces or an escort.

I bet you he was nervous. Would you be nervous? Carrying that much, you know, I walk to the ATM with like \$50 and I'm scared. All right. Look at this. And yet the chapter, how did it end?

[31 : 54] Their safe arrival in Jerusalem. Did you hear that? They get to make it back. No flat tires, no stock loss. Every treasure is actually accounted for. The writer tells us because they count every bit by number and weight.

And they worship. That's how the chapter ends. So what can you and I take away from this PCBC? Now at this point, we need to realize again, and I've said this lots of times before when we go through stories in the Bible, what is described in a narrative is not always prescribed, okay?

What we see happen to God's people back then, described, is not always prescribed. You must do this. You must pray like this today. Where the book of Colossians, right, says in Jesus, is we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, right?

That's an epistle. That's Paul talking and giving instructions. Often the Gospels and passages like this show us stories of redemption and forgiveness that happen to those people. And then we realize, oh, we have a redemption far greater.

Think about the blind man, the woman at the well, the prodigal brothers. These are all stories of God's redemption. But we don't have those exact stories, but we learn what God's redemption looks like.

[33 : 08] So, don't just go from, don't just go from a description and then prescribe it to your life today. I was struggling how to illustrate this. So, Chris, you're going to help me out, right?

So, Leo's going to help me out. Okay. He's going to throw this. Okay. Everyone know what this is? This is a basketball.

Okay. And, basics in basketball, which I fail at all the time. All right. One of the basic things that you have to learn to do is to make a free throw, right? Okay. What's the wrong way to make a free throw?

First tip, don't throw in a straight line, right? Okay. To the basket. Because if you throw in a straight line to the basket, it'll just dip and, you know, you'll make 0%.

It will be your rate. Okay. Rather, you throw in an ark, right? Okay. Look, likewise, the wrong way to read an Old Testament passage like Ezra 8 is to just throw in a straight line to us today, right?

[34 : 06] Because it just will dip. It will fail to hit the target. It's just all wrong. A guy named Jabez in the Old Testament once prays for stuff and gets it and then we just straight line him to us and say, pray the prayer of Jabez and then you'll be the same.

It's stupid. It's daft. I'm sorry. We don't go for park runs because we saw Jonah ran away, do we? Right? We don't.

We don't stab people with a tent peg because Jael did it in Judges 4. So please, no straight line Bible reading, please. It doesn't work that way. And same for us here in Ezra.

We've got to throw this story in an ark, Ezra 8. From the text through the cross, okay, at the top of the ark where Jesus' story is.

That is how to apply and to read blessing and protection for us as Christians. Church, the safety that Ezra enjoys as he journeys to Jerusalem, that is a taste of the safety that we enjoy as we, as God's people, travel to the new Jerusalem.

[35 : 19] Make sense? Because God's good hand, he gathers us as his covenant people. He blesses and equips us and he will protect you.

He will. The Bible says it. And in an ark through Christ, I can say it to you too. Of course, we experience safe passage physically. I'm not saying that if you don't pray, you'll avoid car accidents.

Of course. I have avoided a lot of car accidents. And I know that's God's good hand. I know avoiding the pointless parties since becoming a believer has protected me of all kinds of harm.

There are all kinds of physical benefits, I'm sure. But Jesus redefines protection for his people. We need to get that. More than Ezra did, we know the greatest protection that Jesus grants us is safety forever.

From hell and eternal damnation. From a loss that can't be named. Whether or not you physically make it home tonight after ES, if your life is hidden with Christ, if Jesus is your number one, you will be safe.

[36 : 29] You will make it to the new Jerusalem. I guarantee it. The Bible says so. God says so. Lena Harris knew this. Some of you know her story.

One day she went for a walk. She never made it physically home one day. Just in Mount Albert. It was awful. She was killed by an unjust attack.

And yet listen to her mama's words. I'll quote them in full because they're so good. She says, I know that where was the worst place of her life was also the best. It's where she saw Jesus.

Where she was healed. And where she was taken home to be with him. Our dear sister, safe forever. God's good hand.

Protection. Jim Elliot. He knew God's good hand as well, right? Some of you know her story too. He and his friends, they were murdered trying to share the gospel in Ecuador. Was God's good hand there?

[37 : 30] Yes, it was. In Christ, his killers and unreached people group now praise Jesus. And Jim, well don't worry about him. God protected him.

He's finally alive. He's with Jesus, raised up with him forever. He's more safe and more blessed than you and I can ever imagine. We all need God's protection.

That is true. And the Bible says the Lord Jesus will protect us. This protection may not look the same as Ezra's. But as we throw in an ark, as we go through Jesus, as we see that his tomb is still empty, we know his protection for us fully will last forever.

forever. So can I say if Jesus is not number one in your life, then you need to repent and turn to him for true protection, ultimate safety.

And he promises to gather you with the people, equip you for his service, bless you richly and guard you every step of the way home until we see him in the new Jerusalem.

[38 : 38] Let's pray. Amen. Father, as one singer once said, what if your blessings come through raindrops?

And what if your goodness comes through the deepest sorrows? Lord, help us to reflect on what true blessing really means. Thank you for Ezra's story and thank you even more for Christ in us.

Our hope of heaven. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.