

The Hand of the Lord Was Upon Me

Ezra 7:11-28

Ezra has arrived. Fifty-seven years after the temple construction was finally finished under the leadership of Zerubbabel, and after the passover was celebrated, Ezra the Scribe came onto the scene. We studied his praiseworthy character last week, verse 10, “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

Today we come to the commission he received from the King, the Persian King Artaxerxes. It came in the form of a letter, a copy of which was included in the pages of Scripture, v.11

As we study this letter, I’ve chosen to focus on the implications and general principles of this letter with regard to the proper role of the civil government. The context of Ezra is, of course, the Old Covenant, and much has changed with regard to the civil authority, but the general principles are still valid, what our Confession of Faith calls the “general equity” of the Old Testament civil laws. It’s not that the OT laws are in force exactly as they were originally given, but that the principles of general equity found in those OT laws are still valid expressions of justice and morality. And the governments of our day ought to recognize and apply those principles in appropriate ways.

There are lots of errors to which we might fall prey in that context. On one extreme is the idea of withdrawing, and thinking it wise for Christians simply to withdraw from the governments of this world, in a pessimistic and nearly fatalistic sense of hopelessness. After all, Jesus is coming back to judge the world anyway. And we shouldn’t try to have any influence upon our civil

governments because they are just passing away.

That was a popular sentiment several generations ago, and Christians routinely withdrew from the public arena. In many ways, we, the church, were asked to leave, and we did. And we frequently have to pay the price for that withdrawal now, in that the church is often considered irrelevant and out-of-place when it addresses issues of public morality properly defined by the Bible. Simply put, the civil government has attempted to put us in our place, isolated from any influence in terms of policy-making positions, and we happily retreated. In the past several decades, with Christians often trying to get back involved, with a biblical influence, we are ridiculed and rejected. Marginalized. Ignored.

That’s the first error. Complete withdrawal. The error on the opposite extreme is, for lack of a better word, promoting a theocracy. Promoting a system of civil government where the civil government assumes authority properly given to the church, implying or even declaring that the civil government rules something of a Christian kingdom, not recognizing that the identification of a kingdom belongs to the church. Aspects of this second error would be advocates of restricting citizenship, or voting rights, to those who are Christians. Or enforcing civil penalties for spiritual and doctrinal issues. And there are great dangers, when the power of the sword, properly given to the civil government, is used when the spiritual punishment of church discipline ought to be enforced.

So how do we steer clear of both errors? And how do we understand the proper relationship between the civil government and the church? How do you understand the biblical principles of justice and public righteousness that you find in the OT, and then rightly apply them to our present day system?

With respect to our national constitution, it is not that there should be a complete separation of the church and the state, but simply that the state ought not to interfere in matters of the church. And it is simply untrue to say that Christians have no right to speak on issues that affect public policy, as Christians!

But neither should the church, as a church, lower herself to the level of a political action committee. The church, as a church, shouldn't be endorsing particular candidates for office, nor is a worship service in any way whatsoever, the proper place for a political stump speech. But there are biblical principles that we must study, that ought to be the subject of proper preaching of the word, that will have immediate impact upon public policy.

To use a word common in political discussions, there is a higher law, and we must proclaim it. There is a law that supersedes the Constitution of the United States, a law that goes beyond the law of our land, to which our governmental leaders ought to submit.

To give a simple example, God's law says that murder is wrong. Thankfully, so do the laws of our land, though with a few horrible exceptions like the murder of unborn children. Nonetheless, the basis for those laws against murder is grounded in God's unchangeable law.

Likewise, there are laws against certain sexual crimes, such as the abuse of children. And there ought to be. But what is the basis of those laws? How can we define what is appropriate and what isn't? We're having a hard time with that today, aren't we? Lines are being moved, but still, at a certain point, we legislate morality. Our laws legislate what is moral, and the only reliable standard of morality is God's word.

King Artaxerxes, in this letter to Ezra, gives us a very good example of how the civil government ought to function in relation to the people of God. This letter provides for us a very good example of,

I. THE PROPER ROLE OF THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

Now, I should say at the outset, that Artaxerxes is over-zealous in giving himself the title in verse 12, "King of Kings." That title belongs to God, and to God alone. Artaxerxes is a king, and a king above many kings, but clearly not the king of all kings. So he is not presenting himself in any way as a servant of God in submission to his authority with saving faith.

