

Ezra 5-6

- Israel has been stopped in their rebuilding of the temple
 - Enemies of Israel succeed in stopping the work through intimidation and bribery
 - The people made it as far as the foundation
 - Then, when the going got tough, they retreated
 - They returned to their homes and daily pursuits
 - They even pilfered building materials from the idle temple worksite
 - Fifteen years have gone by
 - It cast into doubt the Israelites' determination and commitment to do the work they returned to perform
 - We know the Lord didn't intend for the people to stop, because He sent them two prophets to declare that the building must continue
 - The prophets Haggai and Zechariah went among the people, warning them to restart the work on the temple
 - We might ask why the Lord permitted the delay in the first place?
 - Wouldn't we expect that if the Lord delivered His people back to the land after 70 years, then He would protect them from this interruption?
 - Why didn't He intervene to protect the people?
 - In reality, we're asking the wrong question...instead, we should ask what makes the people think that the Lord wasn't already protecting them?
 - They stopped at the first sign of resistance – at mere threats

- Chapter 4 recounts later times in history, when they were intimidated and force of arms was used to stop the work
 - But that was not in the chronology of what's happening here – that's a reference to a later point, when Nehemiah was building the wall
 - Here, the only thing they saw was people, making them feel uncomfortable
 - They never bothered to test the enemy's threats, or to see if the Lord would protect them if they continued building
- We're studying Ezra, and later Nehemiah, but we're also studying a pattern of discipline and restoration
 - And when the Lord begins to restore His children in fellowship, after a period of discipline, the first step is a test of true worship
 - Are we willing to humble our hearts?
 - Will we follow Him away from the comfort that tempted us?
 - Will we seek Him in worship, free from the pretense and hypocrisy that marked our period of rebellion?
 - And will we submit to the difficulties and trials that accompany true discipleship?
 - If the answer to any of these questions is "no", then our forward progress halts
 - We'll find ourselves in no man's land
 - Neither under discipline, yet neither fully restored
 - God seems to want to test our hearts early when we seek restoration
 - By these trials, we learn dependence on the Lord
 - If we pass these tests, we are strengthened for the work that lies ahead

- If we fail the test, the Lord doesn't give up, for He is faithful even when we're faithless
- Israel's restoration is in neutral, since they succumb to the pressure of their enemies
 - When their enemies approached and asked to join the work, Zerubbabel wisely declined
 - The people passed the first test of their wisdom and discernment
 - But, when those same enemies retaliated with threats, the people became discouraged
 - They failed the test of their faith in God's power to defeat their enemies
 - So the people appealed to Cyrus' government, seeking relief from human government, which gained them nothing
 - They should have appealed to the Lord instead
- Despite their stumble, God is still at work turning all things to good for this nation
 - In fact, the delay made necessary by their weak faith fits perfectly into a timeline the Lord Himself set through Daniel the prophet, earlier
 - Daniel 9 told the Jews they could time the Messiah's arrival, according to the declaration of an order to rebuild the temple
 - Cyrus made the first decree, and it's repeated by later Persian kings (as we'll see)
 - Daniel said the Messiah would be cut off (or killed) 483 years after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem
 - That timeline is being created even now, in the events of Ezra and Nehemiah
 - Daniel's timeline contained a perfect 490 years

- The Lord has accommodated the fifteen years of Jewish hesitation into the timeline provided to Daniel
 - So that even when God's children sin, He has the power to anticipate and accommodate that sin
- So now, we enter Chapters 4 and 5 to see where Israel goes next

Ezra 5:1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet 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,

Ezra 5:2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

- As we learned last week, the prophets have been working to move Israel back to the work of building the temple
 - Finally, Zerubbabel and Jeshua arose to rebuild
 - Notice again, no clear leader
 - Just two men working together to move God's people back to a point of obedience
 - In fact, we're told the prophets were also working to encourage the people back to the work
 - Also, notice that nothing else has changed to make the resumption of the work possible
 - There is no new edict from the king
 - The enemies of Israel haven't been defeated or given up
 - Israel merely determined to get back to work
 - Which leaves us to conclude that they stopped building before the Lord stopped protecting them

Ezra 5:3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

[Ezra 5:4](#) Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.

