



LAST TIME ON EZRA...

Ezra 5:17

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.

After heinous **DISOBEDIENCE** and **70 YEARS of EXILE** as punishment, Israel had been given another chance. God's people had been sent back into the Land to rebuild the Temple of God. Of course, **THE LOCALS WEREN'T HAPPY** about it, and they eventually **BULLIED THE NATION TO STOP** working on God's house. When the Nation couldn't build the house of the Lord, they **BUSIED THEMSELVES WITH BUILDING THEIR OWN**.

This is soon what many followers of Christ will be faced with. Will we keep walking with the Lord in spite of the trouble it brings, or will we throw our hands up, admit defeat, and console ourselves with stuff and entertainment?

The first time Israel was forced to stop construction on the Temple, they chose the latter. **"Well, it's hard to obey God's will right now, so I guess I'll just remodel my house."** That's what they did! Temporary stuff is a good distraction from the real problem. Always has been.

My intention isn't to be **ALARMIST** tonight, though there's nothing wrong with that when there's an emergency. Whether the **EVENTS TRANSPIRING** in our country right now usher in an

AGE OF ATTACKS ON CHRISTIANITY or not, they should make us seriously consider what we'll do when that **HARD TIME** eventually comes.

Will we **PERSEVERE**? Will we keep **RUNNING HARD AFTER JESUS** even when things get bad? Or **WILL WE WALK AWAY LIKE ISRAEL** did after the first wave of persecution? Will we **console** ourselves with **stuff**, busy ourselves with **work**, or **vacations**, or **hobbies**? Will we justify our decision to stop championing the cause of Christ by **championing the causes of the culture**?

SERIOUSLY! What if we were as zealous about telling people about Jesus as we are about telling them to put on a mask?!!

HEAR ME. Not pushing one way or another, tell me which of these conversations have you had most recently, a conversation telling someone why they needed to be saved, or telling someone why we should or shouldn't have to wear masks? I'm talking to ME TOO!

Invariably the **CULTURE** does a better job **PROMOTING ITS CAUSE IN THE CHURCH**, than the Church does promoting **HIS CAUSE** out in the culture.

Folks, this may sound like a **PESSIMISTIC VIEW** of things, but I feel a bit like the **RUNNER** who's done his warm up and stretches. I'm **PREPARING**, knowing **THE REAL TEST IS ABOUT TO START**; this is just the warmup. I kinda **DREAD** it, but **I'M PREPARING MYSELF TO RUN** it with everything I've got all the same. How about you?

ISRAEL SUCCUMBED to the pagan **PRESSURE** that surrounded them and their focus turned to themselves. Praise the Lord for **HAGGAI** and **ZECHARIAH**! Through their preaching God gave Israel the **KICK IN THE REAR** they needed, and they started building again in spite of King Artaxerxes' order to stop.

So, we see in **EZRA 5** that **THE GOVERNORS** of the land **DECIDED TO TELL ON** them to King Darius. I love how they were acting like **DISGRUNTLED CUSTOMERS** ready to complain to management.

"So, what's your names? Just want to make sure we get it right when we tell the boss about what you've been doing..."

Even more than that, I **LOVE THEIR STONE-FACED REPLY!!!**

Ezra 5:11

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.

Wow! With hearts like lions, the Israelites responded, "WE'RE THE SERVANTS OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, and we ARE REBUILDING this house!"

I'm sure Governor Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai (I call them "Tattle-Tail" and "Bozo") expected the Israelites to **BACKPEDAL** and walk away from construction. Such a **BOLD RESPONSE** had to **THROW THEM** off a little. Truly, they couldn't have imagined how **DRASTICALLY** this situation was about to **FLIP**.

So, they went and tattled to King Darius...

(With pinched nose) "They told us that King *CYRUS* told them to do it."

Ezra 5:17

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.

From a worldly standpoint, **Haggai and Zechariah were the only ones in Israel's corner**. Let's pick up in Ezra 6...

Ezra 6:1-2

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. 2 And in Ecbatana, the capital that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: A record.



"Governor Tattle-Tail" and "Shethar-Bozo" asked King Darius to **search for Cyrus' decree in Babylon**. That's because **Babylon was still the capital** of the Trans-Euphrates provinces, you know, the part of the empire that was "beyond the river," and as such, **it contained the repository of all the records concerning the provinces**. It made sense to look there.

However, it wasn't found. Darius could have quit there and written back to "Tattle-Tail" and "Bozo," **"those Jews are a bunch of liars. We searched and found no such decree from Cyrus."** But he didn't! He was **COMPELLED** to search further, and the scroll was found in Ecbatana.

