

Today we are continuing our series in Ezra as we learn about the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple and the rebuilding of the people as well, as they return, in phases, in waves of people over a few decades, back to Jerusalem and the rest of Israel. They are part of the Persian empire (**Picture**), which conquered Babylon. So, the Persian empire at this time is both the green, red, and orange, this picture. It got a little bigger to the North/Northeast by 490 B.C. or so.



And I think this is often very difficult for us to enter into that time frame and understand what the Israelites went through. But I think we actually have an opportunity here in the pandemic to have just a bit of a taste of it, because it occurs to me that our experience of being unable to gather at church (and other stuff) in the spring of 2020 was not so different from their not being able to gather at the Temple. You’ll remember that for nearly four months, we could not gather in worship – or in a lot of other places, either. Similarly, they were unable to gather at the temple, at their place of worship, or in other familiar common spaces...though rather than four months it was several decades. So, it’s not *exactly* the same, and we haven’t been deported to a new city like they were...and of course there’s the added difference that you all loved seeing me preach from my living room, and watching people walk by through the window behind me...I was actually beginning to think that some of you would prefer to be in our pandemic exile! ☺ But also like them, we’ve come back gradually...in stages/waves. We started with 20-25 in worship, and now 80-90 typically, with more of you still waiting to return. So, there’s just a smidgen of similarity.

Maybe that helps us to gain just a little insight into how they felt as they returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and eventually to rebuild their capital city and their nation. And the book of Ezra chronicles the rebuilding of the temple. So, the last couple weeks we’ve talked about what it took for them to do that: **Rebuilding starts with God’s initiative, they stay centered**

on God throughout the process, it took courage, their expectations weren't all aligned which caused disappointment for some and joy for others, and so forth. And as we've talked about, all of these things are 100% applicable in our lives today, 2500-2600 years after the events we're reading about.

Now, Ezra goes hand-in-hand with the book of Nehemiah, as I mentioned on a previous Sunday. And in chapter 4, we actually get some events that happen much later than the rest of the book of Ezra mixed with things that tie into the events we read about the last couple weeks and will read in a moment from chapter 5. The things that come later are from Nehemiah's time, or perhaps even a bit later. We know this because of the names of the kings there – Xerxes and Artaxerxes – and also because the rebuilding effort mentioned there is the wall, not the Temple. And the wall was rebuilt later. So, if you're reading through Ezra on your own, and if 4:6-23 feels a little out of order, well...it's because they are.

Regardless, with the last verse of chapter 4 and then continuing in chapter 5, we return to the story of the rebuilding of the Temple. So, as we read chapter 5 in a moment, you'll hear that we have a new king, King Darius, who has taken over for Cyrus. Cyrus died in 530 B.C., though how he died is uncertain – historical claims range from dying in battle, to dying on an expedition to the East in present day Kyrgyzstan (*Keer-guh-stahn*), north of India, to his wife killing him. What *is* certain is where he was buried. This is a UNESCO world heritage site, and is in present-day south-central Iran. You want a final resting place like that? Be king or queen of a country, I guess. So, let's turn to Ezra 5.



So, verse 1 tells us about the prophets Haggai and Zechariah being active in the community, and then verse 2 tells us that Zerubbabel and Joshua set to work rebuilding the temple – which doesn't mean they did everything, but they were the ones overseeing the rebuilding. But what sets this all up is that back in chapter 4, in the verses that *do* pertain to these events, we find out that the work on the temple rebuilding ground down to a halt. The first few

verses of chapter four tell us about people from other people groups around the Israelites who bribed some of them, so that the work wouldn't keep going. They undermined the work that was being done. **Then, the last verse of chapter 4 continues that narrative when we are told that work on the house of God came to a standstill until the second year of King Darius' reign.** In the second year of his reign, they started working again.

