

Ezra 4 - 6 - Opposition to the Work of God

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Just a very quick recap: Ezra is a book about the time following the exile of Israel, actually Judah, to the Babylonian Empire. When they were conquered by the Babylonians, they were taken away from their land. The city was destroyed, the temple was decimated. They lived in exile for 70 years until such time as the Lord, as He foretold through Jeremiah, was ready to bring the people back to their homeland. And He did that by moving upon one of the Persian kings, named Cyrus. And that king had made basically a declaration to release the Jews, as many as wanted to go back to their homeland and to rebuild the temple.

Now, this was not uncommon for pagan kings; they wanted the blessing of as many gods as they could get. This doesn't mean that— what exactly Cyrus believed. It appears that from Cyrus' perspective, he had come to a place of embracing the God of Israel as the one true God, but some of the other successive Persian gods, although they gave lip service to the Lord, it was probably something a whole lot less than that, being that they were pagans.

But anyway, so many thousands of Jews went back to their homeland to the area around Jerusalem, and they began to do the work of building of the temple. And of course, whenever you begin to do the Lord's work, there are going to be problems. If you'll look with me here in Ezra chapter 4, it begins by talking about some of the first problems that rose up.

It says in verse 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, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses (and da, da, da)...” (ESV)*

Let me just break off for just a moment to tell you that it's a good thing that the writer told you and I, right here at the very outset, that these are adversaries.

Because otherwise, we really wouldn't have known until later on. Because what they actually go on to say here in verse 2, where I stopped reading, is they came to Zerubbabel and the others and they said, let us help you. We want to help you

because we worship the same God that you worship. Well, it doesn't sound like there's a whole lot wrong with that.

Now, again, had we not been told that these were adversaries of the people of God, we might have then gone on to read about their rather terse response to these people and thought, well, what's your problem? They seem rather friendly to me. When you're doing the work of the Lord and somebody comes along and says, hey, can I help? Because I worship the same God that you worship. What is our natural response? It's, hey, thanks man, appreciate that. That's cool.

But we've already learned that they're adversaries because the writer told us. Let's go on and see just exactly what's going on in this feigned relationship or expression of friendship.

They say to them, “²... *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.*” ³ *But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”*

Well, that's that – rather terse response that I was referring to. And again, had we not been told they were adversaries, we might be taken aback by it. But it's interesting here – once they find that their ovations of friendship, their false ovations of friendship, are spurned

Look what it goes on to say in the very next verse, verse 4, “*Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build...*” We don't know what kind of intimidation tactics they were using, but it also goes on to say: “...⁵ *and (they even went as far as to) 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.*”

That doesn't mean anything to you, but if you understand the terms of these men's reigns, we're talking about a 15- to 16-year period of constant frustration.

And when it says they bribed counselors, that simply means they gave money to people to go to them and say, hey, listen, let me just give you a little piece of advice. And they were saying things in such a way as to try to throw them off track, feed them fearful sort of ideas so that they would be afraid of moving forward with the work and that sort of thing. So they brought discouragement to the people.

Now, what the writer is going to do beginning in verse 6, is he's going to jump way ahead. He's talking to you about discouragement and the efforts of these peoples of the land to try to get them to stop doing what God had called them doing, to do, rather.

But in verse 6, he's going to jump way ahead, time-wise, and he's going to give you, or talk to you, or tell you about further efforts to discourage them that took place after the temple was built. In fact, what you're going to read about here is actually more connected to the Book of Nehemiah when they were rebuilding the city walls and the city itself. But you're not told that except to say that you're told it beginning in verse 6 and in the reign of Ahasuerus.

Now, remember something back in those days; that was like giving you a date, okay? That would be like saying, now, 20 years after that, or in the year 2016, here's what they did. They didn't do that. They simply said, during the reign of... and you had to know, well, it's a good thing historically, these kings are known and we can go back and we can say, well, when did this happen? When was the reign of Ahasuerus? Well, Ahasuerus was the king that Esther married, so this is after, way after, as a matter of fact, the temple has been built.