Why Ecbatana? Well, because it was **CYRUS' SUMMER HOME!** Yeah! When Cyrus captured it in 550 BC, he and the Persian kings after him used it as a summer home, moving their royal courts back and forth between **SUSA** and **ECBATANA** to take advantage of more temperate climates. Cyrus made the decree that sent the Jews home in the **SUMMER of 538 BC** while he was chilling at Ecbatana!

Now, such details may fascinate you as it does me, or they may be more than you wanted, but the point I'm making here is that **EVEN IN THE SEARCH, God was in this!**

The record read...

Ezra 6:3-5

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, 4 with

three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.

Now, if you **COMPARE** this with the written and verbal proclamation recorded in Ezra 1:1-4, you'll see that there are **A FEW EXTRA DETAILS**:

First, we've got **SPECS**:

90ft x 90ft (60 cubits by 60 cubits) **IN ITS PLACE** with three layers of great stones (literally "*stones of rolling*") and one layer of timber.

Now, according to 1 Kings 6:2 **the dimensions of the Solomonic temple were 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet tall.** Given that the dimensions from Cyrus' decree don't match the dimensions of Solomon's Temple, one commentator suggested that these dimensions from Cyrus could have been **BUILDING RESTRICTIONS**, a "no larger than..." limitation.

"...and let its foundations be retained." This wording refers to the ancient understanding that, once a site has been dedicated to worship, that's all it can be used for going forward. Cyrus understood and mandated as much.

We talked about this last time I taught on Ezra. In Ezra 3 they were just working on **THE ALTAR**, and like the Temple itself, **it had to be rebuilt EXACTLY WHERE IT STOOD FORMERLY.** The physical locations of the altar and the Temple were synonymous with God's location in our lives!

Are we going to aim for the bullseye of what we know is God's will or just "close enough?"

FINANCING:

The **RECONSTRUCTION COST** was to be paid from the **ROYAL TREASURY.** You know what's wild about that? The people questioning the construction didn't know about this; they had to be told. That means that, up until this time, **ISRAEL WAS BUILDING WITHOUT HELP!** **This is even more poignant later...**

ARTIFACT RESTORATION:

In Ezra 1, it says that Cyrus returned the gold and silver vessels of the Temple, but the decree mandated that they be PLACE BACK WHERE THEY GO. **"You shall put them in the house of God."** They were for Temple use only!

CYRUS' DECREE CONFIRMED.

King Cyrus joins Team Israel AGAIN because Darius BROUGHT BACK his authority. GOD IS MOVING!!! Darius continues...

Ezra 6:6-10

6 Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. 7 Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. 8 Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. 9 And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, 10 that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

"Keep away." I found this HUMOROUS, but one commentator described how the verbiage, **"stay away from there"** (or **"keep away,"** as it's translated in the ESV) is actually a common Aramaic **LEGAL STATEMENT**. "Tattle-tail" and "Bozo" were essentially given a **RESTRAINING ORDER** from King Darius! Haha!

He then went on to say, "I'm making a decree of my own..." Cyrus' decree was for the LORD'S Temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt. **DARIUS' DECREE WAS AIMED DIRECTLY AT THE TRANS-EUPHRATES LEADERSHIP.**

Pay for the construction cost out of YOUR tax revenue, **"the tribute of the province from Beyond the River."** Instead sending their taxes on to Persia, they were to hold on to them and give them to the Jewish laborers so they could complete the work.

Supply everything they need for DAILY sacrifices--bulls, rams, sheep, wheat, salt, wine, or oil. Give them whatever they need **"that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons"** (Ezra 6:10).

There's A LOT OF LOVE for Israel and the Lord right now, huh? Yeah, and it kind of ends with them too. Darius had some **SHARP POINTS** to make with local leadership—PUN INTENDED.

Ezra 6:11-12

11 Also 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. 12 May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.

He said, *"If you keep inserting yourself into this situation, I'm going to take a beam from your house and insert it INTO YOU!"*

Execution by impaling was practiced in the Assyrian and Persian empires. While the dying process was certainly shorter than Roman crucifixion, the statement that lingered on was just as strong, that statement being: I'M SERIOUS! A dead body on a pole denied offenders a proper burial and served as a strong **reminder not to disobey the king.**

The violator's **HOUSE** was also to be **DEMOLISHED**. As punishment for attempting to undo something decreed by the king, **EVERYTHING** you ever worked for was **UNDONE**. This imagery is evocative of the simultaneous destruction of the universe and the Great White Throne Judgment. Look at the end of Revelation 20...

Revelation 20:11

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.

The **GREAT WHITE THRONE** is where the **LOST** of all ages will be **JUDGED** according to their deeds. At the end of time, Death, Hades, and the sea will give up their dead—again these are only the lost—they'll be judged according to their deeds, and subsequently cast into the lake of fire where they'll be punished forever according to their deeds.