[Ezra 5:5](#) But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report could come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

- At some point after the Jews resume building, word gets out and the governor of the Persian province that included Jerusalem comes calling
 - Tattenai visits the Jews, asking who gave them permission to conduct this project
 - Perhaps Israel's enemies put him up to it, but it's also likely that they had nothing to do with Tattenai's visit
 - In fact, the political climate of Persia was more likely the cause
 - The empire had just come through a period of upheaval and treachery
 - Following Cyrus' death in 530 BC, his son Cambyses assumed the throne
 - But his rule was immediately challenged, and he spent most of his 8 years in power defending his throne against one rebellion after another
 - At one point, he even had his brother put to death
 - Finally, the Persian people lost confidence in Cambyses, leading him to commit suicide
 - The Persian army threw its support behind a distant cousin of Cambyses, named Darius I
 - Darius was able to consolidate power and put an end to the rebellions
 - Still, the new king and his government was very wary of any new source of rebellion that might be emerging within the kingdom
 - It's in this climate of suspicion that the Jews decided to begin rebuilding their city and temple and walls

- Naturally, the governor is concerned that a walled city from a former enemy is under construction
- So he asks the Jews who gave them permission to rebuild Jerusalem
- Ezra says the men leading the construction project gave their names to Tattenai and
 - Notice, Ezra says “we” told Tattenai the names, implying he was present
 - Actually, Ezra won’t join the Jews in Jerusalem for nearly another 60 years
 - When he says “we”, he is referring to the Jewish people, of which he is one
 - So the Jewish people responded to the governor
- The point is, the Jews didn’t back down like they did the first time
 - They boldly proclaimed their names
 - They weren’t intimidated by the governor’s question
 - This is in stark contrast to their earlier choice
- It would seem the Lord has brought them another test similar to the first, and in doing so, given Israel a second chance to prove their faith
 - When the Lord is working to move His children along a path of spiritual growth, He uses trials and tests to accomplish that work
 - Depending on how we respond to these tests, we either demonstrate spiritual growth and move forward
 - Or we demonstrate spiritual immaturity, in which case, the Lord leaves us where we are
 - Meanwhile, He’ll continue to bring us new trials so we might have opportunity to learn and eventually return to a path of growth

- I should also mention that this pattern has limits in God's patience
 - The writer of Hebrews warns us that if we do not press on to maturity through this process, we risk being left behind

Heb. 6:4 For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit,

Heb. 6:5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

Heb. 6:6 and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

Heb. 6:7 For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God;

Heb. 6:8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

- We must learn the lessons of the tests and trials the Lord sends our way, or restoration is impossible
- Israel has been given a second chance to respond to the challenge of God's enemies, and this time, they persevere
 - In v.5, we're told the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews
 - Ezra means the elders knew the Lord was watching them closely to see how the elders responded to this challenge
 - Would they retreat as before, or had they learned their lesson?
 - In the second half of the verse, we find the answer
 - The elders didn't stop the people of Israel from working
 - Instead, they commanded Israel to continue building, even while they waited to hear a response from the king to the governor's letter
 - They've learned their lesson, so the Lord responds in favor

Ezra 5:6 This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king.

Ezra 5:7 They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace.

[Ezra 5:8](#) "Let it be known to the king that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.

[Ezra 5:9](#) "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'

[Ezra 5:10](#) "We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head.

[Ezra 5:11](#) "Thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

[Ezra 5:12](#) 'But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.

[Ezra 5:13](#) 'However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.

[Ezra 5:14](#) 'Also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor.

[Ezra 5:15](#) 'He said to him, "Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place."

[Ezra 5:16](#) 'Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction and it is not yet completed.'

[Ezra 5:17](#) "Now if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter."

- This letter is remarkable, more for what it tells us about Israel than for what it told Darius
 - In his letter, the governor does an admirable job of telling the story in an even-handed and objective manner
 - This feature of the letter argues strongly that the governor was not an enemy of Israel, but merely an official trying to do his job
 - Curiously, he describes the God of Israel as the great God, suggesting that Persians still understood the power of the Lord from His past work in Israel, and perhaps, Egypt
 - First, he describes the building project

- The temple is being built with great stones, beams and all done in great care
- In other words, it's going to be an impressive structure, and so the city is preparing to be a significant destination in Judah
- This part of his letter is alluding to the potential threat of this city
- Secondly, he describes his interrogation of the builders
 - He collected their names and asked their intentions
 - They answered they were replacing a religious structure that had been previously destroyed by the Babylonians
- Even more interesting, the Jews recount how they got to this situation
 - They acknowledge that the Lord Himself destroyed the earlier temple
 - The Lord used Nebuchadnezzar's army to accomplish that task
 - And He did so as an outpouring of His wrath against Israel for their disobedience to His Word
 - When you see the people of Israel making these declarations to the Persian governor, you clearly see repentance at work
 - They are acknowledging that their past misery was a product of God's wrath
 - And they acknowledge that God's wrath itself was a product of their sin
 - And now, they are determined to please Him, even in the face of opposition and threats
 - In short, they have come to fear the Lord more than they fear men
 - This is the turning point God desires and works to produce in our hearts
 - The place where we no longer have an excuse or defense for our mistakes