But the writer is just clumping these things together for you and I, so that we can understand how much opposition they really received. I bring this up to you not only so that you'll understand the chronology of these comments, but also so you'll understand something else about reading your Bible. The biblical writers, and I've said this many times, didn't always hold to chronology. Don't make the mistake of thinking that it wasn't as important to them as it is to you. It's very important to us.

We think in terms of chronological order when you read a book. And you know what? I like—don't you like it better that way when I'm watching TV? I hate it when they do flashbacks— they'll start a movie with or they'll do a little piece of the movie. And then suddenly you see this thing, it says five years earlier. Oh, I hate that stuff. It's like, give me the chronology in the order that it happened. And then, and these movies that keep going back and flashing back and you got to keep it in your brain. You got to know, is this before? Or is this after? Or is this during? And it's just so terribly confusing.

And frankly, the Bible can be confusing that way. We're jumping way ahead now in these comments. It says, “⁶...(During) *the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.* (It says), ⁷ *In the days of Artaxerxes* (Bishlam and Mithredath, now, he's even going further ahead), *Bishlam and Mithredath and*

Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.”

By the way, Artaxerxes is the king after Ahasuerus, who was also known as Xerxes, so now we've, again, we've moved ahead. *“The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. ⁸ Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows...”* Now, this is really interesting. You're even given the detail of a letter that doesn't really apply to the time frame in which the events of Ezra are going on.

This is the time of Nehemiah, okay? Or moving toward the time of Nehemiah. It's in the in-between a little bit, but it's closer to Nehemiah than it is Ezra, in the sense of the chronology. But you're going to get all the detail, whether you want it or not. Here's the copy of the letter. *“⁹ Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, ¹⁰ and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar (and they're probably referring to an earlier Assyrian king known by another name there) deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.*

(Here's a copy of the letter.) *“To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River (that's what they called Judah and the area of Jerusalem, they called the province Beyond the River), send greeting. And now ¹² be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.”*

That tells you right there that they're talking to them about something beyond the temple. Now they're complaining about the fact that they're rebuilding the walls. Well, we haven't gotten to that yet; we won't get to that until Nehemiah. You see how we've jumped way ahead? All right.

“¹³ Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished (let me tell you), they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. ¹⁴ Now because we eat the salt of the palace (and it is the symbolic way of saying because we were being supported by you or supported by the palace) it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, ¹⁵ in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. ¹⁶ We

make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.

¹⁷ The king sent an answer: “To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now ¹⁸ the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. ¹⁹ And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. ²⁰ And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River (talking about David and Solomon), to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. ²¹ Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. ²² And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?”

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 cease.” Again, this was a cessation of labor of the city walls, of the building of the city. Okay, that's the important thing to remember, alright.

Here we go—verse 24, which is the last verse of the chapter. Now, guess what? Verse 24 has brought us back to the present. There was this interlude where he jumped way ahead, but now in verse 24, he says, *“Then the work on the house of God (mean the temple) that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”* Oh, wow. It's confusing, I know. But now we're back to the present.

Now, as we get into chapter 5, the very first verse says, *“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.”* Now, it sounds like things are just kind of, "this is the same time frame," doesn't it? Fact of the matter is, between chapter, the end of chapter 4 when the king, when they basically made them cease what they were doing, and then, now, in chapter 5, 16 years, 16 years.

Now, what goes on in 16 years? Well, the temple has stopped being built; they ceased building it. What are you going to do? I suppose you're just going to build your own house? You're going to take care of your own fields—I mean, you got to live, right? You just go on with life as normal. Now, you'll notice here, as this chapter begins, that it says, Haggai began to speak to the people in

the name of the Lord. The Book of Haggai, which you have in your Bible, actually records what Haggai told them right during this time.

Here's what I want you to do: I want you to keep your finger here, and I want you to turn to Haggai, if for no other reason than to find it. Here we go. It's one of the minor Prophets, and it's not very long at all. See how long it takes me to locate it here.

Okay, are you there? Haggai. It's there, I promise. We're going to read through the first chapter, just the first chapter. It's not terribly long. Look what it says,

“¹ In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: ² “Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” ³ Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴ “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? ⁵ Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁶ 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. (That’s not good.)

⁷ “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁸ Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. ⁹ You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. (Why? because the Lord of Host, excuse me. Because of my house, rather, okay I messed that up.) Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹ And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.”