Notice how **"earth and sky fled away"** from the presence of the One seated on the throne. In just five verses John writes...

Revelation 21:1

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

Based on the context, the **PROXIMITY** of these passages to one another, it's reasonable to interpret that the "**fleeing away of earth and sky**" IS THE DESTRUCTION OF THE UNIVERSE that gives rise to the new heaven and new earth.

Darius promised to **UNDO THE ENTIRE LIFE** of anyone who defied his decree, and we know that the Lord will do it more severely at the end of time. **Everything the lost lived for instead of God will burn before their eyes as they're sentenced to eternal punishment.**

Then Darius CALLS DOWN A CURSE on any ruler or people who would attempt to alter the effect of the decree or destroy the Temple. By invoking "**the God who has caused his name to dwell there,**" Darius leaves the violator's fate in the hands of the LORD, and time and again the LORD carried out this curse.

It happened to **Antiochus Epiphanes** when he desecrated the Temple in 167 BC. **He died INSANE three years later**, and when Herod the Great renovated the Temple primarily to glorify himself, he suffered domestic troubles and died of disease.

Ezra 6:13-15

13 Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. 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; 15 and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

Did you catch whose **DECREE** they were all following? Before the kings of the earth, the Jews knew the One whose decree they were truly following was **GOD'S**. The work gained **SUPPORT, PROVISION, and PROTECTION** because HE was the One behind it all.

This is the part of the movie where you have the **musical montage**. You know, that part when the hopeful, thematic **music swells**, not a lot of talking, and scene after scene showing **the rapid passage of time** and **things FINALLY going the way of the hero** of the story! This is it!

At first, Team Israel only consisted of the Jewish laborers and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Then the world was reminded of Cyrus' support for them. Then Darius joined the work, and not only did he get the **local opposition to BACK OFF, BUT HE ALSO MADE THEM HELP TOO!**

That last part reminds me of the little old Christian lady who lived next door to an atheist. She was always praying and praising the Lord, and the atheist always harassed her for it. One day she ran out of groceries and didn't have the means to go out and get more, so she asked the Lord to provide. Well, the atheist, having heard her, determined he would show her. He went to the grocery store and bought all kinds of groceries. Then he left them on the lady's door step, rang the doorbell, and hid in the bushes. When the old lady came and found the groceries, she began praising the Lord and thanking Him for the groceries. Then the atheist jumped out and said, "Ha! The Lord didn't give you those groceries! I did!" Immediately, the lady returned to praising the Lord, saying, "Thank You, Lord, for all these groceries and for making the devil pay for them!"

Instead of crushing the believer's spirit, **THE ATHEIST** in the joke only wound up being **THE ANSWER TO HER PRAYER!** "Governor Tattle-Tail" and his associate "Bozo" thought they'd put an end to the Israelites' mission, and in the end, they wound up supplying ALL the resources for its completion!

Time and again, the Lord has turned what others meant for harm into good. He did it in the life of Joseph in Egypt...

Genesis 50:20

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

And He did it especially in the DEATH of His Son...

1 Corinthians 2:7-8

7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

"The rulers of this age," the demonic forces, thought they had defeated God by crucifying the Son, when it was actually **God manipulating THEM to crucify the sinless Son** as payment for the sins of all humanity!!!

Folks, **THE LORD IS IN CONTROL!** When pressured yet again to stop building, the Israelites didn't back down. They went all in! They didn't cower before their persecutors. They made no apologies, secretly wondering if they were really doing the right thing. No! They **STOOD UP STRAIGHT, LOOKED THEM IN THE EYE, AND TOLD THEM, "WE'RE THE SERVANTS OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH!"** and **GOD CAME THROUGH!**

The Israelites were **UNDER PRESSURE**, and they **REMAINED**. They **PERSEVERED**, and the Lord rewarded their faith! **God allows trials to enter our lives for our good.** His will isn't to destroy us, and He hasn't allowed the trial in order to see what **WE** will do. No! He allowed it in order to show us what **HE** can do!!!

Imagine how it would've been for the Israelites if they'd just backed down again...and again...and again from their oppressors. They would've never seen the victory! If they had just bowed down and bowed out, things would've been easier, but they would've been living in defeat. They would've never given the Lord the opportunity to show Himself mighty on their behalf.

CYRUS had been used of God to send the Jews home and initiate the rebuilding of the Temple. However, he had been disregarded and forgotten.

By the time the Jews restarted construction, from a worldly perspective, only HAGGAI and ZECHARIAH were in their corner.

Then DARIUS brings back the authority of Cyrus **AND ADDS HIS TO IT**. Then he deputizes ol' "TATTLE-TAIL" AND "BOZO" for the work that they had formerly opposed!

