

Ezra 5-6

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[0 : 0 0] Are you ever discouraged? And I'm thinking especially in the context of the Christian life and Christian service. I don't think it's unusual for believers, for Christians, to know at different times and in different circumstances discouragement. We shouldn't be discouraged that we are on occasion discouraged. It is quite normal. It happens.

And there can be so many causes for discouragement, so many circumstances that seem to contrive to produce discouragement. It may be that we feel we're not very good at what we're doing.

We're maybe engaged in some sphere of Christian service, and we're dissatisfied with what we're doing. We don't seem to be very good at it, or we don't seem to be doing it as well as we feel we ought. It may be that there seems to be a very little impact of what we're doing, and we'd love to see evidence of results, whatever the activity is that we can measure and say, yes, God is evidently blessing, but that doesn't seem to be the case. And so it's discouraging or can be discouraging. We may feel unappreciated, and so we're busy, maybe faithfully, year after year, engaged in some area of Christian service, and nobody really seems to notice, and certainly nobody seems to take the time to even acknowledge or thank us for what we're doing or what you're doing.

It may be that we're just tired. We feel we're in a rut, and that in itself can be discouraging. Well, the people of God that we meet here in Ezra, the returning exiles, I guess as the years pass, it's less and less appropriate to call them the returning exiles. When we meet them here in chapters five and six, they've been back for about 15 years. There were, of course, different waves of returnees, but the ones that we're concerned with had been back for a good number of years, but they still very much would have identified themselves and been identified by others as the people who had returned from Babylon, and they were discouraged. And we want to explore a little the cause of their discouragement, but more importantly, focus on what we might call the remedy provided by God.

But a remedy provided by God that they had to actively cooperate with or be involved in. So, it's God really who takes the initiative and seeking to lift them up from their discouragement.

[3 : 0 4] But they are not passive. There is a response on the part of the people, and indeed without that response, the actions of God would not have produced the outcome that we were going to identify.

So, that's really what we want to think about a little bit this evening. So, where are the people at as we meet them here at the beginning of chapter five? Well, they're discouraged. They were discouraged when the work on the rebuilding of the temple came to a standstill. And we read the final verse of chapter four. Thus, the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill. And that's where really we left it last week. Now, in order to kind of locate ourselves in what follows and the characters involved and the context in which all this is taking place, we're just going to have another wee look. We've done this a couple of times that the key dates. I've actually reduced the number of dates from what we had last Sunday. Chapter four was complicated because the writer, for reasons best known to himself, introduced examples of opposition that were historically much later on in history. And that was a little bit confusing.

We needed to identify some dates to explain that. So, we've reduced the number a little bit. It still seems quite a lot. But let me just quickly go through it for the benefit, especially if you haven't been able to be in the previous occasions when we've been going through the book. But even if you have, just as a kind of reminder. So, the key dates there, this is going back a little bit. 586, the fall of Jerusalem and exile, very central key date in the history of God's people. I'm going to look at my bit of paper because I can see it better than the screen up there. 539, Cyrus defeats the Babylonians and becomes the king of what really the known world at that time. And immediately following that, the following year, he issues this decree, a decree that we read of in chapter one and that is made reference to in the chapters that we've just read. When the officials come and say, what are you doing? And the Jews say, no, there was a decree. Cyrus issued a decree. We're allowed to do this.

So, this decree was referenced and indeed was looked for by Darius and found. So, we've read about that. So, that decree was issued a year into Cyrus' reign and that led to the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, about 50,000 of them roughly. Temple rebuilding starts and almost immediately halts. That's what is spoken of there in verse 24 of chapter four. So, they began great excitement, the foundations are being laid, and then the opposition, the discouragement, and so they just down tools and really do nothing in terms of the temple for about 15 years. 530 to 522 is the reign of the son of Cyrus. So, Cyrus dies in 530. His son takes over. And just one historical detail that a little bit later on in the service or in the sermon will be mentioned and possibly relevant is that Cambyses, I'm not sure how you pronounce that name, he conquered Egypt. So, Cyrus had extended the borders, the territories of the Persian Empire, but it was his son who extended them even further by conquering

Egypt. He dies and he is replaced by King Darius I, the king that is prominent in the two chapters that we've read. And he begins his reign. And within a couple of years of him beginning his reign, the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets, begin. And mention is made of both of them at the very beginning of chapter five. There hadn't been a prophetic word for maybe something approaching 20 years. In fact, Daniel had been the previous prophet who had brought a word from God to his people.