So, chapter 5 tells us how that came about – how they once again began rebuilding. Enter in Haggai and Zephaniah, two prophets of the Lord. And this is one of those times where it's important to remember that Biblical prophecy is not always about predicting the future. The invited people to repent of sin and walking away from God, and getting back in step. You all are familiar with signs on on-way roads that will let you know if you're going the wrong direction. Probably the most common place we see them is on freeway ramps: Red and white with a very clear message that says "Wrong Way." The prophets were the spiritual version of those signs. They let people know when they're going the wrong way, and what to do in order to get back going the right way.

Here in Ezra we don't get much about their message. But we have a record of their message elsewhere in the Old Testament, in the books of Haggai and Zephaniah. So, let me share with you the verses that communicate clearly their message at this point of the rebuilding narrative. It is Haggai 1:3-4, **"Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" (Haggai 1:3-4).** Ouch! In other words, the people have fixed up their own homes, living in "paneled houses" where everything is in good shape, looking good, they're comfortable in their homes, and so forth...while the house of the Lord – the Temple – remains incomplete. The rebuilding process is only part-way finished, and they're all taking an extended half-time break...to the tune of some 14 years, based on dates given here and what we know from external evidence about how long Cyrus was king, and so forth.

This is a seriously sidetracked mission. They completely lost sight of the mission that they had, and everyone started pursuing their own thing. The

leaders stopped leading, the builders stopped building, the designers stopped designing...and everyone started doing their own thing. In fact, jumping ahead in the story for a moment, we see in chapter 6 verse 15 that the Temple was completed in the 3rd month of the 6th year of King Darius. So they delayed 14 years on a project that only took about another 4 to complete.

Have you ever procrastinated on a project? If your hand isn't up, you're lying. We all have procrastinated. Of course, you'd probably rather think about all the *other* people in your life who procrastinate on things – your spouse, your kids, some other family member, your co-workers – but the fact is, you've done it. We all have. It's like part of the definition of being human: We're created in God's image, and "thou shalt procrastinate." And oftentimes after procrastinating, once we get going on the task before us, and finish that task, we realize that the task wasn't as bad as we thought it would be, and took less time than we anticipated. Have you ever had that happen? I know I have.



At the start of the pandemic, I finally finished fencing in our back yard. We'd talked about doing that for a few years – there was just one section, maybe 25 feet long that needed to be fenced in. And I really didn't want to do it because it was on a steep hillside, then there's a rock retaining wall to go down, and then a gate where the fence returns back to the house. But the whole stretch of fence is only 25 or 30 feet. **(Photo of us)**, Finally, in March of 2020, I decided it was a good pandemic project. With some help from Brooke, we got it done in just a couple of days. **(Next photo)** We just needed to stay on the mission, and persevere and get it done. Talking about the project wasn't enough. Gwen and I had talked about doing this for years. Even praying about it wasn't enough.



It's like this quote I came across a few months ago: "God is in control, but he doesn't expect you to lean on a shovel and pray for a hole." Sometimes, you just

gotta put in the work; and to do that and stick with it *takes perseverance*. This is true in various facets of life, including the rebuilding efforts that we have: they take perseverance. **That's the first thing to learn from this, that rebuilding takes perseverance.** We don't want to work ourselves into the ground, of course; but if a rebuilding effort is going to be successful, it will take perseverance to see it all the way through.

The second thing I want to highlight from this passage is the way they handled this potential conflict from the people who questioned whether they should be rebuilding or not. So, they've had a 14-year break, these two prophets come along and give them a kick in the rear to get going – though it was a loving kick in the rear, so it's ok. And so, they start the project again. And then come some people who question whether they should be doing this. And there actually are two things to learn here – so this is like point 2a and 2b in the sermon, because sometimes we are the ones who are being questioned, and sometimes we're the ones doing the questioning.

So soon after they re-start, we're told that “Tattenai, the governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates went to them [the Israelites] and asked, “Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?” And they want to know who's doing the work.

