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July 16th: Ezra 4 & Titus 2

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Resistance to the rebuilding efforts. The appearance of the grace of God purifying us for good works.

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Transcript

Ezra chapter 4. And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Amithradath, and Tabeel, and the rest of their associates, wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.

Rehom the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susur, that is the Elamites, and the rest of the nations, whom the great and noble Asnapa deported and settled in the cities of Samaria, and in the rest of the province of beyond the river. This is a copy of the letter that they sent. Now because we eat the salt of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send

and inform the king, in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers.

You will find in the book of the records, and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. We make known to the king, that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province beyond the river.

The king sent an answer, to Rehom the commander, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, who live in Samaria, and in the rest of the province beyond the river, greeting. And now the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me, and I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province beyond the river, to whom tribute, custom and toll were paid.

Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the herd of the king? Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehom and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem, and by force and power made them cease.

Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. The rebuilding of the temple represented a threat to other groups in the region. The returnees contained many priests and Levites and descendants of the old Judahite elite and ruling classes, the sort of people who would be able to unite a more general population of Jews together, unsettling the existing balance of power.

Unsurprisingly there were plenty of surrounding people who were interested in undermining, compromising, manipulating or otherwise controlling the temple project. Ezra chapter 4 introduces these parties as the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. Their initial approach might have seemed encouraging to the naive.

They presented themselves as worshippers of the Lord who wanted to be involved in the rebuilding project. Their underlying hostility towards the project became more apparent as their initial offers were rebuffed. The primary source of opposition came from Samaritans, who had descended from a mixture of pagan peoples resettled by the Assyrians and the remnant of the ten Israelite tribes who had formerly occupied that land.

After the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians around 722 BC, the Assyrians resettled various pagan groups in the former territory of Israel, each of them continuing to worship the gods of their place of origin, a situation which is described in

more detail in 2 Kings chapter 17. Later waves of resettled populations were brought in under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal as verses 2 and 10 of this chapter mention. After many of the new people settling in the land were killed by lions, the king of Assyria commanded that an Israelite priest be sent to instruct the people in the law of the god of the land of Israel.

However, the situation that resulted was one of syncretistic worship, with the Samaritans worshipping both the Lord and their various pagan deities. 2 Kings chapter 17 verses 33 to 41 describes the situation that resulted. And he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies.

However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the Lord and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children as their fathers did.

So they do to this day. Much more about the Samaritans and their worship had changed by the time of Christ, when they were monotheists who worshipped on Mount Gerizim, where prior to its destruction they had worshipped the Lord in their own temple, a rival to that in Jerusalem. However, at this point in their history, at the time of the return, while the Samaritans could claim that they worshipped the Lord, they definitely did not do so exclusively.

Compromising with such a group at this stage would have set an incredibly dangerous course for the returnees. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are suspicious of the Samaritans and dodged the deeper issues by refusing their help on the basis of the fact that the returnees alone had been authorised to undertake the task of rebuilding. If they permitted the Samaritans to join in the task, they might jeopardise their authorisation by King Cyrus of Persia.

Nevertheless, the Samaritans succeeded in thwarting the rebuilding of the temple by harassing the returnees, intimidating them, bribing Persian officials to prostrate their efforts and other such things. This process lasted for the entirety of the reign of Cyrus, his successor Cambyses, and continued into the beginning of the reign of Darius. While the rebuilding of the temple was completed in the reign of Darius, opposition continued into the reign of Exerxes or Ahasuerus.

Following the longer chronology, this verse links the earlier persecution, resistance and harassment in the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses and Darius I with the later harassment that they experienced in the reign of Artaxerxes. Verse 8 of this chapter to chapter 6 verse 18 is an Aramaic document. Andrew Steinman argues that we should understand this as a collection of different correspondence joined by narrative sections compiled by the people mentioned in verse 7. Bishlam, Mithradath and Tebil are officials who gathered together correspondence from the most recent all the way back to the time when the temple was built.

Steinman suggests that it was likely compiled by Persian officials under the supervision of Nehemiah. The first letter is sent by key officials in the Trans-Euphrates region, the province of beyond the river. The authors of the letter are described in a way that seems to be calculated to gain the sympathies of its recipient.

