

The Grace of Giving in Building the Church

Ezra 1:4-11

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Rev. Greg L. Price

There are givers, and there are takers in this world, and that is true in the family, church, and state. There are those who see their mission in life to serve Christ and others, and there are those who see their mission in life to use Christ and others to serve themselves. Just as the Christian loves God because God first loved him (1 John 4:19), so it may also be said, that we as Christians give of ourselves, because God first gave His only begotten Son to be the propitiation (or satisfaction) for our sins. Dear ones, the gospel of Jesus Christ and the response of faith and obedience in the life of the Christian may be summarized by the word, GIVE. Consider the words of Christ, “Freely ye have received, freely GIVE” Matthew 10:8; and “It is more blessed to GIVE than to receive” Acts 20:35.

Although it is Christ who (as the Head of the Church) builds His church (as He says in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”); nevertheless, it is you and I that Christ uses as agents to build His church and to advance His kingdom. One of the most distinguishable evidences of the work of God’s grace in your life and mine will be our earnest desire and prayer to give ourselves wholeheartedly to Christ, and to give of our time, talents, and treasures to build Christ’s church and to advance Christ’s kingdom. Believe me, Satan and his agents have dedicated themselves (with their time, talents, and treasures) to build the kingdom of every false religion and to destroy the true religion of Jesus Christ. Dear ones, where we have allowed the cares of this life, a giving of ourselves to our own mere kingdom, or a passive neutrality in advancing the kingdom of Christ in our lives, and in our families, in the church or in the state, God have mercy upon us and

raise up a spirit within us to give ourselves wholeheartedly in advancing a holy reformation in all areas of life (as we shall see the Lord did for His people in Ezra chapter 1).

This Lord's Day, we shall consider from our text in Ezra 1:4-11, how the Lord delights to stir up the spirit of people to freely give to build His church and to advance His kingdom. The main points from the text are the following: (1) The Giving of the People in Building the Church (Ezra 1:4,6); (2) The Giving of the Fathers and the Ministers in Building the Church (Ezra 1:5); and (3) The Giving of the King in Building the Church (Ezra 1:7-11).

I. The Giving of the People in Building the Church (Ezra 1:4,6).

A. There is a role for all Christians to play in building Christ's church and in advancing Christ's kingdom (whether young or old, whether male or female, whether scholars or students, whether rich or poor). Dear Christian, you are not to excuse yourself because you do not have the training, because you do not have the gifts, or because you do not have the resources needed to build Christ's church and to advance Christ's kingdom. You are qualified, because you have heard and believed the gospel of salvation—God's gift to you. Because you have freely received from the Lord (His free gift of salvation), you are to give in whatever ways you can to advance the kingdom of Christ.

B. Consider how the Lord chose common, ordinary people to give in building His church.

1. You will recall that King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree (at the command of Jehovah God) for the scattered Israelites throughout his kingdom to prepare themselves to leave their Assyrian and Babylonian captivity in order to return to the land of promise and to rebuild the

temple of God (Ezra 1:1-3). But most of those (whose spirits were stirred up by the Lord to return to Palestine and to rebuild the temple of the Lord) were those who were not able to afford such a journey. They would need the financial help of others who remained in Babylon (and elsewhere) to be able to travel the approximately 800-900 miles by means of the trade route from Babylon to Jerusalem (a 120-day journey according to Ezra 7:9).

2. Thus, we read within the decree of Cyrus the following words (in Ezra 1:4): “And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help [literally, “lift up” —GLP] him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” In other words, everyone was to have a part in rebuilding the temple that lay in ruins there in Jerusalem. There were those who were to actually make the journey and to use their hands in a more tangible way to rebuild the temple (who would be more likely to face the assault of the enemy and face the dangers involved in making the journey and in rebuilding the temple), and there were those who were to financially contribute to their journey (those who would fund them as their representatives in going forth to rebuild the temple). In other words, no one was to set back in the bleachers as a mere observer and watch this redemptive drama play out from a distance. Everyone was to be involved in some capacity.