But he does recognize God, and the proper role which God should have in the life of his nation. And where does that role begin? The answer is implied in,

v.11

The king is writing to a scribe, an expert in the law of God, and expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord and of his statutes. Artaxerxes knows that. In his own words of the letter,

v.12

In issues of public morality, the king recognizes that there is a God of heaven who has given his law! He realizes that the law of God is in the hand of Ezra.

v.13-14

To put that worthy example into words that apply to us,

A. The civil government ought to recognize the authority of the law of God.

Artaxerxes certainly does! He recognizes that Ezra is the teacher of that law, and gives him great encouragement in that.

Oh, that the leaders of our day would do that! Oh that the leaders of our government would have such honor and respect for the teachers of the law today, faithful preachers of the truth. But oh, that the preachers of God's law today would deserve such honor, for it is in the churches of our day that God's law is so often ignored and maligned. It's no wonder the state does the same.

What should the civil government do in relation to the law of God? In NT terms? We read in,

Rom.13:3 "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."

And in,

1 Peter 2:13 "Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good."

The civil government should be in the business of punishing evildoers and praising and promoting those who do good. And there is only one way to define such good and evil, and that is the law of God! Thus, the civil government should be enforcing the biblical principles of God's law as they are applied to issues of public morality. The government should be punishing those who kill and cause harm. They should be punishing those who lie under oath, and whose sexual offenses become a matter of public disgrace proven by witness testimony. They should be promoting that which is good, and right and pure.

And we are a far distance from that today, but this is the standard which we ought to seek after, and this is the goal for our government for which we ought to pray. That we would have leaders such as Artaxerxes, who would recognize the authority of the law of God. And promote it!

B. The civil government ought to encourage God's people to seek the law of God.

Look what Artaxerxes does! He sends Ezra to inquire about the obedience of the people to the law of God!

v.14

And he urges Ezra to promote that law.

v.25-26

Now there is clearly a blurring of the distinction today between the civil government and the authority the church today over God's people, and the King is giving Ezra a large measure of civil authority that would inappropriate today, but what a wonderful understanding of Artaxerxes, that the wicked ought to be punished for their wickedness. And those who don't know the law ought to be taught the law!

And so, our government of today, though it ought to take no steps to establish a national religion or a national church, and is constitutionally prohibited from doing so, ought to urge the church to do what the church is supposed to do, in the words of the great commission, "teaching [God's people] to observe all that I have commanded you."

The government should be encouraging us as a church to carry out that great commission. If indeed, the government was really interested in praising those who do good. How sad it is that even the church of today seldom encourages God's people to

seek the law of God! Seldom does the church of our day truly call God's people to radical obedience as the purest and only acceptable expression of love for God. How sad it is when the church of our day often leads the way in breaking God's laws. But wouldn't it be great if we lived in a land where the government would urge us to be teachers of law, and honor and appreciate us when we are!

Much along the same lines,

C. The civil government ought to protect and promote the worship of God's people.

Again, Artaxerxes' example.

v.15-17

The civil government was urging God's people to conduct proper worship. What a glorious thing for them to do. It went farther,

v.20-22

And as a further encouragement, the priests were to be made exempt from taxation.

v.24

Now, I won't tell you that I think there is a biblical obligation for the government to keep churches tax exempt, and to offer significant tax benefits to me as a minister, namely the non-taxable housing allowance. BUT, it's still a very good thing to do! And we ought to recognize that and appreciate it.

It's a good thing for the government to consider your tithes to be tax-exempt. It's a gracious thing to do. It's a good thing for the government to allow us to own land without paying taxes on it. And Artaxerxes offers Ezra and the Israelites the same blessing.

As an encouragement to worship. As a stimulus for God's people to worship God. And even beyond that, Artaxerxes actually called the people to obedience,

v.18-19

What a glorious thing to do! Note that Artaxerxes is not prescribing the law. He is not telling the people what to do. Just telling them to obey God fully. And that's a good thing.

D. The civil government ought to call God's people to obedience to God.

That's not a theocracy. That's not a violation of our national constitution, at least as it was originally written. Rather, it is a proper thing for the government to do, in terms of praising those who do good, as we read in 1 Peter 2:13. Let the government praise those who do good, good according to God's laws. And in all of that,

E. The civil government ought to recognize God's authority over them.

And here is where I try to avoid both errors I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon. I don't wish for the civil government to merged with the spiritual government of the church in a theocratic rule. I don't wish for the government to institution civil sanctions for theological and doctrinal offenses, which are rightly matters of church discipline, nor do I agree with much that goes under the label today of Christian Nationalism. But I do wish for governmental officials and for our constitutional documents themselves, to recognize the authority of the God of heaven and earth!

