

## **Faith and Favor**

Ezra 7:1-10

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What is the relationship between God's favor and faith? God's favor is not merely worldly prosperity. It's the more valuable spiritual prosperity found in sanctification, in becoming more like Jesus, in seeking God's kingdom rather than the world. And this isn't for self-improvement but rather for the enjoyment of a closer relationship with God. As you seek to be like Christ, God's favor is upon you. His favor is His choice to bless your efforts to do His will. And we will see this play out in Ezra 7-8.

So far in Ezra, the first wave of exiles have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, and by God's grace have rebuilt the Temple. Now in chapter 7, a few decades later, Ezra comes to Jerusalem with a new wave of exiles. In vv. 6, 9 the hand of God is upon Ezra. This is a metaphor for God's favor, which is beyond the grace that He gives to all mankind. It's blessing upon the efforts of those who strive to do His will. We see this favor in 7:11-26, where king Artaxerxes allows Ezra to return to Jerusalem with tons of treasure for the worship of God. Ezra says in vv. 27-29 that it was by the favor of God, the King of kings, that the hearts of the king and officials were turned not only to allow exiles to return, but also to give them so much money for worship. All this treasure makes them easy targets for bandits on the 900 mile journey through the desert on foot. But Ezra has so much faith in God that he refuses to ask for the king's soldiers to escort them across the desert (8:21-23). And we see that indeed God's favor is upon Ezra in 8:31, and they make it back safely.

So what are Ezra's efforts to do God's will, which God is blessing through His favor? Generally, it is to fulfill His promise given through Jeremiah to restore the remnant of Israel after 70 years. So God blesses Ezra as he leads more exiles back. More specifically, God's will is to give them a shepherd. Judah's disobedience led them to exile. They returned intent on following God, but after facing opposition became complacent. So God sent Haggai and Zechariah to lead them back to God. After these prophets died, the Israelites slid back into sin, under the influence of their idolatrous neighbors. So God sends Ezra to lead them back to Him. It's Ezra's effort to lead God's people back to Him, which God blesses through His favor.

Almost every time God's favor is mentioned here, it's directed towards Ezra in particular. And in v. 7:10 we see what makes Ezra exceptional, and qualified to lead God's

people, is that he sets his heart to study the word of God, to do it, and to teach it. Ezra is the model of faith, of someone useful to God, who seeks Him through faith, who believes what He says and follows it.

Ezra knows the importance of studying the Scripture. Like pastors today, Ezra, being in the priestly line, had the advantage of not having to labor, giving him time to study. But studying God's word isn't about going to seminary or the amount of time spent reading Scripture. It is instead setting your heart to seek and know God through His word, to do His will in order to draw close to and imitate Him. It's an attitude that all of us can have. Unfortunately, this is rare in most churches, which embrace religiosity and emotional experience. While emotion is good, we must be emotional about the true God revealed in Scripture, rather than a god of our own making and desire. But often Scripture is an offensive unflattering mirror that reveals our sin, which often disguises itself. The world knows lust as natural love, gossip as concern, anger as justice, pride as self-esteem, greed as aspiration, and vanity as self-care. And we buy into it. We love sin but won't admit it. We wear masks just as sin does. We block God out and hide ourselves from truth out of fear of exposure and judgment. So God's word is like a bitter medicine. Though it offends, it ultimately heals. The bitterness comes from sin, but sweetness and healing is from the gospel. For when we see our sin, turn from it and towards God, He will forgive us and transform us.

Ezra not only studies God's word, but he also does it (just as James 1:22 exhorts us to do). In the worst case, if we don't do His will we may not have even received His grace through true faith. In any case, without doing His word, we miss out on His favor. By following what God says we experience His favor, because He blesses our efforts to do His will. We must choose to make an effort to follow, but we follow with His strength (Philippians 2:12-13). We must seek Him and let Him work through us. We make the effort to battle sin, but will fail on our own. This makes seeking God feel bitter sometimes. But it forces us to rely on God, and the sweetness comes when He works through us. So let us study God's word, do it, and teach and encourage others to do likewise.