

“They Began to Rebuild the House of the Lord”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 5:1-17; Matthew 22:15-22

The Jews in Jerusalem are discouraged. Hauled-off into captivity to the city of Babylon some seventy years earlier, only to have their Babylonian captors defeated by the Persians, the Persian king, Cyrus, then ordered their resettlement back in their original homeland, even giving them the funding to rebuild their temple, and their capital city of Jerusalem. Absent from the area around Jerusalem for these seventy-years, and with the city and the temple desolate, Israel’s neighbors to the north are relieved. The Jews, who were both a religious and military power, are no longer a threat. But these same neighbors are quite disconcerted to hear that the Jews have returned to their land to rebuild, with both the funding and the blessing of the Persian king. Upon their return, the Jews begin rebuilding the altar and foundation of their temple, they have begun offering sacrifices to YHWH, and celebrating the feasts required by the law of Moses. At first, their neighbors to the north—the people of the land—offer to help. When the leaders of the now-returned exiles, Jeshua (Joshua) and Zerubbabel, see through their ruse, and reject their offer, the people of the land begin an eighty-year long period of hassling the Jews, threatening them, bribing local officials, and doing everything in their power to stop the Jews from rebuilding. As a consequence, the people of Israel have become discouraged, and work on the temple has come to a halt. But God will send two prophets to encourage his people, and remind them of his promise that the temple will be rebuilt, and the walls of the city restored. Meanwhile, the people of the land, are determine to stop the Jews, and a local official, perhaps unknowingly, will take up their cause.

We left off last time in 520 BC, when the work of rebuilding the temple ceased. In the last verse of chapter 4 (v. 24), Ezra told us that “*then [i.e., in 520 BC] 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.*” Cyrus’ decree, which returned the Jews to the land and funded the temple had been issued in 538. There had been two years of good progress, until things slowed down, and the work finally stopped in 536. The rebuilding of the temple stopped because of reasons recounted by Ezra in verses 4-5 of chapter 4. “*Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.*” After the foundation of the temple was laid and the alter rebuilt in 536 BC—a time of great joy—the Israelites grew very discouraged. According to Ezra, it was about this time that Israel’s neighbors to the north began their non-stop campaign of harassment, bribery, as well as inciting political intrigue among their Persian landlords, putting great pressure on the Jews to stop rebuilding both the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The Jews grew discouraged and the work ceased.

As we saw last time, the Jews became discouraged because of two related factors. First, as for Israel’s neighbors to the north—the people of the land—they are troubled by the rebuilding of the temple, in so far as such a temple was dedicated exclusively to YHWH according to the dictates of the law of Moses. The people of the land who hassle the Israelites were a mix of Canaanite locals, apostate Jews who remained behind during the time of captivity, as well as Assyrian exiles transplanted to Samaria from areas captured by the Babylonians. Now the entire region was under Persian political and military jurisdiction.

In religious terms, the people of the land were syncretists—as were most of the Canaanite and Assyrian peoples. They claimed to worship the LORD, and pointed out to the leaders of the Jews that they too

made sacrifices to YHWH. But the people of the land actually worshiped YHWH, in addition to all of their own pagan “gods.” They made sacrifices to YHWH, but they also made sacrifices to all the other “gods.” Syncretists cannot be true worshipers of YHWH. This would be like someone who is a professing member of a bible-believing church attending the local Mormon stake (on Wednesday night), the Jehovah Witnesses’ bible study (on Thursday morning), the local Mosque for prayers on Friday, and then the synagogue on Saturday, just to cover all the bases. Syncretists do not like the God of the bible, because he demands exclusive worship and commitment (the first and second commandments). This is one reason why the people of the land are so concerned about news of the rebuilding of the temple by Jewish exiles, and helps us understand why they want the work stopped.

The second reason why the people of Israel have grown discouraged has to do with the building materials for the temple—massive hand-cut stones and magnificent cedars from Lebanon. If Israel’s neighbors worried about a revival of Judaism—that it might become a religious force once again as it had been in the days of David and Solomon, during which, for the most part, the Jews attempted to worship YHWH according to the law of Moses—the local Persian officials were worried about a “wicked and rebellious” people rebuilding Jerusalem’s defenses, thereby becoming a threat to Persian security. Why were the Jews using Persian money to pay for such large stones? Why were the Jews purchasing such expensive lumber, such as the magnificent cedars from Lebanon. Are they really using these materials to rebuild their temple? Or are they rebuilding the walls so as to fortify the city against the Persians?

