

“Love in the Ruins”
Ezra 5-6
June 21, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

The returning exiles made a start in rebuilding the temple and managed to complete its foundation. But there it sat, unfinished, for almost twenty years. There is something profoundly sad to me about a building lying unfinished for so long a time. It speaks of poor planning and wasted resources at the least, and perhaps more tragically of financial reversals and dashed hopes. And since this unfinished temple was right in the heart of the city, it spoke continually and loudly of these things. The unfinished temple was a symbol of failure, and the longer it sat in its unfinished condition, the deeper the sense of failure. Before long, failure would become part of their identity. Since the temple was the place where God met his people, this situation speaks of a ruined relationship with God. Where such ruin exists, we can grow accustomed to it so that it feels normal. Perhaps that had happened to these returned exiles.

You may recognize the title of this sermon as the title of a Walker Percy novel. I’ve not read the novel, but I find the title interesting. It could even serve as a summary of Ezra and Nehemiah. The exiles return to a nation that is in ruins because of the sin of their ancestors. But there is love to be found there, and it is the faithful love of God.

Could that title describe your life as well? Perhaps there is a symbol of failure in your life, much like this unfinished temple. Maybe it is a picture of a family that once was but has now been broken, at least in part by your sin. Perhaps it’s some sporting equipment or something associated with a hobby you used to pursue with someone close to you, but the relationship is no more. Or maybe it’s a Bible collecting dust on a shelf, a Bible that reminds you of a past relationship with God that has grown cold. We see in this passage the primary elements of God’s work to rebuild his relationship with his people.

I. God’s Word

Things were at a low place spiritually. Some lethargy had set in. The people had grown accustomed to a new normal that left God out of the picture. They were forgetting who they were—the people of God whose primary identity was found in their relationship with him. We know from the prophet Haggai that they were neglecting the things of God while giving great attention to their own matters. The house of God was in ruins, but their own houses were being made into palaces. And this had been going on for quite some time. What kind of power would be required to shake these people out of their spiritual lethargy?

God sent to them two preachers, Haggai and Zechariah. When God undertakes his work of restoration of what has been ruined, he sends preachers. God's preachers, though nothing in themselves, have great power because they handle and deliver the powerful word of God. The preaching of Haggai and Zechariah served to shake the people out of their lethargy. Notice the simple way this is described. **“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.”** They prophesied and action followed. Their preaching was sufficient to break up the hard ground of spiritual lethargy.

What was it about their preaching that had such a significant effect? Let's consider just the preaching of Haggai. The book that bears his name records four sermons he preached in a four month period of time. It was his first sermon, found in Haggai 1, that got things rolling. That sermon was a simple call to repentance. Its theme was stated right at the beginning. **“These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord”** (1:2). They were procrastinating. Procrastination is a form of self-deception that allows us to do what we want without a guilty conscience. We avoid guilt by telling ourselves that we have every intention of doing what we're supposed to do, just not now. We acknowledge it as a good thing that needs doing. But then it allows us to continue doing what we want, which is to avoid doing that very thing. Augustine once prayed, “Give me chastity, but not yet.” Haggai calls them out on this sin.

Haggai's first sermon demonstrates the two essential parts of repentance: seeing the danger of sin and the grievousness of sin. He writes of the danger of sin by speaking of the consequences of their procrastination. **“Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes”** (1:5-6). Their misplaced priorities had led to a sense of emptiness. Whatever they tried didn't work. They found nothing satisfying.

As important as it is to recognize the consequences of our sin, it is insufficient to lead us to repentance. So Haggai also speaks of the effect of their sin on God. **“Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?”** (1:4). Because of their procrastination, God says, **“my house lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house”** (1:9). Repentance requires that we grieve the effects of our sin on God. If we only consider the dangerous consequences of our sin, we are being self-oriented. That is, our motive for turning away from sin is all about us. Such repentance is shallow and will not last. The kind of

repentance that leads to life-change is the kind that moves past the danger of sin to see the grievousness of sin, its insult to God.

Tim Keller gives an example of this in the writings of the Puritan theologian, John Owen. He recounts Owen's speeches to himself as he fights sin in his life.

Owen's model soliloquies never say, "I must stop this or I'm going to be punished," which nourishes the self-centeredness of sin even as you think you are repenting. Rather, they say things like "How can I treat Jesus like this—who died so I would never be punished? Is this how I treat the one who has brought me into this unconditionally loved state? Is this how I treat him after all he's done? Will I fail to forgive when he died to forgive me? Will I be anxious over the loss of money when he gave himself to be my security and true wealth? Will I nurse my pride when he emptied himself of his own glory to save me?" (*Prayer*, p. 216).

II. God's Decree

The word "decree" appears ten times in these two chapters. Nine of those occurrences refer to the decree of the Persian kings, either Darius or Cyrus, and the last one refers to God's decree. A decree is an order from a king that must be fulfilled. We can see the force of such a decree in the decision of Tattenai to allow the construction of the temple to continue while he awaited the response of Darius. A little background will help.

Tattenai is identified as "**the governor of the province Beyond the River**" (5:3). Darius had established twenty provincial governorships throughout his kingdom. The governor was to make sure the taxes were collected and to keep peace within his realm, which largely meant stifling any kind of rebellion. So when he hears that a construction project is underway in Jerusalem, one involving large stones, his natural fear is that some fortification is being erected in preparation for a revolt against Persia. So he is really just doing his job when he makes inquiry of Zerubbabel about this. He asks, "**Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?**" (5:3). When the reply came that it was Cyrus, the first king of Persia, who gave the decree (5:13), Tattenai dared not force them to stop building, lest he violate a decree from a Persian king, even if it were the decree of a dead king. So he wrote a letter to the current king, Darius, informing him of all this, and recommended that he order some research to be done to confirm whether or not Cyrus had made such a decree. Notice that the question wasn't, "Should we allow this construction to proceed?" but "Did Cyrus actually make this decree?" The decree of a king was considered unalterable.