[7 : 14] And as a result of the word and the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah, temple rebuilding restarts. And really that's then where chapters five and six pick up the story. The officials come and say, what are you doing? The building continues. And ultimately, Darius very positively and resolutely gives the authorization to continue and indeed provides for the work that had already begun or restarted. And three or four years later, the temple is built. And then the part of chapter six that we didn't read is dedicated with all the celebrations that accompanied it. And so that's a little bit of, you know, the rough outline of what's what and when these things are happening. So the people at the beginning of chapter five, 15 years, the temple work has been at a standstill. They're discouraged.

We get a more insight or further insight of the reasons for where they are in Haggai. Now in chapter five, Haggai is mentioned as one of the prophets that God raised up to challenge the people. And of course, we have the book of Haggai where we have the content of the message that Haggai brought. And in chapter one in particular, it's helpful because it gives us a broader insight into where the people are at. Not simply, well, they haven't built the temple and so they're discouraged because the temple hasn't been built. That's true. But there's more to what's going on. And we can get a sense of that by reading a few verses in Haggai chapter one. So let's just do that quickly. So it's page 948. And we'll just read the first few verses of that chapter. And as I say, by reading this, we'll get a better sense of where the people are at, at this moment in their, in their history. So in the second year of King Darius and the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest.

So the very same characters that are mentioned in Ezra. This is what the Lord Almighty says. And this is the first time that there had been a prophetic word of this kind, explicit and clear from God for about 15 years or more. So this is what God says to the people. There they are in Jerusalem. Temples that stand still. They're discouraged. This is what God says to them through Haggai. And this is what the Lord Almighty says. These people say the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built. 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? Now this is what the Lord Almighty says. Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are never warm. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord. You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home I blew away. Why, declares the Lord Almighty, because of my house, which remains a ruin while each of you is busy with his own house.

Therefore, because of you, the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought in the fields and the mountains and the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces on men and cattle and on the labor of your hands.

[11 : 02] And we'll just leave it there. So that gives a bigger picture. So the people were discouraged because, you know, the opposition didn't allow them to build the temple, but then it didn't just remain there. In the midst of that discouragement, they were, we might say, distracted and deceived. They decided, well, we can't build the temple. It's too difficult. There's too much opposition. We'll focus on our own lives. We'll focus on our own houses and our own crops. And, you know, we'll get busy with that. And the time will come. We'll be able to turn our attention to building the temple. We can't do it now. It's impossible. But hey, let's do other things that were legitimate in themselves. Nobody was saying they shouldn't build a house. Nobody was saying they shouldn't have had their fields and their crops. But the point is that they focus entirely on those matters and forget about or ignore or leave to one side the very thing that they had been sent back to Jerusalem to do as their central responsibility, the building of the temple. And they're deceived into thinking that all will be well. And of course, they're met with a great disappointment that all is not well, that their crops fail, and that they don't enjoy the prosperity they had hoped they would enjoy. And so now they're even more discouraged than ever.

The temple hasn't been built, and even their own affairs are not progressing as they would have liked. And though the circumstances are so very different, you know, we're talking about events that took place, what, two and a half thousand years ago in very different circumstances, the picture painted isn't so different, I think, to the kind of situation we can find ourselves in sometimes.

When maybe we're discouraged in the Lord's work, and we say, well, I'll just leave it to one side for a moment, and I'll focus on other matters, on my work, and on my family, and all of these things that I need to do, and I'll concentrate on these things, and then at a convenient season, I'll maybe pick up on the Lord's service in one way or another. And we find that that is no answer, no solution. And like God's people in the days described here, we find ourselves more discouraged even than before.

So I want to do this, is I want to consider what God does to lift His people, and what God's people do in response to God's initiative. And as I mentioned a moment ago, both are necessary.

