

January 28, 2024

## CONFLICT AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF GOD'S PURPOSES

Ezra 3-6

*(2 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)*

One of the craziest things in Scripture happens right in the middle of our text this week. Right in the middle of the chapter, as we're going along with our story, all of the sudden, the flashes forward to a time 100 years later, where something very similar would take place, and then as the chapter ends, he brings us right back to the story he was telling.<sup>1</sup> Now, why would the author do that? After all, it makes it quite confusing to read. Well, one reason is because I think he's showing us that the things that we see in our text are not unique to that generation. And I think when we look at the truths highlighted in this text we'll agree that this is true, even in our day. Therefore, what I want to do this morning is to walk us through these four chapters by laying out some timeless truths that can help guide us through our text. The first of these truths is that God's people must always put their hopes and trust in him.

### **God's people must always put their hopes and trust in him**

When we last left the book of Ezra, Cyrus had made a decree that any of the Israelites who'd been carried away to Babylon as exiles could go back home so that they might rebuild the temple. Moreover, he offered them materials and returned the temple vessels to furnish the temple once rebuilt. And so over 40,000 of them decided to go, and specifically all those individuals who would have been necessary to oversee the work of the temple and worship therein accompanied them. It was an exciting time, and we left the book seeing a list of names of all those individuals who made the journey back to Jerusalem in Ezra 2.

As chapter 3 begins, the group has not been back for too long, when we're told that the first thing they do is set up an altar in order to offer sacrifices to the Lord. We read in 3:1-4, "When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they build the altar of the God to Israel, to burn offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God."

Now, this is impressive, that they prioritize worship and make sure they are able to worship the Lord in accord with his commands in the law, even before they start building the temple. In fact, this section of Ezra is bracketed by the people worshiping the Lord and observing the festivals, as we'll see again in 6:19-22. But what made the priority of worship crucial as they arrived in Jerusalem was that it was the seventh month in their year. And that month was the most holy

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<sup>1</sup> We know he flashes forward a good distance because we move from the days of Cyrus and Darius to the days of Artaxerxes. Cyrus reigned in 538-530 BC, and Darius reigned from 522-486 BC. But Artaxerxes didn't reign until 464-423 BC. Moreover, the nature of this flash-forward focuses on challenges to Israel rebuilding the walls of the city, which didn't take place until the 440s BC.

month for the Jews. The month would start with the Feast of Trumpets, followed by the Day of Atonement on the tenth, followed by the Feast of Booths on the fifteenth. But what I want us to see is that at the center of their worship is a picture of trust and hope in the Lord.

Here's what I mean. First, Ezra tells us *why* they built the altar. In verse 3 he says, "They set the altar in its place, *for* fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening." Do you see that? When they come back to Jerusalem, there are people who are there and in the neighboring towns. And they're afraid of them. These people might see them as unwanted intruders as they come back to this area and attack them. Who knows what all threats those residing there might be? So what do they do? Do they first thing make sure they're well-armed, or fortified in their homes, or trained to fight? No. They fear the people and, therefore, they build an altar and offer burnt offerings on it as an act of worship. In other words, they're saying, "Lord, we do not look to ourselves or any other man for our safety and protection. We're trusting in you."

After all, the reason Jerusalem had fallen in the first place wasn't because Judah hadn't formed strategic alliances. They were constantly trusting in their neighbors. They'd been exiled because they hadn't trusted in the Lord. And now, they look around, are afraid, and turn to the Lord in worship, expressing their trust in him. Then, we read in verse 4 that they kept the Feast of Booths, which was a celebration in which they remembered how the Lord provided for when they wandered about in the wilderness. That is, it's a celebration, reminding the people that the Lord can be trusted to care and provide for them, even as he did in the wilderness.

So, the people haven't even laid the foundation of the temple yet (as we see in 3:6), but they already establish things in place to express their hope in the Lord and remind themselves that he can be trusted. And, for us, we need to see that this is always the call for the people of God. No matter what time or place in which we live, the need for us as the Lord's people will always be to hope and trust in him. Don't try to be smarter than God. Don't try to make sure you can outline the entirety of your life. Hope in him. Trust in him. For example, do you have financial need? You could reason now being stingy and holding your money might get you ahead, or you could double down on your giving to the Lord? Isn't that the equivalent of what the Israelites are doing here? As believers, let's live our lives constantly pushing our chips into the middle of the table, saying, "Lord, I'm banking my hopes on you." That's what we see in Ezra 3:1-6, and it's how the people of God must live in every age. Second, we're reminded that we'll always face challenges.