3. This is also made clear in what is stated in Ezra 1:6: “And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.”

4. There were two stated purposes and uses of the money and material gifts: (1) the needs of the people in general who were making the journey and doing the hands-on work of rebuilding the temple (Ezra 1:4,6); and (2) the needs of the temple and its ministers which was the purpose of what is called “the freewill offering” (“besides

the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem” Ezra 1:4; “besides all that was willingly offered” Ezra 1:6). You see, the freewill offerings was a gift given to God for the support of the temple worship and for the support of God’s ministers, the priests and the Levites (Exodus 25:1-9; 35:29; 36:4-7; 1 Chronicles 29:9,14; Ezra 3:5). Even though those who gave their freewill offerings to the support of the temple and its ministry might remain in Babylon (and elsewhere in the Persian empire), and would not directly benefit from a face to face ministry in their immediate location where they lived in Babylon (and elsewhere), they gave to the support of the church and to the advance of God’s kingdom in lifting up the hands of the ministry who would serve the Lord in Jerusalem (a 120-day journey from Babylon).

C. Dear ones, likewise in our offerings that we offer unto the Lord in the New Covenant age, there are offerings made with a view to helping those who have a legitimate need, whether they are near or far away (as the churches helped supply the desperate needs of Christians that endured famine in Jerusalem, 1 Corinthians 16:1-3), and there were offerings made with a view to supporting the ministry, whether it was near or far away (1 Corinthians 9:13,14; Galatians 6:6—Paul’s needs were supplied by various churches even while he was ministering in other locations, 2 Corinthians 11:9; Philippians 4:10,15-18). Not everyone is certainly able to give what others may offer to the Lord. We can only give from what we have, not from what we do not have. But the Lord looks more upon the heart of gratitude and thanksgiving from which the offering proceeds than upon the specific amount that is given (2 Corinthians 9:6-8). Do we give to the Lord’s work cheerfully or do we give begrudgingly? Since giving is a grace bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit, that giving that is the work of God’s grace within us will proceed from a free, gracious, and cheerful heart for all that the Lord has freely, graciously, and cheerfully given to us in Christ.

II. The Giving of the Fathers and the Ministers in Building the Church (Ezra 1:5).

A. In addition to the common, ordinary people whose spirit the Lord raised up to give of themselves in rebuilding the temple and advancing the kingdom of God (as we noted in Ezra 1:4,6), the Lord also worked in the hearts of the chief fathers of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. These were the heads of the chief families of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. These men held a particularly significant role as the patriarchs of the families who descended from Judah and Benjamin, the sons of Jacob.

1. The reason that “fathers” are mentioned here among those whose spirit the Lord had raised to go up to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem is because of the chief leadership role that fathers have in families. That is not to diminish the important role that a mother has in the family in supporting the father and in representing the father when he is not present, but the Scripture recognizes that it is primarily the role of the husband and of the father to lead his family (1 Peter 3:5-6).

2. Husbands and fathers cannot trample upon and dishonor their wives and the mothers of their children by their harsh words, by their anger, by their selfishness and self-centeredness, and yet look upon themselves as the leaders God will use to promote reformation in their families. To the contrary, wives and mothers are to be honored as “the weaker vessel” and as “being heirs together of the grace of life”, and if a husband and a father does not bestow such honor upon his wife and the mother of his children, the Lord will “cut off” his prayers (1 Peter 3:7). Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (note here how Christ as Head of His church “gave himself” for her—the Lord did not treat His bride as a doormat, but willingly laid down His life for her in order to save her, protect her, purify

her, and sanctify her). Where a man rules his family without giving himself in service to his wife and children (but rather only expecting them to give of themselves to serve him as head of the family), that man will not likely lead his family to Christ, but will more likely drive them away from Christ. For those who are led must know their leader loves them and is willing to give his life for them and has their best interests at heart in the decisions that are made.

3. Dear ones, God has not established a matriarchy in the God-ordained institutions of the family, church, or state, but rather a patriarchy (family—1 Peter 3:5-6; church—1 Timothy 2:12; and state—Isaiah 3:12). Obviously, where there is no husband or father in the home, a mother must lead her children in being willing to lay down her life for them. However, the absence or abdication of loving, self-sacrificial male leadership in the home is a huge contributing factor to the breakdown of the family and to the aimlessness and spiritual vacuum of children who innately (by God's design) look to fathers for loving leadership, biblical guidance, and godly example in their lives. What should single mothers do where there is no godly father in the home? I would suggest they encourage their children to look to the help and guidance of proven, faithful, loving, godly fathers in the church who may provide some example of male leadership in their lives. Dear ones, one of the stated promises and purposes of the ministry and preaching of John the Baptist (whom Christ called Elijah who was to come in Matthew 11:14) was to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers (Malachi 4:6). In the preaching of John the Baptist both fathers and children were restored to a biblical faith and living out their biblical faith in the context of the home. Dear ones, faithful preaching turns needy sinners to Christ and the gospel which not only transforms individual lives, but also transforms the family, the church, and the state by the mercy and power of God. Dear ones, if our covenanted reformed doctrine is not turning the hearts of you husbands to your wives (and vice