As the rebuilding got underway, the people of land were able to raise Persian suspicions—especially among local Persian officials. Did the Jews have permission from Cyrus to rebuild as they claimed? Not knowing where they actually stood with the Persians, the Israelites became discouraged because there was every possibility that their hard work of rebuilding the city and the temple would come to nothing. Can you really trust a Persian king? Can you trust the local Persian officials? Can you trust the people of the land? No. But you must trust YHWH’s promise that he will rebuild his temple and bring peace to his people through his Spirit, even if that promise seems to depend upon a Persian king. This is the struggle the Jews now face and this nagging doubt lay at the root of the people’s disappointment.

As we turn to Ezra chapter 5:1 (our text this morning), and pick up where we left off last time, I will divide our sermon into two parts. In verses 1-2, Ezra recounts how two prophets sent by YHWH, Haggai and Zechariah, are active during this period, speaking forth the word of God, encouraging the people to trust in God’s promise and then continue their work on the temple. Given the connection between the Old Testament prophetic books of Haggai and Zechariah—written during the same time period Ezra is describing in his opening chapters—I think it important to consider their respective ministries in more detail. But, first, we will consider the historical circumstances described by Ezra in the balance of this chapter, especially the letter sent by a local Persian official named Tattenai, to the Persian King Darius, desiring to know upon who’s authority the Jews were rebuilding their city and their temple. This episode is recounted in vv. 3-17, and provides the historical background for this week’s sermon as well as next’s, when king Darius responds to Tattenai’s letter, and then the work on the temple is finally completed.

Ezra chapter 5 opens with the declaration in vv. 1-2, “*now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.*” It was during this time of discouragement that God sent two prophets to his people—Haggai and Zechariah—these prophecies are in the books which bear their names. Ezra also notes that these two prophets spoke in the name of God, “*who was over them.*” God is gracious to send prophets to both

encourage and rebuke a discouraged people struggling to believe his promises, rather than punishing them further. Ezra reminds us that nothing which comes to pass throughout this entire situation is beyond YHWH's control or outside his sovereign purposes. As one writer puts it, this phrase in Israel's history is a "gentle reminder of man's accountability and heaven's help."¹ The neighbors to the north may seek to discourage the Israelites, but neither can they, nor the king of Persia, frustrate YHWH's ultimate purposes. YHWH, not Cyrus nor Darius, controls all things, and when necessary YHWH speaks to his people in and through the work of his prophets. YHWH is Lord of all the earth! He encourages his discouraged people through his word of promise.

The opening verses of Ezra also tell us that during the time when Haggai and Zechariah begin to speak forth the word of the Lord, the two leaders of the people, Zerubbabel and Jeshua "*arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.*" So, for the next four years, from the time of the second year of the reign of Darius (520 B.C.), until the temple is completed in 516 BC, God strengthens and encourages his people in the midst of their time of great discouragement. The word of God comes from YHWH's prophets, and the people upon hearing the promises YHWH has made to them under the terms of his covenant, are once again motivated to do the work of the Lord. Grace produces gratitude, just as faith in Jesus Christ produces good works. Paul makes much the same point in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, when he wrote, "*and we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*" The word of God comes to Israel, and upon hearing again God's promises, his people get to work. They "*arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem.*" But their neighbors to the north cannot help notice that work has resumed. And they are not happy.

In verses 3-5, Ezra tells that "*at the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure? They also asked them this: 'What are the names of the men who are building this building?' But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.*" Whether the people of the land alerted these two Persian officials to the renewed work on the temple, or if they discovered this on their own, Ezra does not say. The altar had been finished, and sacrifices were being offered since 538, yet the temple still was left unfinished for fifteen years. Any new work on the temple would be quickly noticed by both the Persians and the people of the land.

Fifteen years of inactivity is a long time under these circumstances. The sad fact is that the exiles—now back in the land—quickly lost sight of God's greater purposes upon their return. Given the persistent opposition which the Israelites faced, the people to the north had worn them down, and so the returned exiles stopped work on the temple, and began instead to work on their own homes and dwellings. We read in the first chapter of Haggai, "*thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD. ' Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 'Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?'" There is nothing wrong in building a home in which to live. There is everything wrong with neglecting to build the house of God—especially when this is the reason why YHWH "stirred the heart of Cyrus" to return his people to their land.*

¹ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 53.