It's interesting. God is speaking through Haggai, and he says, have you guys noticed what life has been like since you stopped working on the temple? I know you got intimidated. I know people were scaring you. I know they were frustrating your efforts, and I know that you guys were discouraged. I understand that. I get it. But what you did instead of trusting me is you gave up and you listened to other voices rather than listening to my voice.

But have you noticed what has been happening ever since? That actually took place. Have you realized that life has just gotten really hard? Have you noticed that even though you plant your fields, you don't get very much in return for your planting? Have you noticed that when you go to harvest your vineyards, there just isn't that much? Have you noticed your money just seems to fade? Have you noticed the rain isn't watering the crops like it should? It's because I've called for a drought. Have you noticed? Have you noticed? Have you noticed? What's going on? Maybe we're not doing what we should be doing.

Now, this is an interesting sort of scenario. But, this is a picture of what it's like when we stop obeying God's voice and we start thinking about and being directed toward the things of the world, or we just get frustrated or intimidated out of walking with the Lord, doing what we should. Fear takes over, right? Or something of that nature?

And because we become fearful, or because we become frustrated or disappointed, we just give up. And we just say, well. And we close our Bible, and we stop going to church, and we stop fellowshiping and praying, and it's, eh, just... it's whatever, just whatever. And God says, have you taken inventory of your life? Have you noticed that your life has just gotten hard? Have you noticed that I've been frustrating your efforts? God's good at that, by the way.

And we've talked about this before. When we're praying for people who've become wayward—people who've walked away from a relationship with the Lord—we ask God to make their lives miserable. And we ask God also to open their eyes to see it, to recognize that, look at this, look what's happening in my life. All my dreams, all my goals, all my plans are coming to nothing. Why? Because I have completely omitted God from my life. I no longer pray about things. I no longer seek the face of God. I don't care. I just got frustrated or I got discouraged or I got distracted or intimidated or whatever the thing might be.

What is it in your life that frustrates you, intimidates you, or distracts you to the point where you feel like giving up? I mean, there's a lot of things that might fall under a certain part of that category, but some of them may just drive you more into the arms of the Lord.

What is it that makes you feel like giving up? We've all got that button, every one of us. And there's something that can happen in our life that makes us feel very much like just quitting. I'm just, I'm done. I'm done. What is it for you? Well, for the Jews living in Jerusalem at that time, it was all the intimidation procedures and things that these people were bringing upon them, and they just,

like, they gave up. God speaks to them now and says, it's time to get busy again. Should you be building your house when my house is in ruins?

Now, guys, remember, the New Testament correlation to the house of the Lord is what? It's you. You are the New Testament correlation to the house of the Lord. God doesn't dwell in buildings anymore; He dwells in people. You are the temple or a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Here's the question: What will cause you to just give up any progress of your walk with the Lord? To stop moving forward, to stop going to church, to stop praying, to stop seeking His face, to stop wanting His will in your life? What does it? Very important. Well, God is being very gracious through Haggai to speak to the people and awaken them to understand this is what's happening, you guys. Open your eyes and see it.

Now, I want you to see the response here in verse 14 of Haggai, (he says, and the Lord stirred up. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm in verse 12. I beg your pardon.) Verse 12: *"Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people (look at this) feared the Lord. (In other words, they took his word at face value and said this is God talking to us.)"*

¹³ *Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, "I am with you, declares the Lord." (That's always a good thing to hear, isn't it? God says, I'm with you.)* ¹⁴ *And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God,* ¹⁵ *on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king."*

Okay, so now you know the powerful impact that God's Word had on the Jews through Haggai. Now turn back to Ezra once again, and we can keep going here with chapter 5.

Ezra chapter 5 which picks up the story right after Haggai gives them this word look at verse 2. And this is pretty much what it's told us in Haggai: *"Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua (it called him Joshua in Haggai, because that's the same name) 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, look what happens after they begin to rebuild.)* ³ *At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-*

bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?”⁴ They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?”

Now stop there for just a moment. It might look like this is another intimidation factor, but as we read on in this chapter, we're going to find out that these men really don't have the same attitude as the men we heard about 16 years earlier, who were trying to use intimidation, fear tactics, and bribery to get them to stop.

