

**Restoration Under Zerubbabel**  
**Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2**  
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**Memory Verse: Ezra 3:11b** – “And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the temple was laid.”

This is my first venture as a lecturer for this study, so I hope you'll be patient and understanding with me. I want to disclaim that I am not a Bible expert, nor do I hold a degree in Bible studies or theology. What I am is a believer living in exile and I believe that each of you are as well.

Did you enjoy the study on Job? I did. Perhaps you were thinking the same as me after the lesson last week and watching news coverage of the 8.9 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. For some reason I was awake at 2:00 am following last week's study and turned the news on television. I couldn't help think while watching the waters spreading uncontrolled across the fields and countryside of Job 38:8-11,

“Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb ... when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?’”

And we know who released the sea from its doors with the tsunami. It was not Job and his friends, nor you or I. It was God the Almighty, and more proof that only God is truly in control!

In the study of Ezra and the restoration of the temple at Jerusalem we see that God is again in control. God had allowed the people to be carried away into captivity because of their disobedience. He moved the heart of a foreign, pagan king and opened the door for a remnant of the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem for the purpose of restoring His temple.

In Ezra, the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem lies in ruins. Today, because of the Resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Temple is not a place but a person. We are the Lord's Temple and it is our lives that lie in ruins and we exist in exile.

Charles Swindoll writes in his series on God's Masterwork, “*Ezra's message reminds us that God's discipline, though often severe, has as its goal our repentance and restoration. The same sovereign hand that disciplines us holds onto us and eventually brings us back to where we belong – to Him.*”

I suspect that each of you have had an “exile experience” at some point in your lives. I expect if we could pass the microphone around the room each of you could share about your own time in exile. I too have lived in exile, or at least it felt like it was.

As a young couple 30 years ago, my husband and I and one 4-year-old son moved from my roots in Southern California to Cleveland, Ohio to pursue my husband's 'dream job'. Yes, Cleveland, Ohio .... At that time commonly known as the "mistake on the lake"! For 3 years we learned how to live in snow, drive on black ice over bridges and highways and even to choose our own church for the 1<sup>st</sup> time. Before that we simply attended church where my family worshipped. If my dad attended a church, we figured it was the right place for us. Living completely away from family support and totally on our own resources was a valuable exercise in getting along together and deciding what we believed for ourselves, as well as learning to trust and depend on God.

I still recall the day my husband came home and announced that the dream job wasn't working out and we should probably move home to California. I didn't hesitate for a moment and told him I would be ready to leave in 6 days! Actually, it took a bit longer than that, but we made plans to move pretty quickly. Because our home in Anaheim was rented and we didn't have jobs, my aunt offered us to live with her until we figured out what to do. It would be another 6 months before we could move into our own home and our lives were restored to the point we left 4 years earlier, except we now had a second son born during our time in Cleveland.

What does all this have to do with the remnant in Babylon? Cleveland was not living in exile like the Jewish captives, but it felt like it. The point is that we've all lived in exile at one time or another. An exile experience isn't limited to a physical location. It can be an emotional or even relational experience. I believe it is through those "exile experiences" that we learn to what extent God is in control in our lives. He allows us to fall into exile based on our disobedience, but his plan is always to bring us back into His presence.

So, how did the Jews come to be in Babylon in captivity? And why was the exile of God's people necessary?

As you recall, before the Israelites entered Canaan, they were told to exterminate all Canaanites and to destroy their high places of worship. They compromised and failed to do that. They allowed the Canaanite idolaters to live among them. In time this led to invitations to the Canaanite feasts where there was drinking, dancing (new freedoms to the Hebrews) and eventually religious orgies. Sounds a bit like college "Animal House" doesn't it? I'm sure the process of compromise was slow and gradual so the moral shift did not seem so drastic to the Israelites.

How is the spirit of compromise corrected? Today the answer is the same as for ancient Israelites. The truth is found in what God chooses to reveal in His word. As messengers God sent prophets to turn the people back to the "old ways."