When Haggai and Zechariah begin prophesying against the spiritual apathy which quickly set in after the Jews returned home and were forced to deal with their trouble-making neighbors to the north, Jeshua and Zerubbabel step up to lead the people.² Work starts, but the people of the land immediately notice and want it stopped. Ezra recounts how two local officials—Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai, who are part of the Persian governmental oversight of the area—suddenly show up to challenge the Jew’s right to be rebuilding their temple. Nothing had been going on for fifteen years. So why did the laborers stop working on their own houses to work on the temple, and why is all of this building material being hauled to the site of the temple. What is going on? Did the people of the land put these two officials up to this surprise building inspection, or did the local officials really not know of Cyrus’ decree from 538?

Remarkably, many the details of Ezra’s account are verified by other ancient sources. One scholar has found a document dated the 5th of June in 502 B.C., which refers to Ta-at-tan-ni as the governor who was subordinate to the Satrap over Eber-nari (the region of Judah and Samaria).³ Tattenai and the man who was presumably his subordinate, Shethar-bozenai, would have been based in Damascus (modern day Syria), and Tattenai was responsible for overseeing all the political matters throughout the old boundaries of the southern kingdom of Judah. The Satrap is a regional ruler (like a prince), who reports directly to the king. As governor, Tattenai, would have been accountable to the Satrap for anything requiring local oversight in Judah, and was probably governor over both the Jews in Jerusalem, and the people of the land just to the north. It is very likely that what got his attention—whether this was reported to him by the people of land, or if he saw it himself—was the presence of a number of large stones and a number of huge timbers (the cedars from Lebanon). Were the Jews really building a temple? Or were they building defensive fortifications against the Persians, or their neighbors to the north? Would this people really put this much effort into rebuilding the “house of their God?” They do have a reputation for rebellion . . .

Tattenai wants to know from the Israelite leaders, *‘who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’* He also wants to know, *“what are the names of the men who are building this building?”* This is the Aramaic equivalent of “where are your papers?” We know that king Darius was dealing with trouble with the Egyptians to the southwest of Jerusalem, so it was only natural that Tattenai would query the Jewish officials about the purpose of this building project, whether the Jews had permission to build it, and who was in charge of the people living in Jerusalem.

Tattenai must have been satisfied with the answer he received from the leaders of the families (the elders) because he did not order work on the temple to cease immediately. Ezra is clear that this was not really Tattenai’s decision. YHWH’s “eye was upon the leaders of the people.” The Persians “did not stop” the Jews from building *“until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.”* No doubt, had God’s word not come to his people and their leaders through Haggai and Zechariah, the discouragement and fear that they felt previously, would very likely have again fallen upon them like a dark cloud. Their rebuilding efforts would have once again come to a halt. But God encourages his people and they get back to work.

Tattenai will do his duty and write to the king—the party to the decree with Israel (as Suzerain to Vassal), and then wait for a response. Meanwhile, the Israelites keep building until they hear back from Darius and the Persian royal court. But at no point do they reject the proper authority of Tattenai or Darius.

² Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 779.

³ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 54.

After their defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 587, and with the fall of Jerusalem and Judah, the Jews now face a new political reality, even in their own promised land. As the elders confess (in what follows), their status as vassal to Persia is due to Israel's sin and the covenant curses which came upon the people. The promised land, once ruled by Israel, is now part and parcel of a pagan Gentile empire, and a land in which the Jews now live only because God stirred the heart of Cyrus. The Israelites are indeed doing as Jesus commanded in Matthew 22:21, (which is part of our New Testament lesson), "*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*"

As a priest with access to the temple archives, Ezra, who as we have seen, is writing this account nearly eighty years later after these events, thoroughly documents his account of Cyrus' decree and the rebuilding of the temple by including the actual texts of the documents important to his account. As in the previous chapter, in verses 7b-17, Ezra includes the actual text of Tattenai's letter to Darius. In verses 6-7, Ezra tells us, "*this is a copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River [west of the Euphrates] and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the governors who were in the province Beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. They sent him a report, in which was written as follows,*" before including the body of the letter in 7b-17:

To Darius the king, all peace. Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God [the title of the Jew's God, not a declaration of faith in him]. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. [The presence of cedar timber and large cut-stones is the chief cause of Tattenai's concern] This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?' We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. And this was their reply to us: 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished [the Jews appeal to their covenant with the true and living God, YHWH, as the basis for rebuilding their temple—as if to challenge Persian authority]. But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; and he said to him, "Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site." Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.' Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.