These men are really just officials of the king, and all they want to know is – it's like the inspector or somebody coming, or somebody maybe looking at your building process and saying, you got a permit to do that – it's the same thing. They're coming to these guys and saying, who, who told you to do this?

Now they're not aware of king Cyrus's original decree to rebuild — it's been too long. It's been a long time, right, since that first was given. They're like, who, who told you to do this? And what are the names of the people building and so forth? And they just want to get their documentation in order.

Verse 5, they didn't let this bother them though. It says, *“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.”* In other words, this governor did not insist they stop until they could get an answer. He said, well, okay, you guys can go ahead and build, and that's fine. We'll go ahead and send a word to the king, and we'll figure out what's really going on here. But he let them—in other words, God gave them favor with these officials, alright.

“⁶... (And then we're going to—we're given the copy of the letter) that Tatanai, the governor of the province Beyond the river and Shethar Bozenai and his associates (I'm sure glad they don't name them all), the governors who were in the province Beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. ⁷ They sent him a report, in which was written as follows: “To Darius the king, all peace.

⁸ Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. ⁹ Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: ‘Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’

¹⁰ We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. ¹¹ And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the

servants of God, 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.

¹² But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. ¹³ However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt.

¹⁴ And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; ¹⁵ and he said to him, "Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site."

¹⁶ Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.' (They didn't say, for 16 years we got scared and didn't do anything. But it's been an open ended project. We'll leave it at that.) Therefore (verse 17), 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."

Chapter 6: *"Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored."* In other words, the king commissioned the people to do a Google search. This is one of the very first Google searches ever. And, I'm sure it was a lot more than just a few seconds.

"² And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: "A record. 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, that's the letter that they read or not the letter but the record that they found of Cyrus's original decree.)

⁶ “Now therefore (now he's writing to the governor of the land), 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. (Let the work on this house of God or) ⁷ Let the work (rather) 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.”

And that's the main reason this king wants to see this temple go up, he wants to benefit from it.

Then, I always love this “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 (I mean, that's just a little incentive. That was just one of those little things, it's like, hey guys, have a good time, alright.) 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.”

You got to imagine, this is like hewww... because what happens, 16 years goes by, Haggai begins his ministry saying, hey, what's going on? God is asking you a question. You're leaving His house in ruins, and you're building your own houses. Get busy. And they hear the Word of the Lord, and they go, we need to do this. They were convicted. They started getting busy building the house right away! Tattenai, the governor, is like, what are you guys doing? Who told you could do this? Well, so they tell him the whole story and they're like, is this going to be another? It's like we just, we're trying to be obedient.

Have you ever done this, people? Have you ever tried to be obedient to God, and you just hit barriers? You hit barricades, you hit walls, and they're like, what is this? And it's really interesting as Christians; we assume that when we're

obeying God, it should be easy. People say that all the time; they're going—I prayed about it, and I said, Lord, what is it you want me to do? And the Lord told me what he wants me to do. And I've had nothing but problems. I'm beginning to doubt whether that was God.

And we look in the Bible and we go, why would you doubt? Why would you doubt that was the Lord? Because it's so hard. Everywhere I go, there's problems, there's setbacks. We ran out of this. We did this, and then they start telling you all the things and you're like, yeah. Where did we get this idea that it was going to be easy when it was from the Lord? Where did we get that idea?

Do you think the apostle Paul ever thought that? Hey, Paul, I'd like to call you to do a little missionary work for me and just go to other places and start churches and stuff like that. Okay, sound like fun? Yeah, okay, good. Oh, by the way, people are going to hate your guts. They're going to throw stones at you. You're going to be whipped like 3 times. Just, I'm just, full disclosure here. And oh, I think you'll be shipwrecked one time, that won't be fun. Oh, and then you'll get bit by a snake. That'll stink. Let's see. Let's see, you'll be chained in a prison, stuff like that. Still want to go? It's well, God if you're in this, isn't this going to be fun? Isn't this going to be just a laugh a minute?