As Artaxerxes did. It's not a statement of personal faith, necessarily, but one of the submission of the civil authority to a higher authority.

v.23

The king rightly realized that if he would not submit to the authority of God, then he would subject himself and his kingdom to the wrath of God Almighty. And that is the message we ought to be preaching today, and that is the message which we ought to be speaking to the leaders of our government. In the words of,

Ps. 2:10 “Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.”

“Kiss the son.” That’s we need to proclaim in the church, and proclaim it to those who rule us in our civil government. Kiss the son with the kiss of submission. “Lest he be angry. And you perish in the way.” That’s the warning.

The civil government ought to recognize God’s authority over them, and this is where our government is so often goes astray, acting as though they themselves are autonomous and sovereign.

The truth of Scripture is this, that the civil government is to be God’s minister to you for good, and God’s minister to you for punishment, if you do evil. He has been appointed by God for that purpose. And where does that leave us? Perhaps on a different plane than simply the daily, dirty workings of American politics, that can easily leave us rather discouraged. It is easy to become cynical in our current political context. Yet whatever the level of frustration might be, still you need to keep the bigger picture in your mind, especially when you pray. The big picture of the proper role of the civil government. Having tried to define that, let’s look at the great blessings of it.

II. THE GREAT BLESSING OF THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

Usually we don’t think in those terms, for there are few

blessings, except perhaps national security, that we can legitimately take from our own government these days, but look at these blessings as Ezra identifies them. And the first blessing is protection.

A. God’s people should praise God for the protection of the civil government.

Ezra did, ascribing all the good that he received from the Persian government to the hand of God.

v.27

Blessed be the Lord for doing this. Praise be to the Lord for doing this. Praise be to God for putting these things into the heart of the King. You see, it was God’s hand of providence, and Ezra knew it. It was God’s hand of providence that caused the king to choose to bring honor to the house of God.

God’s hand of providence is the solution, and in all your political activity, whatever that might be, you must always keep that at the forefront of your mind. God’s hand of providence alone is capable of producing the sort of protection provided by the civil government which I’m advocating. And we should be prepared to praise God for that protection, by the hand of his providence.

B. God’s people should also praise God for the mercy of the civil government.

Following Ezra’s example.

v.28

It’s a matter of mercy, God’s mercy, not political strength! It’s a matter of mercy, God’s mercy, not fund-raising success or effective advertising. The success, the blessing that we might get from the civil government, is a matter of mercy alone. Not a matter of merit. And we should praise God for his mercy in the freedom and blessings we do enjoy in our own country. And for

all our faults that are so easy to identify, we are citizens of a free country, by God's mercy.

We have the freedom to worship together this day, as we see fit, according to God's mercy. Though crime is an increasingly serious problem, still we live in relative safety, and in great prosperity, by God's mercy. We have great affluence, comfort and luxury, and we take for granted many freedoms that God's people in other countries literally die fighting to obtain.

By God's mercy, our lot is cast in this free land, and we, like Ezra, should be faithful to praise him for that. And above all else, to recognize God's hand.

C. God's people should recognize God's hand upon them.

v.28b

Ezra was encouraged! With good reason. God's hand had been upon him. And he went up to Israel to teach the law of God.

We need that encouragement, don't we? We need the encouragement to know that God's hand is upon us. That he has been merciful to us. And provided protection for us. We need the encouragement to continue on in all the work we have to do.

And God gives it to us. For surely, we can say, in many specific ways, that God's hand is upon us as a church. The hand of the Lord our God has been upon us, and continues to be upon us. Even as we consider the activity of our own civil government. And in that regard, we need to pray with greater diligence for the hand of God's providence to bring the fullness of the blessings that we have seen in Ezra's day in our study today.

So were does that leave us? I hope it leaves you encouraged. Encouraged about the land in which we live, for though we may well face God's judgment and justice for the sins of our land, still even that justice would bring about good for the church. And God is able, at his own command, to pour out his spirit in revival, that this land of ours would change, including the government, that there would be an understanding of and submission to the law of God. Pray for such a revival, and be encouraged that God has the power to bring it about. And above all else, pray for the hand of the Lord our God to be upon us.