### **In obeying God's call to us, we will always face challenges**

We could be deceived into thinking that if we trust in the Lord, then we'll never face challenges. But this text reminds us that the reality is that we must trust the Lord *because* we'll always face challenges. Remember, we have an enemy and are at war. But the challenges come in multiple ways. First, there are challenges from within. We're told in Ezra 3:8 that the people finally get to work on building the temple, and we're told in 3:10, that they finally finish the foundation, provoking great praise to the Lord. In fact, we're told in 3:11 that they sang, praising and

thanking the Lord, saying, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And the people shouted a great shout in praise to the Lord. However, we’re also told that some of the older Israelites who’d seen the first temple and weren’t as impressed with this one “wept with a loud voice” (v. 12).

This is the first challenge, as some within the group weep because they think that the work of the present doesn’t compare to the work of the past. But the reality is, the people were doing what God had commanded them to do. This should have been a day of praise, but already discouragement was coming from within the camp. And sadly the discouragement didn’t stop there.

Next we’re told in 4:1, “Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of father’s houses and said to them, ‘Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.’”

Now, this hardly seems like conflict at first glance. It sounds more like a gracious offer from some like-minded brothers. But if we look deeper, we can see the problem. These “adversaries” of 4:1 were brought to the land by the king of Assyria, whose practice was to bring people who weren’t native to the land to settle into conquered lands. Then, the king would teach them the religious practices of the new land, but inevitably, their own religious practices would get mixed in as well. It’d be like a group of professing believers who gather on Sundays, read the Bible, sing, and then offer child sacrifices. That’s who these people represented, and so this was a temptation for the people of God to be pulled away from their God-prescribed worship.

Therefore, we’re told in 4:3 that the returnees rightly rejected their offer. Challenge averted. Well, not so fast, because another quickly follows. We read in 4:4-5, “Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.” So, the challenges were non-stop for years. And if you skip down to 4:24, you can see the result of these challenges as we read, “Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”

But, as we’ve noted, something interesting happens in the verses between 4:5 and 4:24. In 4:6, we suddenly flash-forward about a hundred years. That verse begins, “And in the reign of Ahaseurus . . .” and then proceeds to tell about a time even after Ahaseurus’s reign, in the days of Artaxerxes.

This flash-forward shows us another time (about 100 years in the future from where chapter 4 begins) when the people of God faced a challenge from those around them. This time it wasn’t in regards to the temple. The temple would have been rebuilt about fifty years prior to the reign of Artaxerxes. This time some people opposed the Israelites simply rebuilding the wall and the

city itself. In this flash-forward in time, the people write a letter to king Artaxerxes, telling him that the Jews have been a notoriously rebellious people, and if they're allowed to rebuild their city and fortify it with a wall, they'll try to be independent, will refuse to pay taxes, and will try to revolt against his reign. And sure enough, after Artaxerxes looks into the history of the Israelites, he is convinced, and so he writes a letter back, telling them to stop their building so that we read in 4:23, "Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them to cease."

Now, why, after showing all the challenges that the people faced in building the temple under the reigns of Cyrus (538-530 BC) and Darius (522-486 BC) does Ezra jump forward a hundred years to show us challenges to building the city itself under the reign of Artaxerxes (464-423 BC)? I mean, there are similarities, obviously. In verse 23 we're told the work of rebuilding the city stopped, and in verse 24 we're told that the work of rebuilding the temple had also been stopped one hundred years prior. But I think Ezra includes this story not merely so that we can see some similarities but because he wants us to see that no matter what time or age or place in which the people of God seek to obey his call, we will always face challenges. The challenges can come from within (as those with us discourage us or compromise on the faith), and they can come from without (as those outside of us challenge and persecute us). But however they come, we must recognize that there will always be challenges as we seek to obey our Lord. Our enemy doesn't take our obedience to the Lord lying down. This is why Paul told the churches in Acts 14:22 that it is "through many tribulations [that] we must enter the kingdom of God."

As a pastor, I want us to be aware of that. The fact that as we seek to obey the Great Commission we have challenges rise up from within and from without doesn't mean something is wrong or that we're failing. This is the way it'll always be for the people of God. And we need to strengthen ourselves to stand strong and not be taken aback when challenges come. And this brings us to our third point—we must always hold up God's Word to shape and reform us.

### **We must always hold up God's Word to shape and reform us**

So as we arrive at 4:24, the work on the temple has ceased. Apparently they'd been at it, laying the foundation around 538-537 BC, and we're told that the work ceased "until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia," which would have been about 520 BC. So for about seventeen years the work stopped. The people no longer pursued the task for which the Lord had brought them back from Babylon. So what changed? What caused them to begin the work again? What brought them back to obedience? The answer isn't surprising. It's the Word of God—specifically the Word of God through the mouths of Haggai and Zechariah.