Listen. Sometimes, it's when we're—sometimes we face the biggest issues when we're walking in obedience to God. Paul said to Timothy, everybody who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12-17). It doesn't even matter what you're doing—you're just living for God, you're just living to please Him, and love Him—he says that alone is going to bring on persecution in your life.

And then you start doing things. I mean, actively doing things in your community, or in your neighborhood, or even in your home. And some people are going to want to snuff you out. And if you're not prepared for the opposition that comes, you're going to be like the Jews, and you're going to see that opposition, and you're going to go—forget this. I didn't sign up for this program. I'm done. And you quit. And you quit.

How many Christians do you think have just thrown in the towel because life got hard. The difficulties of life... Remember, Jesus talked about seed that goes into the ground. Some of it sprouted but got choked out by some things. Some of it was just persecution, difficulty, barriers, walls (Matthew 13:7, 22).

Verse 13 says, *“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 (they didn't want to be impaled on their, on something, on a board from their house) 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.”

Now, if you go and read through the Book of Zechariah, you'll find out that we don't know if there could have been some things that Zechariah said to them that are not written in the Book of Zechariah. But if you read through the Book of Zechariah, he doesn't really address specifically this issue of the temple building very much at all.

But he talks to them about— Zechariah is actually a book of prophecy related to end times. I mean, it's a wonderful book to study— but what Zechariah, if what is written in the Book of Zechariah, is what he was sharing with the people there in Jerusalem and Judah during that time, they had reason to be excited because Zechariah is all about God is coming back, and God is going to fight the battle for you, and there's just some incredibly wonderful, marvelous prophecies in that book.

It says they finish the building, I'm in the middle of verse 14. *“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.”*

“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.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.

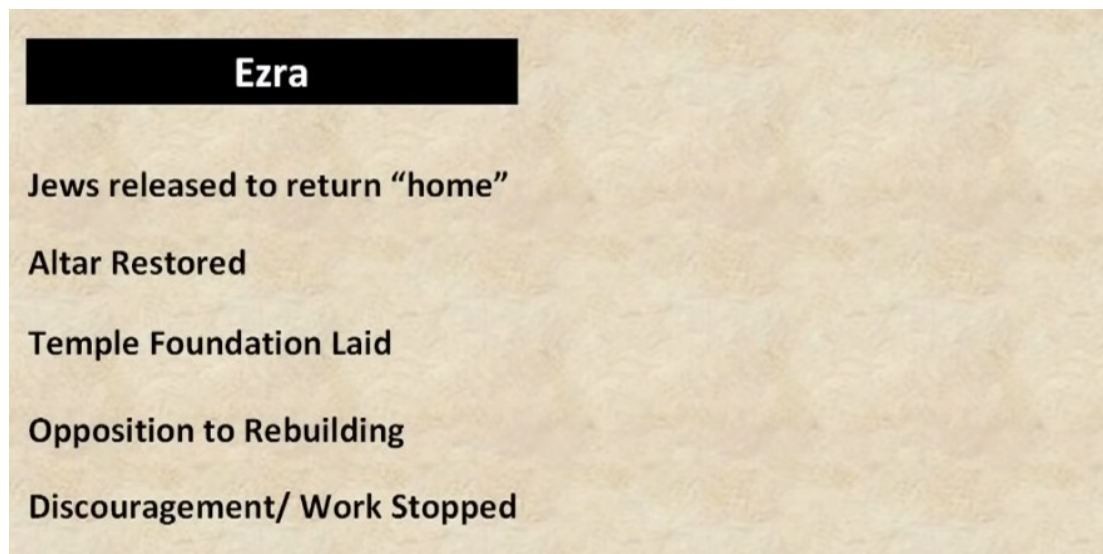
“¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover.²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves.²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel.

²² And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which happens right on the heels of Passover) seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful and

had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”

They, in other words, were very consciously aware of the fact that they had received favor from a pagan king to do what God told them to do. It was obviously a - it was a faith-building sort of exercise for the people. What's interesting about what we've read so far in the Book of Ezra, and by the way, Ezra is going to make an appearance after this. Here's the guy who's named - the book named after him, we haven't even heard from the man yet. We'll get into that next time.

