



Parkway Fellowship

THE JOURNEY BACK • DON'T GIVE IN TO DISCOURAGEMENT •
EZRA 4:1-5,24; 5:1-5; 6:6-12 • 5/24/2020

MAIN POINT

Discouragement is a temporary attempt to get me to permanently abandon God.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Name some popular voices you listen to these days, whether it's via podcast, radio, TV, blogs, or social media.

What are some factors that help you choose what voices to "tune" into?

Have you ever turned a voice you'd previously trusted "off"? Why?

Sometimes the voices we listen to are encouraging, and sometimes they are discouraging. It's not that we should pursue some Pollyanna type of existence, never acknowledging the harsh realities of the world around us; that's not what God is calling us to. But He is calling us to recognize the choice we have in taking those voices to heart. The truth is, discouragement is all around us. Ezra 4-6 will help us diagnose the common problem of discouragement and will show us the wisdom to navigate our discouragement and find hope in God.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 4:1-5,24.

We learned in this week's message that discouragement is often about temporary circumstances. What were the discouraging circumstances facing God's people in

Ezra 4?

Do you think they knew the circumstances were temporary? We've all heard the phrase, "This, too, shall pass." Why, then, do we so often act as though our bad circumstances are permanent?

What are some signs we're beginning to believe our circumstances are permanent rather than temporary?

The work on the temple was in a standstill for a little more than 10 years. Would you consider that a temporary or permanent circumstance? Why is it true that no earthly circumstance, no matter how long it lasts, is permanent?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 5:1-5.

There's been a regime change in Babylon. King Cyrus is out and King Darius is in. It takes a couple of years for this news to actually reach Israel, but when it does, the Israelites take this regime change as an opportunity to renew their efforts to build the temple. After the Israelites start building again, the local governor, a guy named Tattenai, writes to Darius and asks if it is okay.

Considering the history, what response do you think the majority of the Israelites were expecting to receive from Darius?

How do you think you would respond in a similar situation? Do you tend to be easily discouraged or resolutely hopeful? Why?

The prophets were behind the rebuilding of the temple. Governor Tattenai and his buddies were not. What is the danger of listening to the wrong voices? How can you know which voices are the right ones to listen to?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EZRA 6:6-12.

Darius decreed the work should be carried out, unhindered, and with diligence.

Have you ever experienced a setback that discouraged you? Or have you ever been a member of a church that experienced a disappointment? Explain what that experience was like.

How was the Lord faithful through that time?

Sometimes things happen to us that crush our hope and trust. It is difficult in those times to press forward in faith. But God is faithful. He never forgets us or His promises. God did not allow the postponement of the temple to last forever. Discouragement was, and is, a temporary attempt to get us to permanently abandon God. Instead of giving in to discouragement, we can trust that God is with us. Fortified by this hope, we can persevere in carrying out His kingdom purposes in any circumstance.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In this week's message, we learned the following two points of application: Which voice is my choice, and I keep following and He keeps paving. Which of these stands out to you the most personally right now? Why?

What way have you seen God intervene in your life as He did with the Israelites?

What voices of discouragement do you need to stop listening to?

What are you going to change to follow God more closely than before the pandemic?

PRAYER

Thank God that every earthly circumstance is temporary, but His kingdom and promises are permanent. Ask Him to help you not give in to discouragement. Ask Him to help you know what it should look like to endure faithfully in carrying out His kingdom purposes.

COMMENTARY

| EZRA 4:1-5,24

4:1-2 The author's description of those who offered to help with the construction as enemies shows that their offer was not what it seemed. Their identity is clarified in that they had been brought... here by King Esar-haddon of Assyria. Second Kings 17 describes the policy of the Assyrian kings who deported many of the people in the northern kingdom of Israel and replaced them with people from Babylon and beyond. These events (2Ki 17) occurred half a century before Esar-haddon, and no report is given of deportations or resettlements during his reign (681-669 b.c.). But as the present verse indicates, he carried on the practice of resettlement. The claim of these enemies that they also worshiped your God was probably true. The problem was that they worshiped the God of Israel along with the false gods of their homeland (2Ki 17:3-

22). If Zerubbabel allowed these people to help in the construction, it would be impossible to prevent them from worshiping there as well. Zerubbabel and the other returnees knew well the terrible price their nation had paid for their syncretistic practices and could never allow such a practice again.

4:3 In refusing their help, Zerubbabel did not cite their religious syncretism as the issue but focused on the legal decree of Cyrus that they were to build the temple (1:2-3). You may have no part with us is a variation on a Hebrew idiom that means "we have no common interests."