We read of the summary in 5:1-2: "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."

Now, these two prophets prophesied in very different ways. We heard from Haggai 1 earlier in the service how Haggai rebuked the people for turning their focus to building their own nice paneled houses, while ignoring the house of the Lord. Haggai brought a very straightforward rebuke. Zechariah, on the other hand, wrote with vivid imagery, pointing out to realities that the temple typified and to the coming of our Lord. But both them, in different ways, called the people out of their disobedience to get back to obeying God's commands.

This is a reminder to us that we desperately need the Word of God. It is always the tool God uses to shape and reform his people for good. We'll talk more about this as we continue to go through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah—because it is central—but we must never think that we are beyond needing to hear the Word of God read and preached to us. Again, this is God's means to shape his people.

Without exposure to God's Word, we're apt to drift away from holiness and obedience to the Lord. The pull of the culture is simply too strong. We swim daily in the waters of people telling us that sexual immorality is good and should be celebrated, that gender is self-determined, that homosexual actions are good, that murdering children is good for women and should be financed by our tax dollars, and on and on. And that's just a taste of what our godless culture says. And if we're not exposing ourselves to God's Word, we'll find ourselves being moved in that direction, maybe not overnight, but little by little. God's ordained tool to shape us and transform us to his will rather than allowing us to be conformed to this world is his Word. That's why it is what we emphasize every Sunday in our corporate worship, and it must be what this church continues to emphasize if the Lord sees fit to have us tarry another hundred years. God's Word is what shapes and reforms his people in every generation.

So, we've seen that the people of God in every generation must trust and hope in the Lord, will face challenges as we seek to obey the Lord, and must be continually shaped and reformed by God's Word. But there's one more truth I want us to see: God's purpose and mission will not be thwarted.

### **God's purpose and mission will not be thwarted**

So, to review our story so far, the returnees made an altar, started worshiping the Lord, and started working on the temple. Everything seemed great. Then, they faced challenges. The challenge that ultimately brought their work to a standstill was when their neighbors threatened them, made them afraid, and bribed officials against them to frustrate their work (4:4-5). And so the work stopped, for years, until finally Haggai and Zechariah rebuked them and held up a glorious vision of what God was doing in his redemptive purposes, so that in 520 BC they began working on the temple again. And yet, once more, the enemy didn't take this obedience lying down.

Immediately, officials in the area started challenging them again. Tattenai, the governor of the area, and other officials came to them asking them, "Who gave you a decree to build this house

and to finish this structure?” and “What are the names of the men who are building this building?” (5:3-4). This kind of questioning and threatening had caused them to stop before. But note the words of 5:5. “But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.”

God sustained them, and so they kept working. Then a letter went to Darius from these officials that included the reasoning given by the Jews for rebuilding the temple. Their answer was that the Lord had this temple built, and then he had it destroyed because of the rebellion of this people. But then, they note that in Cyrus’s first year as king over the new world power, he issued a decree for the temple to be rebuilt. That’s the decree we read in chapter 1.

Therefore, when this letter got to Darius, he put out a search to see if this was true, and behold it was. Moreover, he found that Cyrus’s decree said that the rebuilding of the temple should be paid for from the royal treasury. Therefore, Darius responded with these words: “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. Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews and 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. 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 without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.” Then, after making a threat to anyone who would stop this work, he finished the letter by saying, “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” (6:7-12).

And so the Lord’s people kept on building, with the king’s money, until we read in 6:15 “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,” which would have been 516 BC, seventy years after the exile. Then the people worshiped, dedicating the house of the Lord with all kinds of offerings, and celebrating the Passovers and other feasts unto the Lord.

Now, I mentioned earlier that one benefit of Ezra’s flash-forward scene in the middle of chapter 4 was to show us that the people of God will always face challenges, in every generation. But no doubt one reason he paralleled these scenes for those in his own day was to say, “Look, just as the Lord’s purpose was not thwarted in the days of Darius’s reign, so it will not be thwarted in ours either.” God’s purposes will not be thwarted. This is why in 6:14 the author makes sure we don’t think Darius was ultimately responsible. It was God’s decree that accomplished God’s purpose to rebuild the temple.

And we, too, must hear this word. Let’s be faithful and labor in obedience to the Lord, knowing that the devil himself will not prevail against the Lord’s mission for his church. Let’s keep preaching the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; calling people to repent and believe;

baptizing those who come to faith; teaching one another to obey all that Christ commands; and training, sending out, and supporting laborers to do that very thing to the ends of the earth. And let's do it, trusting our God to sustain us. Amen.