Darius issues the recommended decree, discovers that Cyrus did indeed issue such a decree, and then makes a decree of his own. His decree is that the construction should be allowed to proceed. He then adds something that must

have given great joy to the small Jewish community in Judah. **“The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue”** (6:8). Not only did he make an order to provide for the construction, but also for the worship that would ensue, sacrificial animals and produce. He even went further and said, **“I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill”** (6:11).

The next to last appearance of the word “decree” is the most important. It is found in verse 14. **“And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia”** (6:14). Nowhere before this verse does it say that God issued any decree. All the decrees were from Persian kings. What that teaches is that God’s decree is the ultimate one. The Persian kings were not followers of Israel’s God. They didn’t consult him before issuing their decrees. But everything they decreed came ultimately from the sovereign will of God.

This doctrine of the sovereignty of God is both a comfort and challenge to us. The comfort comes from realizing that God’s control extends even to the most powerful of his enemies. They end up doing only what God has ordained should be done. How does God use his great, sovereign power? He uses it for the benefit of his people. The temple will be rebuilt, and God works out things so that the Persians pay for it. Even when circumstances seem to be against us, as the builders must have concluded when initially challenged by Tattenai, God works them out for blessing. As William Cowper has famously written in his great hymn, “Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.” God will build his temple. Since the New Testament teaches that the Church is now the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), this means that we can take comfort in knowing that all the challenges the Church might be facing today will be turned to God’s glory and our benefit. God will build his Church. Of this you can be sure.

The sovereignty of God also poses a challenge to us, and the challenge is not to be consumed with anxiety. Has it ever occurred to you that anxiety is rooted in pride? We are anxious because we’re concerned that things might not work out as we want them to. The assumption in that is that we know how things ought to work out for us, and that is our pride speaking. The truth is that I am not wise enough to know how things should go for me. If I were Zerubbabel, I would not have chosen to see the governor come for his inquiry and write down my name. I would have chosen an easier path in which the construction could have proceeded without the threat of a possible cease and desist order. When we rest in the sovereignty of God, we learn to repent not only of anxiety, but also the pride that lurks behind it.

III. Our Worship of God

The story of God's work to rebuild his temple ends in worship. Upon the completion of the construction, a project that had taken five years since its resumption, they worshiped. They offered sacrifices and dedicated the temple to God. And then they celebrated Passover for the first time in over one-hundred years. Ezra tells us the result of this worship. **"And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful"** (6:22). Worship and joy go together.

Worship is the end of this story of the rebuilding of the temple, and worship is the ultimate end of our story as well. Remember the theme we have stated multiple times. God is making a home with his people, and this temple is the place where God dwelled with them. So let's trace this theme of the temple through the Bible. The Garden of Eden was a temple because God was present there in joyful fellowship with his image bearers. That's what made it paradise. But it was lost due to sin and God directed Moses to make another temple, called a tabernacle. And that is where God met with his people. Then God moved from a tent to a permanent building in Solomon's temple. But again, that was lost due to Israel's sin. This is now the second temple. It will be expanded and adorned by a massive project undertaken by King Herod, and that is the temple that existed in Jerusalem during Jesus' life. But when Jesus died, that temple was made obsolete, indicated by the splitting of its curtain from top to bottom. Jesus said he is now the temple. Jesus is the fulfillment of all those sacrifices, and he is now the place where we meet God. Also, the Church is called the temple of God now (1 Cor. 3:16), because we are the body of Christ. So to ignore or marginalize the Church is to do what Israel did before they resumed construction of the temple. Curiously, though, the next step in the development of the temple will be that there is no more temple. Speaking of the New Jerusalem, we are told in Revelation 21:22, **"And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."** In other words, we won't have to go to the temple, because the entire new earth will be a temple filled with the joyful presence of God.

CONCLUSION:

The Bible says that heaven will be characterized by everlasting joy. The source of that joy will not be our enjoyment of something within creation—some food, hobby or delightful vista. Rather, it will be the Creator God who, in love has entered the ruin of this world through our Lord Jesus to restore it completely. Even now, to the degree that this truth enters into our souls, we are filled with joy. And this joy needs to be expressed in praise and worship.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Ezra 5-6

1. Israel was shaken out of its spiritual lethargy by the ministry of two preachers, Haggai and Zechariah. It has been said by some that good preachers are more important to the health of a nation than good politicians. What do you think?
2. We have the text for Haggai's sermon that was so powerfully used of God. It is a sermon found in Haggai 1, and it is about repentance. His sermon features two components of repentance: seeing the danger of sin and the grievousness of sin. What is the result of seeing only the danger of sin?
3. These two chapters speak strongly of the sovereignty of God. Note especially that 6:14 says that these things happened by the decree of God, even though the previous 9 appearances of that word "decree" all refer to the decrees of Persian kings. When rightly understood, the sovereignty of God is a great comfort to us. How does it bring comfort to you?
4. The sovereignty of God is also a challenge to us. It exposes the dark underbelly of our anxiety, showing that anxiety is rooted in our pride that leads us to think that we know best what is good for us. What anxieties are you battling right now? How are these anxieties addressed by resting in the sovereignty of God? Be specific.
5. Has God ever used for good what seemed at first to you to be a setback? Explain.
6. The passage ends in joyful worship (6:22). What have you found to be helpful in making worship joyful?