First of all, then, what does God do to lift His people? Well, I think what we witness in the course of these couple of chapters is what we could call a three-pronged strategy. I'll kind of qualify that in a moment, but for the sake of distinguishing different elements, let's call it a three-strong strategy on the part of God to encourage His people, to lift up His downcast people. And the three elements are this. There's the proclamation of God's Word. That is the very first thing that we find that God does to lift His people. He speaks to them. So the proclamation of God's Word. That is accompanied, and that's why maybe we shouldn't speak of it as a second element. But the proclamation of God's Word is accompanied by the movement of God's Spirit. And all that is also then accompanied by a demonstration of God's power. And these three elements together serve to lift God's people from their discouraged, downcast state. First of all, then, the proclamation of His Word. We see that in chapter 5 in the first couple of verses now. Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. So there is a word from God. The silence is broken. God speaks to His people through Haggai and through Zechariah. The prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, we don't have time this evening to see all that they said, but we can summarize by saying that they complemented each other. Haggai brings a word of rebuke. That much we picked up even from reading the first few verses of Haggai. Haggai is not a very long book, but even at the very beginning it's clear that the tone of the Word from God is a tone of rebuke. The people of God are being rebuked for failing to build the temple, for focusing on their own affairs and ignoring God's work. So Haggai comes and rebukes the people. Zechariah is a much longer book. There's much more content to it, so it's difficult to summarize it in one theme, but overall it is a much more encouraging, visionary word. So there's the rebuke, but then this is followed by, or even accompanied by, this presenting to them of a glorious vision of what awaits them, and the two work together.

[16:13] And of course even to this day we need both, and we have both. We have all of this Word from God in the Bible. We don't need a Haggai or a Zechariah. Well, we've got a Haggai and a Zechariah in the Bible, and as we turn to God's Word, we receive as is necessary words of rebuke, and also words of encouragement and a vision to lift us up from where we are. And notice also just a curious anecdotal point, but I think, what shall we say, worth noting that these men of God who are sent to speak to God's people, they're not ivory tower theologians, but they are men who preach to God's people, but also get stuck into the work that they're urging them to engage in there at chapter 5, in the very beginning.

And the second half of the verse, we're told that they prophesied to the people, and then we're also told that the prophets of God were with them, helping them. So, they're there mixing the cement or whatever you do to build a temple. I guess there wasn't much cement, but, you know, whatever you do to build a temple in them days, they were there doing what needed to be done. So, the Word of God is proclaimed, and when we bring this forward to ourselves and our own circumstances, in times when we may be discouraged, what do we need to do? What does God do for us? Well, He speaks to us. He speaks to us. He speaks to us in and through His Word. That is the means that God uses to lift His people back up again.

Now, of course, sometimes that may be the very thing that we are weary of doing. That's what discouragement does. It leads us to think, well, why bother reading the Bible? Why bother going to church and going to Bible study? I just can't be bothered. You know, we're discouraged, and so, you know, we're weary sometimes of the very things we need to do, and so in those circumstances, we need to be very disciplined and careful and say, well, but this is what I need.

This is how God will lift me back up again as He speaks to me in and through His Word. That is what He did in the day of Haggai and Zechariah, and that is the way He continues to work today.

So, the proclamation of His Word, but that proclamation of His Word is accompanied by and is integral to or inseparable from the movement of God's Spirit. In Haggai chapter 1, that's stated really quite tellingly and quite explicitly in verses that we didn't read from verse 13 of Haggai chapter 1. Did I say 2? I meant 1. Haggai chapter 1 from verse 13, Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people.

[19:03] I am with you, declares the Lord. And then notice what it says, So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.

They came and began work on the house of the Lord Almighty. And so, the proclamation of God's Word is accompanied by the movement of God. Now, in the context of the Old Testament, the language of the Holy Spirit is not used, but clearly it is God's Spirit who is moving in the hearts and minds of the leaders and of the people. As they hear the Word, God moves in them and applies it and encourages them by it. So, the Word proclaimed accompanied by the work, the movement, the moving of God's Spirit amongst His people and within His people. And of course, that is also the way God operates today. And we need to pray that the Spirit of God would ever be moving amongst us and within us as His Word is read and proclaimed and taught. But the other element that we have in God's strategy, if you wish, of encouraging His people is the demonstration of His power. And to have a sense of how God is operating powerfully in these circumstances or in these events, we just need to recap very briefly what happens. Well, the building work recommences. Encouraged by Haggai, in Cuddles by Zechariah, the people restart the building of the temple. This is before Darius gives them all the help that he is going to give them. Purely on the basis of the Word preached and the movement of God's Spirit, they begin working again. What happens? Well, we've read what happens. Some of the local officials, the planning office, I guess, I don't know, came and say to them, you know, what are you doing? There's a curious detail in that these officials, their title is in the original language, the King's Eyes. That was their job title. That is a very, you know, a very fitting title for people who are checking up on what's going on in the empire.