Although they are situated beyond the river, they were largely sent there by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. They themselves are Persians, Babylonians, Medians and other people who had come from the other side of the river. As such, they have a natural kinship with the Persian king to whom they are writing.

Within their correspondence, they present the city of Jerusalem as a constitutionally and historically rebellious city. A city that had a long history of causing trouble in the region, rebelling against those to whom it had to pay tribute. Breaking covenants and betraying loyalties.

They of course are writing purely as those concerned with the king's honour. As persons disinterested in the matter, save for the fact that they are loyal subjects of the king, they write to him as if they were concerned with nothing other than his own sovereignty. They encourage him to search the historical records.

Not just the records of the kings of the Medes and the Persians, but also the records going back to the time of Babylon. If Artaxerxes permits the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, he will only be inviting trouble. Artaxerxes responds favourably to them.

He commands the cessation of the rebuilding efforts in the city. While people may be settled there, it should not be re-fortified and re-established as a city. Jerusalem has too much of a history of trouble making, and Artaxerxes' sense from the historical chronicles seems to support the writers of the letter.

The claims being made concerning Jerusalem are ridiculously overblown. While Jerusalem proved to be unfaithful at many points in its past, little good reason was given that this would be the case in the future. Jerusalem's situation had much changed.

Of course, the writers of the letter were not primarily concerned with the rule of Artaxerxes, but with their own power in the province. The re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem would pose a threat to them, far more than it would pose any threat to Artaxerxes. Verse 23 of this chapter are digressionary, taking us beyond the time of the rebuilding of the temple to a time when the larger city was being re-established.

Verse 24 moves us back, connecting us with the earlier narrative. A question to consider, of what earlier episodes in Israel's history might we be reminded by the opposition that they face in this chapter? Titus chapter 2 But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled.

Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us. Bond-servants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything. They are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness, and to purify for himself a people for his own possession, who are zealous for good works. Declare these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

In the opening verses of Titus chapter 2, Paul speaks to the life of the household. In his teaching in verses 1 to 10, he seems to be especially concerned to encourage a respectable and God-honouring form of life among the various groups within the church, older and younger men and women, and bond-servants. Several scholars have remarked upon the influence of the phenomenon of the new Roman woman, with some wealthier women abandoning old standards of sexual propriety, neglecting the life and management of the household, and trying to be more vocal in the traditionally defined public sphere.

Toleration of such behaviour in the church, and the impression that the message of emancipation in the gospel justified it, would have brought the gospel into disrepute for many in the society. Many commentators have speculated that Paul had such women partly in view in his teaching in 1 Timothy chapter 2, verses 9 to 15. Although this sort of background has likely been overstated by many, it is not unlikely that such women were part of what Paul had in his sights in verses 3 to 5. Paul is concerned that the Christian message not be ill-spoken of, and even more, that those who profess it adorn it by their behaviour.

The material of the first ten verses of this chapter is similar to some of the household codes that we encounter elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, in Ephesians chapter 5 and 6, Colossians chapter 3 and 4, and also in 1 Peter chapter 2 and 3. The opening verses of chapter 2 suggest that there is a close connection in Paul's mind between Christian

doctrine and appropriate ethics, even though they are not simply identified. One of the more distinctive features of Paul's teaching here, in contrast to what we find elsewhere in his work, is his attention to the intersection of age and gender. He does not directly address wives and husbands here, but older men and older women, younger women and younger men.

While the marital context is referred to and is taken for granted at many points, the teaching thus organised leads more to the development of individuals into mature exemplars of their sex. The older men are addressed first. These are not the same persons as elders, although the elders would have been older men.

The older men are supposed to be sober-minded. Perhaps this is a statement about their being temperate, or perhaps it's a reference to their not drinking too much. They're supposed to be dignified, serious, to have an appropriate sense of gravitas.

They need to command respect and honour. Older men should be accorded honour and authority, but they also need to command it by their display of dignity. They need to be self-controlled, prudent, restrained, moderate.

People who have a reign upon their appetites, their passions and their moods. People whose wills are guided by their reason. They must be sound in faith, in love and in steadfastness.

These three things are presumably related to the three theological virtues of faith, love and hope. Steadfastness corresponding with hope. Soundness in faith would be belief in the gospel and in God that does not waver under trial.