The outcome of the king's search will be the subject of our sermon next time. We should take note of the fact that in verses 11-16, when Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai report the Israelite response to his questions, the Jews confess their faith and acknowledge their sins.⁴ In verse 12, they confess their faith in YHWH.

⁴ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part five)

“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth.” The Jewish leaders also confess that YHWH had taken their land and now returned that land to them *“because our fathers had angered the God of heaven.”* This implies that ultimately, this is not Darius’ land to give to YHWH’s people. It is YHWH’s land to give to his people, grounded in the promise repeatedly made to Abraham. In the New Testament this promise of a land between the River of Egypt and the Euphrates is extended to all the earth.

The reality is that Israel now lives with the consequences of being expelled from the land, while the kings who now possess the land (first the Babylonians and now the Persians), do so at YHWH’s pleasure and will be directed by YHWH to accomplish his sovereign purposes. The earth is the Lord’s and he determines who lives where and why.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were active during this period, and it was their prophetic calling in speaking forth the word of the Lord which had the effect of “stirring up” the hearts of the people to return to the work of rebuilding the temple. Haggai writes in a matter of fact style reminding the exiles of the importance of rebuilding the temple. In verses 14-16 of chapter 2 of his prophecy, Haggai reminds the people of Israel to consider that an unfinished temple reveals something much deeper. *“So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the LORD, and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean. Now then, consider from this day onward. Before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the LORD, how did you fare?”* Even as their temple lay in ruins, the people should understand their failure to rebuild as a sign that their hearts were unclean.

Their sacrifices made on the altar turned aside God’s wrath. But their lack of work on the temple was an indication that their hearts were growing as hard as the stones they secured to build the temple. Yes, the restoration of the temple will come, and Haggai’s prophecy ends with the declaration in verse 23, *“on that day, declares the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the LORD, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD of hosts.”* The signet ring—a sign of the royal line of David—shall be returned to the people, this time not through an earthly king, but as Paul reminds us, in Romans 1:2–4, was something God *“promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

As for Zechariah, “the son of Iddo,” he was a priest and a member of a well-known family who had returned to Jerusalem with the exile from Babylon. Unlike Haggai’s prophecy, Zechariah’s prophecy contains a series of night visions and apocalyptic images, as seen in the opening chapter (vv. 8-17).

“I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel who talked with me said to me, ‘I will show you what they are.’ So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, ‘These are they whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.’ And they answered the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, ‘We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest.’ Then the angel of the LORD said, ‘O LORD of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?’ And the LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, ‘Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease;

for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the LORD of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.”

Through the night visions of Zechariah, the discouraged people of Israel are exhorted to turn to the Lord, who, they are reminded, orders the affairs of men and nations so as to fulfill his promises. The horsemen on patrol in Zechariah’s vision are the prophetic sign that YHWH watches over all, and that he will pour out his mercy upon his downcast people, Israel, despite their great discouragement after seventy years in exile. The people of Israel had broken their covenant with YHWH and had gone into exile, and because of the constant hassles from the people from the land and the possibility that the Persians would stop work on the temple had simply given up. Zechariah tells them that YHWH will deal with their enemies, but the time has come for the former exiles to get to work in light of the covenant promises he has made to his people. As result, “*they began to rebuild the house of the Lord.*”

As we wrap up, we have seen throughout Ezra’s account of this turning point in Israel’s history, the struggles faced by the people of God in those difficult days. Like them, we tend to see our present circumstances with our eyes, and too we easily forget the promises of God, who can turn our every trial, our daily struggles, total disaster, and even times of temptation, to our good—whether we understand how, when, or why.

We know this because of the greater promises foretold by Haggai and Zechariah. We know that Jesus Christ has offered the final sacrifice for sin. We know his body is God’s true temple. We know he has already defeated death and the grave. Because we believe and confess this, and we hear these promises anew, let us now get to work living lives of gratitude in the service of our God and on behalf of our neighbor. Amen.