They were the King's Eyes. From what we read, unlike on previous occasions, they don't appear to be particularly hostile. In fact, if we're being generous, we would have to say they're simply doing their job. You know, 15 years had passed since Cyrus' decree. It's not surprising that these officials wouldn't have been familiar with it. They see this big building project and not unreasonably, they're going and saying, well, you know, do you have permission to do this? Much as would happen today if you started building something in our own country. So, the officials come and they inquire as to what authorization there is. The letter is sent to Darius to establish if they are indeed authorized or not, but interestingly, they're allowed to continue building, which also would suggest that the officials weren't particularly hostile. You know, until we get an answer, well, you can carry on the work you're doing. In fact, they're very generous in saying the speed with which the work was being done and the efficiency with which it was being conducted. The letter is sent, and the letter includes the explanation that the Jewish officials, presumably Zerubbabel, Yeshua, gave about what they were doing, how they did have permission from Cyrus previously. And when Darius gets the letter, he searches for the decree, and it's found not in Babylon, we're told, but in Ekbatana. At the beginning of chapter 6, we're told that Ekbatana was the summer residence of the king. In using the language of modern references or reference points, there's a road between Baghdad and Tehran, and in between or along that road, you find this location about 6,000 feet above sea level. So, it was just that bit cooler in the summer months for the king. And so, some of the royal archives seemingly were stored there, and that's where this decree is found. Now, you read the decree, and it's not the same as in chapter 1, and I think the reason for that isn't particularly difficult to come by. There are two documents that speak about the same thing, but covering different aspects of it. And so, you know, this is found. Darius is sure that, you know, there was indeed this authorization, and he communicates to the officials that they must allow the Jews to continue building the temple. And of course, what we've read is that the decree that is given was very favorable to the Jews. In fact, it placed the Jews in a better place than if the officials had done nothing.

Now, I imagine Zerubbabel would have hoped or would have preferred that no officials came snooping around, seemingly intent or possibly intent on frustrating what they were doing. They said, oh, we'd be so much happier if nobody interferes. But in the event, their interference proved to the good, because the decree comes, and it was more generous than Cyrus's. You know, I'm not going to go through all the details, but we've read that the decree from the royal treasury, it was to be funded, and indeed, even the provisions for sacrifices, and even the food that needed to be eaten by the priests, all of this was to be provided by the local officials from the tax revenues from that region. And so, their circumstances are way better than they had been previously, and that then is evident by the speed with which they are able to conclude the construction of the temple.

Now, why this favorable response? And this is where we see the demonstration of God's power. Well, right at the end of the two chapters, in chapter 6 and verse 22, we read, in the second half of the verse, the attitude of the king of Assyria, or, well, the Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work in the house of God, the God of Israel. Just a wee detail to explain there, the king of Assyria, well, why the king of Assyria? They're speaking about Darius, who's the king of Persia, and I imagine the reason it mentions Assyria is because Assyria was one of the kingdoms that Darius conquered, but possibly the writer is somewhat, what would we say, somewhat, I don't know, mischievously identifying a people who had been historic enemies of Israel. And so, he describes Darius as the king of Assyria. It's almost like, amazing, imagine that, the king of Assyria, his mind was changed in our favor. Who could have, who would have thought there may be something going on there?

[26 : 11] God moved the heart of Darius. He had done the same with Cyrus, verse 1 of chapter 1. And maybe if there were skeptics trying to demythologize the account, they would maybe be able to point to any number of reasons why Darius could have been favorably inclined to the Jews, as he evidently was. They could have said, well, maybe it was the influence of Daniel. You know, Daniel's kind of been in the background. We don't read about Daniel, but he's around. He's back in Babylon, still in a position of some prominence. And so, there's maybe an influence there that made Darius favorable to the Jews. Respect for Cyrus. Archaeologists tell us that in many of the building projects commissioned by Darius, invariably there's an inscription praising Cyrus, you know, his predecessor, two or three behind. And so, he clearly held Cyrus in great respect. Now, why could that have been significant?