versa) and the hearts of you fathers to your children (and vice versa), then it is a knowledge that merely puffs up rather than a knowledge that edifies (even though it is the biblical faith). It is a knowledge that lacks love, and is the mere loud noise of sounding brass and tinkling cymbal, but profits the hearers nothing (according to 1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

4. Here we see in Ezra 1:5 that God raised up the spirit of the fathers to lead their families and tribes by their willing example to endure the hardships they would face in seeking to build the church and to advance the kingdom of God. These fathers were willing to give their lives in leading their families in advancing the kingdom of God, in promoting the reformation of the one true biblical religion. The church will only have the godly, biblical, capable leadership of ministers and elders to the degree that the family has such (and vice versa). Dear single men and young men, are you working diligently (by God's grace) to be the godly and biblical leader that God calls you to be, long before you are married? Dear single women and young ladies, do you earnestly desire and patiently pray for (by God's grace) such a godly and biblical man to lovingly and faithfully lead you and the children God gives you? This is why an extended courtship rather than a few dates is necessary to evidence such qualities in a man who is prepared to lead a family. How about you, dear Christian husbands and fathers? How important is it to you to give yourself to the Lord and to give yourself to your families in lovingly leading your families to trust, to love, and to obey Christ and whatsoever He has commanded us to believe and to practice?

B. But the Lord also raised up the hearts of the priests and Levites in giving themselves to rebuild the temple and to restore the faithful ministry of doctrine and worship to God's people (Ezra 1:5).

1. If there would be a reformation in restoring the temple (or church of Christ) that has fallen into great disrepair due to heresy, schism, and idolatry, the Lord must raise up faithful ministers to give

themselves to preaching the gospel (yea even the whole counsel of God), to leading God's people in pure worship, and to correcting in love the sheep that stray from the truth. The fields are white unto harvest (Jesus said), and what is needed are faithful gospel officers to go forth and to reap the harvest by means of pure gospel preaching that turns the hearts of people away from their sin and their own self-righteousness, so as to look by faith alone upon Christ as their only righteousness and only hope of eternal salvation. Such gospel preaching will indeed focus on the need of individuals to turn to Christ, but it will also focus on the need of the family, the church, and the nation to turn to Christ. For there is a moral person to a family, to the church, and to the nation (just as there is a moral person to the individual), and wherever there is a moral person that has been instituted by God and is bound by God's Moral Law, there is a moral person that needs the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ and sanctification by the Spirit of Christ in illuminating God's will by means of God's Moral Law in the hands of the Mediator.

2. A love and desire for Christ will issue forth in a love and desire for a faithful gospel ministry to rebuild Christ's church and to advance Christ's kingdom. Is it your constant prayer, dear ones, that God would stir up the hearts of faithful ministers to trumpet forth the true gospel that proclaims to men a Savior who is ready and willing to save even the chief of sinners who look not to their faith, who look not to their repentance, who look not to their love, who look not to their obedience as the ground of their salvation, but who look to Christ and His perfect righteousness as the only ground for their justification, sanctification, and glorification? Dear ones, it is a popish faith that looks inside for the qualification to come to Christ; however, it is saving faith that looks outside oneself to Christ alone as He is freely offered in the gospel for the qualification to come to Christ. We need gospel officers to be willing to lay down their lives for the pure gospel, for pure gospel worship, for pure Presbyterian church government, and for the pure covenanted

reformation of Christ's church. Is this, dear ones, your constant prayer and earnest desire that burns within you?

III. The Giving of the King in Building the Church (Ezra 1:7-11).

A. Cyrus not only issues the decree to set God's people free from Babylonian captivity in order to rebuild the temple, but he also gives unto God's people the sacred vessels that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:7), and also gives the financial support to rebuild the fallen temple of God from his own royal treasury (Ezra 6:4).