- The place where we recognize that the Lord moved in our life to bring us into a state of discipline for our own good
 - And now, we are working to please Him, because we are unwilling to repeat that mistake
 - When you reach this point, you know that restoration has begun and good things are around the corner
- At the end of the letter, the governor asks the new king, Darius, to conduct a search of the archives of Babylon to determine if Cyrus did, in fact, issue this decree
 - Under Persian custom, decrees of prior kings had a force of law that bound even future kings
 - So if Cyrus had, in fact, permitted this rebuilding project, then even Darius couldn't stop it
 - So the search was necessary, regardless of whether Darius approved
 - So then we read what Darius did

[Ezra 6:1](#) Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.

[Ezra 6:2](#) In Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum –

[Ezra 6:3](#) "In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits;

[Ezra 6:4](#) with three layers of huge stones and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.

[Ezra 6:5](#) 'Also let the gold and silver utensils of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

- Darius issues his own decree that a search take place in the archives
 - Nothing is found in the Babylonian archives, where Cyrus was living at the time the exiles were allowed to leave

- But a search was also conducted in the province of Media, present-day Iran
- The capital city of that city, Ecbatana (present-day Hamedan), was the summer residence of the Persian kings
 - The city is a mile high and sits next to green, wooded mountains
 - It's cooler in the summer than the surrounding desert region
- In this place, a scroll was found with the instructions of King Cyrus
 - The opening word of the scroll is the word translated "memorandum" or "record"
 - The word indicates that what follows is an official record of the Persian government
 - And from what follows, we learn that God gave Cyrus specific instructions for the size of the new temple
- Based on the dimensions given in this memo, the second temple would be twice as high and three times as wide as Solomon's temple
 - It's unclear if the Jews actually followed these instructions
 - We might assume that if the old men wept at the sight of just the foundation, it must not have been even as big as Solomon's temple
 - Why would they weep at the sight of a much larger foundation?
 - Cyrus commissioned and funded an impressive building, yet the Jews didn't make the most of what God provided
 - It waited until Herod to build a temple that met the standards Cyrus set
- After hearing of Cyrus' edict, King Darius has no choice but to honor the prior king's orders and permit the temple construction to continue

- So Darius issues his own edict to the governor

Ezra 6:6 “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from there.

Ezra 6:7 “Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.

Ezra 6:8 “Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.

Ezra 6:9 “Whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail,

Ezra 6:10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

Ezra 6:11 “And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.

Ezra 6:12 “May the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence!”

- Darius echoes Cyrus’ words with his own decree
 - The Jews are allowed to build their temple and the city
 - Moreover, Darius becomes a royal protector of the work
 - He orders that the Persian governor make every effort to ensure the work goes as planned
 - And then, the king declares that Persia will bear the entire cost of the project
 - Whatever is needed for the work and for the sacrifices at the temple will be provided
 - It’s interesting the degree of detail the king includes in his edict
 - He seems to know a great deal about what kind of sacrifices would be practiced in the temple

- There is no indication that he received this knowledge from Cyrus' edict
- Could the Lord be revealing this to Darius, just as He revealed Himself to Cyrus?
- Finally, Darius commands that anyone who opposes the Jews would be executed by impalement
 - Impaling was a common method of execution in the Persian Empire
 - It's a forerunner to crucifixion
 - One end of a beam was sharpened and the other side planted in the ground
 - The sharp point was inserted under the chest of a person and pushed through his esophagus and lungs
 - He was then left to hang until he died
- Darius liked to use it against his enemies
 - He had 3,000 rebels killed by impaling them
 - But in this case, you notice he goes a step further and declares that anyone who tries to stop the work will be defeated by the Lord Himself
 - Though Darius didn't know the Lord as Savior, nevertheless, it seems clear the Lord impressed these truths upon his heart
- Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus and Darius stand as pillars, testifying to the Lord's capacity to work through the unbelieving world both in His wrath and in His mercy
 - When God was angry with Israel, He called upon Nebuchadnezzar to chastise them
 - Nebuchadnezzar attacked because he wanted to destroy and conquer lands to increase his own glory

- But he was acting as God intended, to enhance God's glory
- The Lord let him loose on the people of Israel
 - They experience the power of a man and his army
 - He was an instrument of God's wrath
- His choice to use Nebuchadnezzar was a measure of grace
 - The Lord chose a blunt instrument, and dealt with Israel with a light touch
 - Imagine if God had executed the destruction Himself?
 - Nothing would have remained to be restored
- And then, when the time was right, the Lord used Cyrus to conquer Babylon and eventually free the Jews
 - Cyrus was the most powerful man on earth, and yet his will bent to the will of God
 - God directed Cyrus to act just as the Lord promised to do centuries earlier
 - And Cyrus even provided the wealth to get the project started
 - If God can do such wondrous things through a Gentile king, imagine what miracles He is prepared to work through The King of all the Earth?
 - It's the same argument Paul makes in Romans 11

Rom. 11:12 Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!