Well, once he had established that Cyrus had decreed that the temple should be built, Darius would have said, well, said, well, I have to respect the decree of Cyrus, a man I so greatly admire. There are also possibly geopolitical realities that would have made being favorable to the Jews something Darius would have seen as sensible or prudent. I mentioned when we were looking at the timeline that the previous emperor, Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, had conquered Egypt, but he had only just conquered Egypt, and there would have been real concerns that the Egyptians would have at some point revolted against the reign of Darius and of the Persians. And it would have been very favorable for Darius to have a friendly buffer state like Judah bordering with Egypt on side. And so, it's possible that Darius thought, well, no, it's worth just having a good relationship with the Jews with a view to avoiding the Egyptians, maybe causing trouble, possibly. The point is this, that I don't know how God moved the heart of Darius. I don't know if Darius even knew that his heart was being moved by God. But what I do know, and what we do know, is that God did move the king's heart in favor of God's people, just as he had done with Cyrus before him. And just as he continues to do today, though we aren't privy to the manner in which he is doing it. And his people, in this case the Jews seeking to build the temple, they witness with their very own eyes this demonstration of God's power. Just imagine the excitement when the decree of Darius arrives, and the officials to whom it had been sent come and say, well, this is the decree.

And they read the decree, I would imagine almost in disbelief, at every point it's good news, at every point it's in their favor. They couldn't have dreamed of such a positive response. And they could not but acknowledge that God was at work. God was demonstrating his power, as the writer indicates, to change the mind, the heart, the attitude of the king of Assyria in favor of the Jews.

Well, that's what God does. And very quickly, what do God's people do in response to God's initiative? And we'll just mention this very much fleetingly. The main thing to say is that they do need to do something. What do they do? Well, they listen to God's Word, and they repent. In Haggai chapter 1, it's made very clear that they acknowledge their guilt. They acknowledge that they have fallen short.

They acknowledge that they have not done what they ought to do. Interestingly, even in the communication that is sent to Darius, when the officials came and said, you know, who gave you authority to do this? And they give a little bit of a history of it. It's interesting that even to these pagan officials, they acknowledge that their forefathers had rebelled against God. And that's why they've been sent to Babylon. You might have thought, well, we'll just keep that to ourselves.

[30 : 31] We don't want our enemies to know our past failings. But no, they honestly acknowledge their guilt, the guilt of the people of which they form a part. Then, of course, their own personal guilt in terms of what they've been doing or not been doing these past 15 years. So, they listen to the message, and they repent. And there can be no genuine renewal, be it personal renewal or corporate renewal, without repentance. And, of course, they also get to work. That's one aspect, really, of repentance.

They get to work, and they finish the temple, as we read. And having finished the temple, what do they then do? Well, they join in joyful celebration of God's goodness to them and His provision for them.

And that is what is described in the second half of chapter 6 that we didn't read. But maybe if we just had to focus on one thing that is said about the people. Once the temple has been built, is what is said of them, or what is said of what God had done for them there in verse 22 of chapter 6. The Lord had filled them with joy. He had filled them with joy. And the contrast between verse 24 of chapter 4, thus the work of the house, or thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem, came to a standstill with what we read in verse 22 of chapter 6, that the Lord filled them with joy. God had intervened to encourage them, to lift them up, but the people had responded fittingly, listening to what He had to say, repenting of their sins, getting to work, finishing the work, and as they did, joining together in joyful celebration of God's goodness. And as we observe what happened two and a half thousand years ago to

God's people, our people, we draw encouragement and lessons from it. We observe it and we acknowledge this is the work of the Lord. It is marvelous in our eyes. And this is the same God who is ever ready and willing and able to encourage us and to lift us up when we are discouraged. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for this great story of Your dealings with Your people through time and history. And we thank You that as we explore the story, we identify with those who, though in different times and in different circumstances, are so similar to ourselves, equally flawed, equally prone to weakness and to discouragement. And yet, we also acknowledge and celebrate the reality that You are the same God. You are the same God who intervened to lift up Your people there in Jerusalem so long ago. And You are the same God who, through Your Word and the movement and the moving of Your Spirit, would lift up Your people today. And we pray that that would be our experience, that we would know what it is to be filled with joy, that we would know what it is to, under Your hand and with Your help, fulfill the task that You have given us in Your service. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.