The prophet Jeremiah warned the leaders of the nation of Judah for 40 years that Babylonian exile was inevitable.

**Jeremiah 11:9-11** - Then the Lord said to me, "There is a conspiracy among the people of Judah and those who live in Jerusalem. They have returned to the sins of their forefathers, who refused to listen to my words. They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers. Therefore, this is what the Lord says: 'I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them.'

**Jeremiah 11:17** – The Lord Almighty, who planted you, has decreed disaster for you, because the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done evil and provoked me to anger by burning incense to Baal.

Jeremiah also prophesied captivity would last 70 years, equal to 2 generations ... and it did! Unfortunately, the people didn't listen.

In 586 BC King Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem captive. He took to Babylon 10,000 of the most powerful, intelligent and skilled people of Judah. The Temple and the king's residence were ransacked and destroyed, and all the wealth of Jerusalem was taken to Babylon as Nebuchadnezzar's spoils of war. Only the poorest of the people remained in Judah.

At issue was the length of captivity. False prophets told the people to expect to be in Babylon only 2 years. When no rescue came year after year, the people settled into life in Babylon; making homes, planting and raising crops.

In our study God was at work in 3 key events:

- Release of the captives
- Return of the remnant
- Rebuilding the temple

In 539 BC the Persians conquered the Babylonian Empire lead by Cyrus the Great. Surprisingly he did not loot the city of Babylon and left the religious and civil institutions intact. A year later Cyrus the Great issued a proclamation:

"Cyrus, king of Persia, hereby announces that Jehovah, the God of heaven who gave me my vast empire, has now given me the responsibility of building him a Temple in Jerusalem, in the land of Judah. All Jews throughout the kingdom may now return to Jerusalem to rebuild this Temple of Jehovah, who is the God of Israel and of Jerusalem. May his blessings rest upon you." Ezra 1:2-3, The Living Bible

Clearly God was in control and exercised His power of influence, even of a foreign ruler. But why would a conquering king do such a thing?

- To win the favor of people treated harshly by the Babylonians
- He desired the goodwill of the gods of each country
- By returning the sacred vessels of the Yahweh of Hosts, it put an end to the insult offered the God of Israel by the King of Babylon
- And it fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah.

The release of the remnant was also foretold by the prophet Isaiah almost 150 years before Cyrus ruled. Historians later said that Cyrus read this prophecy and was so moved that he carried it out.

Isaiah 44:28 – Who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.”

Philippians 2:13 – For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

King Cyrus also appointed Shesh-bazzar as governor of Judah. In Ezra Judah refers to a district in Persia, not to the tribe of Judah. Shesh-bazzar was believed to be another name for Zerubbabel, a grandson of King Jehoiakin and of the royal bloodline of King David.

In Babylon it's been estimated likely 2-3 million Jews were living 70 years and 2 generations since their captivity. They were likely comfortable and settled with Babylonian life. By this time few of the original captives were still alive, and those still living were likely older. Less than 50,000 Jews choose to answer the call back to Jerusalem, only 2-3% of those living in Babylon. They were led by Zerubbabel and the High Priest Joshua.

Of the remnant who answered God's call to return to Jerusalem, God knew all their names. Ezra Chapter 2 lists the names and families of the captives in Babylon electing to return as the remnant to Jerusalem. The importance of God knowing their names includes:

- The Lord knows his people personally.
- Common people are vital for accomplishing God's plan.
- The covenant community was similar to the exodus from Egypt, and in fact was known as the 2<sup>nd</sup> exodus.

The remnant of Judah returning to Jerusalem was encouraged with a freewill offering from those who chose to remain in Babylon. And they carried with them the riches taken from the temple by the Babylonians.