- Finally, the Lord brought a third king to complete the work
 - Darius declares the work to be completed uninterrupted
 - He commands that the power of the realm support, defend and fund the work

- And he threatens a horrible death to those who oppose the will of God
 - If the man working on God's behalf will exact such a terrible penalty for opposing the work of the Lord, how much more will the Lord's own penalty be for those who oppose Him?
- As a result of Darius' edict, work continues to completion

Ezra 6:13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent.

Ezra 6:14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

Ezra 6:15 This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

Ezra 6:16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Ezra 6:17 They offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel.

Ezra 6:18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

Ezra 6:19 The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month.

Ezra 6:20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.

Ezra 6:21 The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover.

Ezra 6:22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

- The Persian governor returns to the land with Darius' edict, and naturally, he carries out the orders of the king faithfully
 - The people persevere in rebuilding the temple
 - Ezra properly credits two works of Lord for causing the temple to be finished

- First, the Lord sent His prophets, who stirred the people to begin building again
- Secondly, they credit the work of the Lord through the kings to accomplish His purpose
- The Lord is always in control of all things in Creation
 - That control is exercised first and foremost through His Word, which goes out to accomplish His purpose
 - And secondly, the Lord directs the steps of men
 - So that nothing in Creation is acting outside the Lord's purposes and plans
 - This is how He works all things to the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose
- Ezra mentions three kings who contributed to the completion of the work
 - The king Artaxerxes played no part in the rebuilding of the temple
 - But he was the king who will protect the work of building the walls
 - Once again, Ezra is summarizing events over the entire course of rebuilding the city
- Finally, the temple is finished and the proper temple services can begin again
 - To commemorate the opening of the temple, the nation conducts a massive sacrifice of animals at the new temple
 - Hundreds and hundreds of animals are sacrificed to thank the Lord and sanctify the temple
 - While this number may sound impressive, it pales in comparison to Solomon's celebration
 - For the first temple, He sacrificed 200 times as many animals

- The Jews also offered a sin offering for the twelve tribes
 - Notice that only three of the tribes are represented in the Southern Kingdom
 - This suggests that though the ten tribes were largely scattered outside the land, the nation still thought of itself as a nation of twelve tribes
- This dedication takes place in the month of Adar, which is roughly late February on our calendar
 - It's been about 21 years since the foundations were laid
 - And 70 years since the Jews lost their first temple
 - That first temple stood for exactly 400 years
- This second temple will stand for about 593 years, until it will be destroyed by Titus in AD 70
 - A third temple will be built during Tribulation and will stand for seven years, until Christ's return
 - So the first, second and third temples stand for 1,000 years
 - And the fourth temple Christ occupies in the Kingdom will also stand for 1,000 years
- Then five weeks later, the Jews celebrate their Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread
 - They are joyful for the chance to obey the Law they have been given
 - But they are also thankful for the Lord's work through the Assyrian king
 - Darius was not Assyrian, of course, but his kingdom had inherited the Assyrian remnant
 - What was once Assyria, and then Babylon, has now become Persia

- And the people clearly recognize that the Lord was working to turn these events in Israel's favor
- So they thank the Lord for turning a power that was once their enemy into their protector
- This chapter brings to an end the first step of the three steps of restoration
 - The people have shown repentance, a willingness to obey and persevere and a joy over the Lord's faithfulness
 - These steps are a far cry from the disobedient, rebellious people that received God's discipline
 - Before, they were far from Him; now, they are working with Him
 - But there are still many things missing from this relationship
 - First, the people are largely ignorant of what it means to follow and obey the Lord
 - They are reading the Word and doing their best to follow the Lord's instructions
 - But they still need instruction and guidance to ensure they remain obedient to the Lord
 - Secondly, they lack the leadership to drive them forward in a proper way
 - They have men leading in one capacity or another in these various construction projects
 - But who will lead them and guide them in accomplishing God's will?
 - They need leadership
- Next week, we begin the second phase of God's restoration in Israel
 - In Chapter 7, Ezra enters the picture
 - And he comes for the purpose of teaching the people