Now, God is watching over them as verse 5 says, and Tattenai and Sethar-Bozenai don't make them stop while the investigation is carried out about whether or not they should do this. And there's a lesson to learn here that's not so much about rebuilding, but in how we approach people when we aren't sure if they're doing what they should be doing. And that is: **Be gracious and don't assume the worst about others, or that you know the whole story.**

These two guys probably had the authority from King Darius to make decisions as they see best for the kingdom. So, they likely could have just stopped the rebuilding while then inquiring about the legality of it with Darius...which would have been a several months delay – maybe 6 months or even more. But probably because of what the Israelites told them, they maybe realized that there was a “slight possibility” that they were given

permission to rebuild the Temple. And so, they gave them Israelites benefit of the doubt, and as verse 5 tells us, the Israelites didn't have to stop their work while the inquiry was made. If it came back that they were building illegally, then they'd have to stop. But until that point, they could continue. Essentially, they were considered "innocent until proven guilty." We're all familiar with that concept. But so often we don't live that way. They show us here how to do it: Give the benefit of the doubt. Listen to their side of the story and consider it.

And then the second point comes from the Israelites, who, as near as we can tell, they didn't get defensive or upset that someone would question their efforts to rebuild the Temple. It's as if they expected opposition and questioning, and were prepared for how they would respond. And so they just explain to them what the deal is: That King Cyrus had not only given them permission to rebuild, but he sent them to go do it. Check the records in the city of Babylon, and you'll see that to be true.

And so, they each present their side of the story, it gets written down, sent to Darius, and we see in Chapter 6 that he orders a search of the records in the city of Babylon, and sure enough, it is just as the Israelites say. And then Darius sends word back that yes, they're allowed to rebuild and he even gives his own support of it, offering more materials and so forth, and tells Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai to leave them alone and let them rebuild.

So, what could have been a pretty ugly conflict, was not, because one side was gracious, and the other side wasn't defensive. How much smoother would our own relationships be if we lived like this ourselves? Have you ever accused someone of something rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt? I did when I was a teenager and I learned my lesson: Don't assume you know everything. It's amazing how asking questions rather than making judgment statements can change the course of a conversation and impact the relationship positively. Or: Have you ever responded defensively, rather than just stating your side in a non-judgmental, non-emotional kind of way? It can be really hard to do, admittedly. I'm far from perfect at it – just ask my wife. 😊 Fortunately, we see a good model for us here, and also in Jesus' life.

Remember when Jesus was on the cross and some of his accusers and even those who nailed him to the cross were there...what did he say to and about them? He prayed for them. He didn't lash out in anger. He didn't make assumptions about what they'd done. Some of them – like the Roman guards – were just doing their job. Others were making assumptions about Jesus as they accused him of stuff. But Jesus prays for them, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” Oh, my goodness! **What if we responded like that in the face of our doubters, critics, and persecutors?** What if we had grace and forgiveness toward others – not just in rebuilding facets of our lives, but more broadly?...though maybe it's needed in rebuilding efforts especially, because there can be a lot of obstacles when rebuilding. Some people are even threatened by other people's rebuilding efforts. (Co-dependent relationships, for example.) Or maybe you're in a rebuilding phase of life because of how someone treated you – maybe they didn't treat you with grace and it led to where you are now, needing to rebuild. And you really want to just blame them and live in bitterness and contempt toward them. Can you forgive them instead? Can you keep away from defensiveness and bitterness? Perhaps Jesus' words from the cross can inspire you to respond with grace as he did.

So, whatever rebuilding you've got in your life right now, or in the future, it takes perseverance. Sometimes we're tempted to kick back in the comfy confines of our “paneled” homes or other familiar surroundings. But God is calling us to out to build and rebuild for His cause, and that takes perseverance. That perseverance is what will allow you to finish the rebuilding opportunities in your life, too. And then in that process, and in other facets of life: treat others with grace. Given them their dignity. Don't assume the worst about them. Give them the benefit of the doubt...and pray for them, as Jesus did from the cross for those who crucified him. When we live like this, we will shine the light of Jesus and build up the church all for the glory of God. Let's pray...Amen.