The journey was a distance of about 900 miles and was over hard terrain. The trip lasted at least 4 months, leaving Babylon in the Spring and arriving in Jerusalem in the Fall.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they found the city and the Temple in ruins. However, their first need was to construct shelter for temporary dwellings. The people were few in number compared to their enemies in the region. There was a long history of animosity with the local inhabitants that had not cooled over their years of captivity. The remnant was faced with overcoming fear. However, in obedience to the Lord, burnt offerings were sacrificed morning and night to indicate the people's dedication to the Lord as they began and ended their day.

When does fear arise? It arises when we take our eyes off the Lord. How does fear affect our lives? After wandering from God, we must confess our waywardness and surrender all aspects of our lives to him, otherwise fear of our enemies, no matter who or what they are, may consume us.

The Jews returning to Judah were not able to reclaim their family property unless they could prove their lineage. About 650 people were disqualified and unable to prove their Jewish ancestry. Zerubbabel and Joshua allowed them the rights of strangers and foreigners. Proof of ancestry was especially important for priests and Levites to serve in the temple. God had made it clear that any outsider who attempted to serve at the altar would be put to death. These men were excluded from priestly privileges until they could be tested by "the Urim and Thummim." This was the means for the high priest to determine God's will.

The remnant arriving in Jerusalem found the Temple in ruins. Its physical condition was a picture of the people's spiritual condition. Rebuilding the temple involved investing in the work with thank offerings, setting up the temple altar and laying the foundation by gathering materials and preparing to build.

Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the people began their work in earnest. The first item rebuilt was the temple altar where they offered burnt offerings in thanks to God for the safe journey. The temple foundation was completed in 534 BC, 2 years and 2 months after the arrival in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, the joy of worshipping and serving God is always accompanied by Satan's attempt to spoil it. Reconstruction of the temple was met with opposition and false accusations. First there was the temptation to compromise God's covenant. The Samaritans were distantly related to the inhabitants of Judah. They intermarried and were idol worshippers. They wanted to help the Jews rebuild the Temple.

2 Kings 17: 32-33 "They worshiped the LORD, but they also appointed all sorts of their own people to officiate for them as priests in the shrines at the high places. They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought."

To align with the Samaritans would compromise the purity of the Jews. If the Samaritan outsiders had begun to mingle with the Jewish remnant while helping to rebuild the temple, it would not take long for the two groups to socialize and

intermarry, which was contrary to the Law of Moses. Judah's leaders rejected their offer to help.

Israel was a nation set apart from other nations because God had given them a special task to perform in the world. Even today God's people must maintain a separated position and not get involved with anything that will compromise their testimony and hinder God's work. However, separation must never become isolation because God has a work for believers to do in this world. Warren Wiersbe in *Be Heroic, Demonstrating Bravery by Your Walk* said, "God's people are separate from the world so they can be a witness to the world."

When the enemy was rebuffed from sharing in the rebuilding, they told lies about the Jews to encourage the people of the land to do everything possible to discourage the workers and hinder the work on the temple. Their opposition included false accusations in the form of letters sent to the Persian kings. As accusations usually do, they take a grain of truth and twist it to serve their own purposes.

Letters were sent to King Artaxerxes with accusations against the Jews which included:

1. Jerusalem was described as a rebellious and wicked city, which was true. If restored, the Jews could declare independence from Persian rule.
2. Such an independent state would create a loss of revenue and tribute to the Persian Empire.
3. Jewish rebellion would dishonor the Persian king.
4. If the Jews succeeded in restoring the temple and the Jewish nation, they could conquer the entire territory across the Euphrates.

In response, King Artaxerxes issued an order to the Jews to cease work on the temple. In the face of opposition, the people were overcome with discouragement and apathy. Unfortunately, opportunity and opposition usually go together. The question is how you choose to respond to the opportunity and the opposition.

Even the apostle Paul was aware of problems surrounding opposition and opportunity.

1 Corinthians 16:9 – "Because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me."

Whenever God's people try to serve the Lord, somebody will oppose them. The lies of their enemies hindered the work of the Jews on the temple. The remnant feared their local enemies and consequently became apathetic and more interested in their own homes. In addition to rebuilding the Temple, they were rebuilding the city walls because an unwalled city was easy to plunder. The people and their property needed protection as well. By stopping their work, the Jews were admitting they had no faith in God's Word, or in God's power to perform it.

Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy was quoted in Warren Wiersbe's book on *Be Heroic, Demonstrating Bravery by Your Walk*; "Faith is not believing in spite of evidence, it is obeying in spite of consequences."

Unfortunately, there would be 16 years of inactivity on the temple.

Exactly on August 29, 520 BC, and 2 years under the Persian King Darius, the prophet Haggai brought God's message first to Zerubbabel and Joshua, then to the people concerning their attitude toward reconstruction of the Temple. God sent 4 messages through Haggai. The first was for the people to consider their priorities. The people were claiming it was not yet time to rebuild the temple. Through Haggai, God asks a challenging or probing question of the people;

Haggai 1:4 - "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

"Paneled houses" was a reference to luxurious dwellings, not just simple homes. Not only were the people refusing to accept God's priorities as their own, they were pursuing their own self-indulgent, self-gratifying ways. Years earlier the people had gathered materials to rebuild the temple, including cedars from Lebanon. Yet no materials were mentioned lying around waiting for the reconstruction to resume. One can imagine that the idle building materials may have found their way into the people's "paneled houses" and were possibly no longer available for the temple reconstruction. In spite of the people's luxurious homes, life in Jerusalem had been difficult and not too prosperous. Their crops failed due to drought because God was displeased with their priorities.

When God wanted to motivate his people back into action, he sent messages through Haggai that included 4 elements:

- He asked a question to challenge and convict his people
- He issued an exhortation
- He delivered a command to action
- He gave an explanation

Through Haggai God questioned the people and used the events in their lives to check their attitude and get their attention. That question was how they had time for their fine, luxurious homes while His temple laid in ruins.

His exhortation was so crucial that God stated it twice! The King James Version asks, "Consider your ways." In the New International Version God says, "Give careful thought to your ways." I happen to like the version in The Message;

"Take a good, hard look at your life.  
Think it over.  
You have spent a lot of money,  
but you haven't much to show for it.

You keep filling your plates,  
but you never get filled up.  
You keep drinking and drinking and drinking,  
but you're always thirsty.  
You put on layer after layer of clothes,  
but you can't get warm.  
And the people who work for you,  
what are they getting out of it?  
Not much—  
a leaky, rusted-out bucket, that's what.  
That's why God-of-the-Angel-Armies said:  
"Take a good, hard look at your life.  
Think it over."

#### Haggai 1:5-7, The Message

Does this resonate with our world today? I have one adult son who was on a path of living life on his terms and not on God's. Over the past few years, I can see how his Dad and I have said these words to him in one form or another. Greater than that, I can see how God is using his life events to get his attention. He's a much more humble and focused young man today than he was a few years ago, but God isn't finished with him yet. As parents we're still praying for and working on him, and fortunately so is God.

God's call to action was for his people in Jerusalem to climb up into the mountains, bring down timber and rebuild the Temple. And why should they do that? So God may take pleasure in it and be honored.

1 Cor 10:31 – "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Finally the explanation;

"And why?" (This is a Message from God-of-the-Angel-Armies, remember.)  
"Because while you've run around, caught up with taking care of your own houses, my Home is in ruins. That's why. Because of your stinginess. And so I've given you a dry summer and a skimpy crop. I've matched your tight-fisted stinginess by decreeing a season of drought, drying up fields and hills, withering gardens and orchards, stunting vegetables and fruit. Nothing—not man or woman, not animal or crop—is going to thrive."

#### Haggai 1:9-11, The Message



Does this sound like another conviction for our modern times to you? Then the governor Zerubbabel, the high priest Joshua and all the people listened to God and paid attention to Haggai. In listening, they honored and feared God.