What's interesting about the Book of Ezra is that it so closely aligns itself, symbolically speaking, to a person coming to faith in Jesus Christ and the kinds of things that will happen in their life. And so, what I want to do is, I want to show you on the screen here.



First of all, on the left side of the screen here, this is basically what we see in Ezra: we see that the Jews are released under the decree of Cyrus to return to their homeland. Once they get there, remember, we dealt with this last week. The first thing they did before doing any work on the temple itself was to restore the altar and the sacrificial system. And then they began to lay the foundation and ultimately completed the foundation of the temple. And then it was at that time that opposition arose to this whole rebuilding project.

And what happened then because of that? Well, discouragement set in, and disappointment with God. And so, they stopped, 16 years they just did their own

Ezra	Your Life in Christ
Jews released to return “home”	Coming to Christ
Altar Restored	
Temple Foundation Laid	
Opposition to Rebuilding	
Discouragement/ Work Stopped	

thing, even though Cyrus had given them this decree. They stopped. They allowed themselves to be frightened into a place of discouragement, and that sort of thing. Okay, so let's look at how these things apply to the life of a believer who comes to Christ.

Well, just as the Jews were released to return home, that's a picture of just coming to Christ, because they were in exile. They were literally in bondage, if you will. They're living under a foreign kingdom, a foreign king. They're living under ways that, and being forced to observe and follow ways that are not, they're just very worldly, but then they get released from that suddenly. And they say you can go, and that's just a beautiful picture of what it is for a believer to recognize their bondage to sin and to turn to the Lord and to be set free and so forth, to come to the Lord.

And just as the altar was restored first, this speaks of establishing worship. One of the very first things that a new believer begins to do is they begin to realize that this God who saved me is worthy of my life. That's what worship is about, by the way. It's not singing songs, it's not clapping your hands, it's not raising your hands, it's not stomping your feet, it's not dancing. It's not... it's nothing you do with your body. Those are expressions. But worship is offering yourself

Ezra	Your Life in Christ
Jews released to return “home”	Coming to Christ
Altar Restored	Establishing Worship
Temple Foundation Laid	
Opposition to Rebuilding	
Discouragement/ Work Stopped	

as a living sacrifice. Isn't that what Paul said in Romans? He said that's your spiritual act of worship. He says in view of God's mercy, therefore, let us offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). It points back to the Old Testament sacrificial system.

And as a new believer comes to faith in Jesus Christ, he comes; she comes with that recognition that my life is no longer mine. It no longer belongs to me to do as I see fit. It's the Lord's. That's worship—offering oneself to God. That's worship. You're worshiping God. So, when you come here on a Sunday or Wednesday, or you're just hearing music, or whatever, and you begin to lift up your voice to the Lord, remember, it's not the singing that God is looking for. It's the attitude of surrender. The attitude of worship. Genuine worship. God, I'm yours. Well, after a believer spends that time worshiping the Lord, just as the temple foundation was eventually laid.

Ezra	Your Life in Christ
Jews released to return “home”	Coming to Christ
Altar Restored	Establishing Worship
Temple Foundation Laid	Early learning and discipleship
Opposition to Rebuilding	
Discouragement/ Work Stopped	

We too need that time of early learning and discipleship. That is the foundational period of time for our growing in Jesus Christ, and the things—every new believer has to go through that. I honestly got to tell you, I love walking new believers through those early learning processes of figuring out just laying a foundation of who is Jesus? You know, what does the Bible say? What are all the statements that Jesus said about himself? You know? Wow. You go through like the, I Am, statements, many of them are on these walls, right around here. And you begin to think about all the implications of what Jesus said about himself.

Well, what we're doing is laying a foundation of understanding of just who this Jesus is. And they begin to have a firmer grasp of how a person is saved. Oh, it's by grace through faith and this is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8-9) And more of the foundation goes in, and there's just this

beautiful structure that is the basis of all that they will build in their future lives. That's those early years of learning and discipleship.