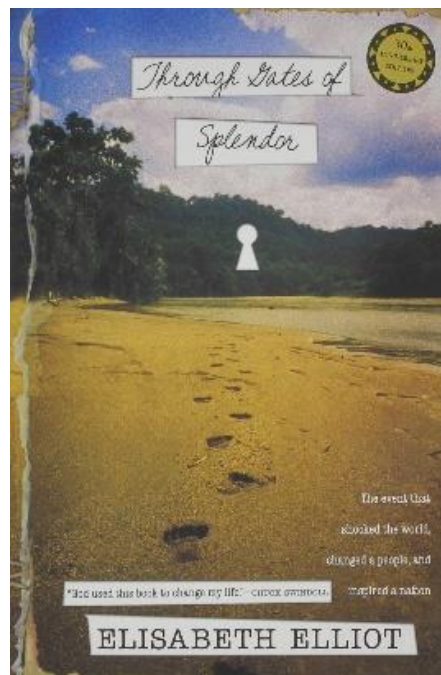
SUDDENLY NO ONE WAS AGAINST THEM, AND EVERYONE WAS FOR THEM!!! What a **FLIP!**
That's what happens when God is in something and we wait on Him!

Now, I hear someone thinking, "Yeah, it's great when the Lord shows up like that...except for when He doesn't. I know, sometimes it seems like you don't get to see the **VICTORY** of the Lord, and I'll make a couple of remarks on that.

FIRST, AS HARD AS IT IS TO SAY, even in those times, IT'S NOT ABOUT US. The glory is the Lord's, and while good may come from the trial, it may not be in our lifetimes. God's not on our timetable.



I think of the five missionaries who perished in Ecuador, speared to death by the very people they went to evangelize. THEY DIDN'T GET TO SEE THE VICTORY...but their wives did. Their wives actually went to live among their husbands' murderers and ultimately led them to the Lord!



If you've never read Elisabeth Elliot's account of this in her book Through Gates of Splendor, you should. It's a TRANSFORMATIVE READ. Have tissues or a handkerchief on hand...

No, the hard reality is that sometimes we don't get to see the victory, but that doesn't mean it doesn't come! It's also a strong REMINDER THAT WE'RE NOT LIVING FOR THIS WORLD; we're living for the NEXT, forever with God.

Passages like Ezra 6 encourages us, though, showing us that God DOES come through for those who trust Him. Then comes the CELEBRATION!

Ezra 6:16-17

16 And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. 17 They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

"CELEBRATE GOOD TIMES! COME ON!" What a joyous moment this was! It was actually happening! They were dedicating the Temple of God to Him after it had been destroyed. When they returned to Jerusalem, they found a burnt ruin, but now **they stood before the house where the LORD had caused His Name to dwell.**

It was definitely a MEAGER CELEBRATION compared to the dedication of Solomon's Temple...

1 Kings 8:62-63

62 Then the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the Lord. 63 Solomon offered as peace offerings to the Lord 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord.

Now listen again to what they offered after exile: 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and 12 male goats as a sin offering for all Israel.

The people could barely offer HALF OF ONE PERCENT of what Solomon offered at the first dedication of the Temple. They were a broken, **IMPOVERISHED** people after exile.

This is why Cyrus had said to PAY THEM to build the Temple from the Royal Treasury! They were BROKE after exile! And in their limited means, it's precious to know that these Jews carried on construction without support until Darius. They were zealous! They were devoted!

It says they offered 12 male goats as a sin offering FOR ALL ISRAEL. Whether or not representatives of all 12 tribes of Israel had returned by this point, the vision was that they all *WOULD* return. They were ready to be united again as 12 tribes in a **COVENANT** relationship with God...

...and that's what's communicated through the final verse that we'll look at tonight...

Ezra 6:18

And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

"...as it is written in the **Book of Moses.**" In that phrase is encapsulated the theme of the entire book. They had been **PUNISHED** through exile for living in **REBELLION AGAINST THE WORD of God**. They had done things their way, and exile is what it had gotten them. Now as they "tried God's way," they experienced the mighty move of God on their behalf.

Would they eventually disobey God again? Yes. Even in close relationship with the Father because of the Son's sacrifice and equipped with the indwelling Holy Spirit, do we take steps away from God? Absolutely. However, the book of Ezra repeats one thing over and over again:

REVIVAL COMES AS WE COMMIT TO LIVE ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD.

Impossible situations teach us to rely on God more, and they allow us to experience His grace, and power, and love. The rebuilding of the Temple was a **MIRACLE**, but it happened as a broken people returned to the Word of God. Just because we live by the Book doesn't mean life will be easy; honestly, it's almost always harder, but there's more **PEACE**. As we continue to watch events unfold in our country, my prayer is that we'll remember that peace isn't found in anything but Christ, and that we'll help everyone else understand that too.