Soundness in love would be seen in the commitment of the older men in their service of God and his people. Their steadfastness would be seen in their hope-fuelled endurance under trial. Paul next turns to the older women.

They need to be reverent in behaviour. They need to show a godly integrity and holiness of life. They need to avoid slander, gossip, loose talk and excesses of wine.

And Paul expects such older women to play a critical role in educating younger women in godly conduct. Ensuring thereby that the household of faith is well ordered. The older women's teaching of the younger women mostly concerns their proper behaviour in the context of their households, their practical and loving commitment to their husbands and children.

Paul's language here concerning the teaching might have more of a corrective shading in its meaning. The older women are to moderate or maybe even, as Philip Towner argues, to call the younger women to return to their senses. The older women's instruction of the younger women is with the end of teaching them to be self-controlled, the same term that was used earlier of the older men.

However, like many such virtue terms, it is coloured by gender. With regard to the virtues, men and women can be like two different kinds of instruments playing the same note. While the note may be the same, it will have a very different timbre.

As he does here, Paul also encourages self-control for women in 1 Timothy 2, verses 9-10. Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness, with good works. The younger women are also instructed to be pure, likely meant in a sexual sense here.

They are expected to be good managers of their households. We should be aware of reading the term translated by the ESV as working at home, in terms of modern debates about working or stay-at-home mothers. The ancient household was a realm of production, education, welfare, society and all sorts of other such matters.

The young woman managing her household would be deeply embedded and invested in active labour and the society and wouldn't be anywhere near as likely to be facing the home-workplace dilemma that many contemporary women do, where either choice may restrict her capacity for rising to her full stature. The alternative to working at home may not be so much working in the workplace as being a busybody, a gadabout, a gossip and a lazy woman. That said, the location of the work is not unimportant.

At the heart of marriage is the task of building a world and transforming the world together with one's spouse. Marriage is not just about enjoying a private domestic retreat with one's spouse, but about forming a realm of common labour out into the world. A marriage where no such labour is occurring, a home that is reduced to mere shared leisure, is a marriage that is missing an important dimension.

Rather than merely being independent careerists, husband and wife ideally share their home as a focus and or site of their labour. They may not be working alongside each other, but their household is their common project. Men and women may be distinguished in their vocations and Paul's understanding, but the household is supposed to be a true commonwealth, a sharing of the end, the focus and the fruit of their respective labours.

The household also stands in contradistinction to the public arena. As in 1 Timothy chapter 2, Paul seems to have some concerns about the way that women were intruding upon the functioning of that realm in ways that compromised its operations, seeking authority over men in a manner that disrupted the actual operation of healthy authority. Paul doesn't address such issues so directly here, but they are likely partly in view in the notion of the submission that women are supposed to show to their own husbands.

When modern Christians speak of submission, they tend to situate it primarily in the direct face-to-face relationship of the husband and the wife. However, the headship of

the man was primarily directed out into the world and the submission of the wife would chiefly have been to that, in the shoulder-to-shoulder relationship of their common labours. Submission in the face-to-face relationship may have been rather secondary.

A wife who honours her husband greatly strengthens him and if he is a good husband, the strength and standing that he enjoys will be used to build her up. The wife's submission is less a matter of passive and reluctant capitulation to him than willing and active collaboration with, counselling of and honouring of her husband as he sets the lead. She should not be engaged with a tug-of-war against him, nor just be his doormat.

Rather, they should both be throwing their united yet differing energies into their common task, from which they both end up stronger for being one flesh. Poole hopes that by correcting the younger women, the older women will protect the word of God from being ill-spoken of. Titus, for his part, is now instructed to teach the younger men in a manner comparable to the way that the older women teach the younger women.

He must present himself as a model, a lived example of the behaviour that he is encouraging. In addition, he must provide sound teaching, marked by integrity, truth and seriousness. The young men need to be self-controlled, restrained, prudent and temperate.

Once again, Poole is concerned that those bad-mouthing Christians in Crete be silenced, not being able to fault the behaviour of the members of the church. One of the things that we might observe here is the way that for Poole, teaching in the church on certain matters needs to be gendered and generational. It matters who teaches certain lessons.