Ezra	Your Life in Christ
Jews released to return "home"	Coming to Christ
Altar Restored	Establishing Worship
Temple Foundation Laid	Early learning and discipleship
Opposition to Rebuilding	Opposition to Growth
Discouragement/ Work Stopped	

But, like we've already said, next comes opposition to this building process, just as the Jews dealt with the opposition that they struggled with. Also, as a believer, you're going to be opposed. Here's the deal: you not only live in a world that is constantly just out there trying to draw you, suck you into this, and we have a natural magnetic attraction to it. It'd be one thing if we hated the world. We don't, let's face it. We don't hate the world. We are attracted to the world through our sinful nature. Looks very attractive.

Well, that would be bad enough if that was all there was, but you've got an enemy. There's an enemy who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). What's up with that? We've got this double whammy and opposition to this growth process. And then people get used by the enemy to say things that are hurtful and disappointing and discouraging.

Ezra	Your Life in Christ
Jews released to return "home"	Coming to Christ
Altar Restored	Establishing Worship
Temple Foundation Laid	Early learning and discipleship
Opposition to Rebuilding	Opposition to Growth
Discouragement/ Work Stopped	Discouragement/ Growth Stopped

And eventually, just as the Jews got discouraged and work stopped, the very real possibility for the believer in Jesus Christ is for that same discouragement

to stop their growth. To the point where, as we've already talked about, they just say, this is too hard. This is too hard.

I think I've told some of you guys before that when I was a fairly new believer, I was going through a really, really hard time with just the work of the enemy. Just the enemy was just really working hard on me. I just, yeah, I don't want to make it sound like I was the enemy's number one target, far from it. I'm sure he dispatched one of his little minions, but it was working, and I was really frustrated.

I went to my pastor. I was in my mid-twenties. I went to my pastor and I sat him down, and I said, if this is what walking with Jesus is about, I don't think I want to do this, and I was serious. I was dead serious. I don't think I want to do this. And he just laughed at me, praise the Lord. But that's the way I felt, and it was very genuine, and I don't think I'm alone in that. I think a lot of Christians just, it's just too hard

You get a situation where somebody's married to an unbeliever, and they're trying to come to church and they're trying to read their Bible, but all they get is discouragement at home. Their spouse is always complaining about why you go to church so often and why don't you just spend some time with me once in a while. And putting down this God that you say you believe. Why do you read that stupid book full of old wives' tales and myths.

It's just hammering, and it goes on for years. Pretty soon, the believer in the family just says, this is just too hard. I'm tired of this. It just wears you down and wears you down through intimidation, fear, and all the other things. It's just like, you know what? It's easier just to acquiesce, say, you know what? I'm done.

And then we go through that period of time where we're just miserable, and what we put—the money that we put in our pockets seems to just fall out, and the work that we do, we just don't get the return for it, and so forth. And just like the Jews here, we find ourselves in a situation where life just is no longer satisfying. Hopefully, we're drawn back to a place of returning to the Lord and saying, God, I allowed disappointment and discouragement to stop me dead in my tracks.

And just like Zerubbabel and Jeshua, there had to be a time of repentance—a time of saying, you know what, God? You're right. You're right. It's time for me to get busy and start working back on the temple, this temple, and start getting myself back in fellowship, back under the Word of God, back in prayer—back

where I need to be to walk with you. That's hard, isn't it? After you've created habits that run, that go the other direction.

When I was living in Minnesota, sometimes the snow would create these huge ruts in the road, and if your car's tires didn't match up with whatever ruts had come before you or whatever, you really get tossed around, particularly if you've got one of these little cars or something like that. And because that just only speaks of when you create a rut in your life, it's extremely difficult to get out of it, very, very hard.

When a Christian has been out of fellowship, out of prayer, they've lost their appetite for the Word of God, they've stopped reading the word for so long. They just—have you ever been there? Have you ever gotten to a place where it's just like, I not only do I not read the Bible, I don't want to. I no longer have a hunger. It's just gone. Well, it's just like anything else. You create a hunger by doing it. You create an appetite by doing it, and it's really hard to get back into the swing of things.

That's why, boy, if that's ever you, it's: get some people around you praying for you. It's like, hey, I got to get back to where I need to be with the Lord, but this is going to be hard. This is going to be like coming off drugs, I'm telling you. I mean, and this is because I am—I know that I'm going to really miss my old life, but I got to do this. I got to be obedient to God.