1. Dear ones, I submit that we see here the duty of the civil magistrate to actively promote the reformation of the one true religion of the Lord. Whereas the sacred vessels that had been used within the temple of the living God were stolen and hijacked by Nebuchadnezzar, placed alongside the idolatrous objects of worship within the pagan temple, and profaned in a blasphemous and drunken gathering by Belshazzar (Daniel 5), Cyrus actively restores to God's people the sacred vessels of God's worship as holy ordinances to be used in the worship of God in Jerusalem. The civil magistrate has been instituted by God to be "the minister of God" for the good of God's people (Romans 13:4). As such, the civil magistrate is not to be neutral when it comes to the only true religion of biblical Christianity (according to God's Word). For here in Ezra 1, Cyrus (a Gentile king) is moved by God and God's Word to provide for and preserve God's true religion and the pure worship of Jehovah God. You see, dear ones, the role of a civil magistrate in promoting the one true religion taught in Scripture was not simply the role of Jewish kings and princes, but was the duty of Gentile kings and princes as well. And for this reason, the religious pluralism and national polytheism established within this nation today is to strike Christ in the face with our national fist, rather than to kiss Christ with our national lips (as we are

commanded to do in Psalm 2:10-12). The civil magistrate is not to usurp the place of Christ (who alone is Head of the church), nor is the civil magistrate to exercise the keys of the kingdom which belong only to Christ's ministers and elders. However, the civil magistrate is to be a national father in protecting and promoting the one true religion of biblical Christianity and in suppressing idolatry, heresy, and blasphemy within his national family (for if the Christian father in a family is bound to do so, a Christian national father is bound to do the same within his national family). That is what we pray for and that is what we hope for when Christ will cause the gospel of Christ to penetrate the hard hearts of magistrates, of nations, and of peoples at the time of the prophesied millennium to come.

2. I simply note in passing that Cyrus not only restored to God's people the sacred vessels of the temple that had been taken and profaned, but he also gave from his own royal treasury to support the reformation of true biblical religion (Ezra 6:4). Although the chief responsibility in financially providing for the church and the ministry would seem to lie upon God's people (as was true under God's law in the Old Testament and as is true in the teachings of Christ and the apostles), I think it is also true that there is nothing improper for the civil magistrate to promote the reformation of the one true biblical religion by way of financial support and help (especially in the initial stages of reformation wherein the faithful church has so many needs and cares in being established).

B. Finally, Cyrus also gave to God's people their own faithful prince, Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah, who I submit is one and the same with Zerubbabel, mentioned in Ezra 2:2 (and elsewhere in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah). Just as Daniel was given a Babylonian name (Belteshazzar) in Daniel 4:19, so I would submit Zerubbabel was likewise given a Babylonian name (Sheshbazzar). Both Sheshbazzar and

Zerubbabel are identified as the governor of Judah just after the return of God's people from Babylonian captivity (Sheshbazzar in Ezra 5:14, and Zerubbabel in Haggai 1:1,14; 2:2,21). Both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are identified as the one who laid the foundation of the temple (Sheshbazzar in Ezra 5:16, and Zerubbabel in Ezra 3:8-11 and Zechariah 4:9). We'll have more to say about Zerubbabel in future sermons, but suffice it to say at the present time that he was a royal descendant of King David and within the royal line of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, Cyrus gave to the people of God a type of Christ to come to be their governor and ruler.

Dear ones, a national reformation of biblical Christianity as the one true religion of that nation will require individuals to give of themselves and their resources wholeheartedly to build Christ's church rather than setting in the bleachers or watching the game on TV, will require fathers to give of themselves to lead their families in righteousness and truth, will require ministers and elders to give of themselves in faithfully sounding forth the gospel and the whole counsel of God regardless of the persecution and opposition they may face, and will require civil magistrates to promote and establish biblical Christianity as the national religion. This is what the Lord accomplished in the reformations of the Old Testament, this is what the Lord accomplished in the reformations in Europe and especially in Scotland. Where do we begin? We begin with giving ourselves (and from there we move to our family, the church, and the state). We begin by embracing through faith alone the gospel of Jesus Christ and expressing our thankful hearts for God's unspeakable gift to undeserving sinners like you and me by giving ourselves, our time, our talents, and our treasures to promoting reformation in the family, in the church, and in the state (2 Corinthians 9:15). Dear ones, a thankful heart for all that Christ has given to you and me will be evidenced in a heart

that cheerfully gives to promotes Christ's kingdom in the family, church, and state.

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