4:4-5 These verses highlight one aspect of the opposition from the people who were already in the land (lit "the peoples of the land," see note at 3:3): they... bribed officials to act against them (lit "they hired counselors against them"). In the vast Persian Empire, bribery of government officials was commonplace.

4:24 The verse begins with an Aramaic preposition, be'dayin, that is usually translated "then," which suggests that verse 24 temporally follows verse 23. But as pointed out above, verses 6-23 form a parenthesis in which letters written to the Persian kings illustrate opposition to the Jews. Thus verse 5 and verse 24 serve as parallel bookends that bracket the lengthy parenthesis of verses 6-23.

| EZRA 5:1-5

5:1 The impetus for a renewed attempt at construction began when Haggai and Zechariah brought their prophetic oracles to the Jews. In his first oracle, God asked the Jewish community, "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" (Hag 1:4). That same year Zechariah son of Iddo encouraged the people to respond to God's promise of future glory for Jerusalem. In this present verse, Zechariah is said to be the "son of Iddo" while in Zech 1:1 he is the "son of Berechiah, son of Iddo." This is no contradiction. The term "son" (Aram bar) and its Hebrew equivalent (ben) can refer to a descendant such as "grandson." Thus Zech 1:1 and Ezr 5:1 are both correct.

5:2 Haggai and Zechariah also pointed to Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest as those who led the people (2:2; 3:2,8; 4:3) in the renewed construction. Helping them did not imply manual labor but encouragement and moral support for those doing the work.

5:3-5 Tattenai is called governor (Aram pechah) of "Beyond the River," the Trans-Euphrates region, even though he probably served as "sub-governor" under Ushtanu, a new governor appointed by Darius in 520 b.c., the year when construction on the temple resumed. Zerubbabel is also called "governor" (Hb pechah; Hag 1:14; 2:2,21), although he answered to Tattenai and

was responsible solely for the region of Yehud (Judah).

Tattenai's question who gave you the order to rebuild this temple may have been a genuine concern for the legal authorization of the construction. The word structure translates an Aramaic term ('usharna) that could refer to wood used in the furnishings or, more probably, to the wood used in the construction of the walls (v. 8) and the roof. While Tattenai wanted to confirm the legality of the construction, he did not forbid it while waiting for written instructions.

5:5 The phrase God was watching is literally "the eye of their God was on" the elders. The idiom "the eye(s) of the Lord" occurs elsewhere in the OT (Job 36:7; Ps 33:18; 34:15). In Ezra's Memoir (see "Structure" in the Introduction) a common idiom for God's providential care is "the hand of the Lord was with us" (Ezr 7:6,9; 8:18). This verse contains the first mention of the Jewish elders in the postexilic era. In the Persian period, real power was in the hands of the Persian-appointed authorities, while the elders more often were called together to witness important events and judicial decisions.

| EZRA 6:6-12

6:6-7 Just as God was watching over His people (5:5) while they waited for Darius's decision, so His care for them was seen in Darius's decision that prohibited Tattenai and the other Persian officials from hindering the construction of the temple.

6:8. The Jews naturally would have been anxious after Tattenai's visit. But what could have been reason for discouragement and defeat turned out to be an advantage. Certainly God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20).

6:9. Darius was concerned that the cult be practiced correctly, so he made provision for sacrificial animals. The same would be true of the religious practices of other people subject to Darius. Precisely the products that were considered staple foods—grain, oil, and wine along with animals—were to be offered to God. Under the new covenant, we rejoice because in Christ all these offerings were fulfilled for us. Real worship consists of daily dedicating ourselves to the Lord (Rom 12:1-2).

6:10. The king took seriously religious matters. He wanted all his peoples to pray to their gods on behalf of him and his sons. This tactic also won the favor of his subject peoples. The New Testament tells us to pray for our political leaders (cf. Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1-2).

6:11. The translation "he is to be lifted up and impaled" is uncertain, but a severe penalty is clearly prescribed. It was common for ancient covenants to include curses against those who broke the covenant. Also Assyrian, Aramaic, and Persian decrees and laws often included harsh

threats of punishment for those who disobeyed. The further punishment, “His house is to be made a pile of rubble,” finds parallels in Dan 2:5; 3:29.

6:12. This verse contains an additional curse. The phrase “caused his Name to dwell there” reflects an understanding of biblical theology (cf. Deut 12:5), a strong indication that a Jewish scribe helped Darius prepare this decree. Darius was in fact speaking almost prophetically. As Daniel prophesied, God would do this very thing, destroying the king and kingdom that would oppose him and his people and then would establish an everlasting kingdom of righteousness (Dan 7:23-27).