While part of Poole's concern here is doubtless propriety, he likely has other considerations in mind too. If Titus were primarily the one charged to teach the lessons to the younger women, then the teaching might be experienced primarily as something designed to get them into line. However, if the teaching is given to them by godly older women, women who are honoured and respected and reverent in their behaviour, the younger women will more readily perceive the teaching as something designed to build them up, to strengthen them, to enable them to become like those older women, not just as something designed to get them in line.

There are many occasions where good teaching is hamstrung by the fact that it is not being taught by the right person. A teacher who can serve as an exemplar of that which they are teaching, in a way that makes it desirable to the person being taught, is always going to be a lot more effective. Even if Titus were able to teach the young women the content of their appropriate behaviour accurately, under typical circumstances he could never be as effective as a godly older woman who could also exemplify it.

Poole concludes his instructions here by addressing bond servants. As in 1 Timothy, his instructions here are limited to bond servants. He does not address masters at this point.

Such servants are to act not just as man-pleasers, but as those who are looking towards a greater master, who are concerned to please Christ and by their behaviour to adorn his doctrine, behaving in such a way that stands out from everyone else and draws attention to the beauty of the teaching of Christ. In verses 11-14 we arrive at what might be thought of as the climax of the letter. In this condensed theological statement, Poole expresses the theological foundation for the transformation of life that he is encouraging.

It arises from the epiphany of God's grace in history. In the work of Christ, this has brought salvation for all people. As Poole makes clear at the beginning of 1 Timothy 2, the gospel is something that comes with the message of salvation to every class of persons.

Already in this chapter he has spoken about the way that salvation can be lived out by older and younger men and women, and also by those in slavery. This is not a salvation exclusive to the rich or to a particular people like the Jews. It's for everyone.

And this epiphany of God's grace in history results in a transformation of behaviour. It leads to a rejection of old ways of life that characterise the age that has passed, ungodliness and worldly passions. The alternative to these are self-controlled, upright and godly lives.

Such lives develop out of the epiphany of God's grace in Christ in the fullness of time, but are also fuelled by anticipation, by the blessed, God-given hope of the appearance of the glory of our great God and saviour, Jesus Christ. That future horizon leads to dramatic renovation of life. Scholars have debated the end of verse 13.

Is Jesus Christ to be identified with our great God and saviour, which would be a most remarkable declaration of the deity of Christ, or is there some other way of understanding the expression? Tanner, for instance, suggests that we should take Jesus Christ as being in opposition with the glory of our great God and saviour. Jesus Christ is the glory of God. There is still a powerful theological statement being made here, but it may be more subtle in character than others believe it to be.

Verse 14 is redolent with all sorts of memories and echoes from the Old Testament. Christ gave himself to redeem us. This might remind us of the way that Jesus is described as a ransom for all in 1 Timothy 2. He has redeemed us from the realm of lawlessness and wickedness.

And he has done so to purify us for himself as a new people. We are supposed to be his special possession. We might think here of the Lord's statement to the children of Israel at Sinai.

We might also think of statements like Ephesians chapter 5, verses 25-27. Jesus Christ

loved the church and gave himself up for her, so that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. God's intention to create a holy, chosen people for himself is in keeping with the Old Testament promise that he will be their God and they will be his people.

The redemption from lawlessness and the purification also draw our mind back to the promises of the new covenant. God will purify his people by sprinkling clean water upon them. He will forgive their sins and their lawless deeds and he will place a new heart within them, writing his law upon it.

All of this is coming to pass through the work of Christ. And the goal of all of this is to have a special godly people who are devoted to good works. The moral transformation of life that Paul is encouraging here is not a secondary thought.

It's been the whole point all the way along. This is what God's action of grace was always aiming at. Lives that have not been revolutionised by such grace to display holiness and godliness are still born in the faith.

Paul concludes the chapter by charging Titus to teach effectively and with authority. He must boldly exhort and encourage people in these matters, stirring them up to this expression of faith and good works. He must rebuke false teachers, troublemakers and those who are not abiding by the teaching.

And he must do all of this with authority, not allowing anyone to disregard him, in such a manner he would fulfil the purpose for which Paul left him in Crete. A question to consider. What can we learn from the conclusion of this chapter concerning the proper relationship between grace and good works?