To hear the Lord means we obey what we have heard. By responding with obedience and reverence, God sends encouragement by sending his presence. "I am with you" means that God will help, equip, enable and protect. However, obedience must come before God's power and enablement is provided.

One month later God again sent a message to the remnant through Haggai. The people were discouraged. The older people could remember the incredible beauty of Solomon's temple, destroyed 66 years earlier. Many were discouraged because the rebuilt temple was inferior and plain by comparison. But Haggai encouraged them with God's message that the glory of this temple would surpass that of its predecessor. The most important part of the temple is God's presence.

Again, God delivered his 4 elements to bringing the people back on track. First the challenging questions;

- Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory?
- How does it look to you now?
- Does it not seem to you like nothing?

Next the exhortation; "Take courage and build!" Or, as in The Message, "Get to work! Yes, get to work, for I am with you!" There is exhortation and encouragement, one right after the other. When God says, "I am with you," it means that His Spirit is abiding in their midst. The people were to take courage, work and trust that God was with them. They were to avoid comparisons with others or with the past.

Romans 8:31 – "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

And lastly, God gave an explanation and a promise regarding the rebuilt temple.

"This is what God-of-the-Angel-Armies said: 'Before you know it, I will shake up sky and earth, ocean and fields. And I'll shake down all the godless nations. They'll bring bushels of wealth and I will fill this Temple with splendor.' God-of-the-Angel-Armies says so.

<sup>8</sup>"I own the silver,  
I own the gold.'  
Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.

<sup>9</sup>"This Temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness.' Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies."

## Haggai 2:6-9, The Message

Although God's people became discouraged as they worked on the Temple, God encouraged them and promised peace and glory in the future for His house. He reminded His people that He was the One who owned all the riches of the world and that, through His Spirit, He was abiding in their midst. Consequently, they possessed all the resources they could possibly need. Some 500 years later Jesus Christ would walk in those same temple courts.

Two months after the second message, Haggai brought the third message from God this time to the priests of the Temple.

Challenging question #1 – While carrying holy meat in the folds of a garment, if it touches a loaf of bread, a dish of stew, a bottle of wine or oil or any other food, will they become consecrated or holy by such contact? The priests answered, "No."

Challenging question #2 – If a person who touches a corpse also touches one of these foods, will it become contaminated or defiled? The priests answered, "Yes."

What does this mean? It's a confusing riddle to me. I found that it is an asymmetrical principle of holiness and uncleanness, as Paul compares personal conduct in 1 Corinthians 15:33; "Bad company corrupts good character."

Simply working on the Temple did not make the people holy. Holiness could not be communicated through mere contact with holy implements. The people were unclean because they choose their own ways, their own priorities and their own wills instead of God's. They were unclean and, consequently, everything they touched became defiled. Consider their lack of success, the harshness of their existence and the unfortunate events of their struggles in Jerusalem.

God reminded His people of their recent past in order to speak to them concerning their future. God's blessings had been withheld due to their disobedience. Now His blessings would be unleashed upon them for their obedience.

Haggai's fourth message was delivered the same day to Zerubbabel. God promised to make Zerubbabel like his signet ring, for he was chosen. A signet ring was a cherished and valuable possession of an ancient monarch. This ring was the seal by which the king authenticated a possession to belong to him, and to be under his protection. Consequently, a signet ring was a possession which the monarch held dear and with which he was not likely to part.

There is an interesting background to Zerubbabel as God's signet ring. The prophet Jeremiah informed Jehoiachin, king of Judah, that even though he were a signet ring on the right hand of God, God would pull him off and give him into the hand of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Seventy-seven years later Haggai used the

same terminology when reversing God's earlier decree when speaking to Jehoiachin's grandson, Zerubbabel. The promise made to Zerubbabel was a messianic promise since he was a descendant of David. Zerubbabel was God's chosen servant through whom the promises made to David would ultimately be fulfilled.

God declared to Zerubbabel, "I have chosen you." Such a proclamation is ours as well, for each of us has been chosen by God.

Ephesians 1:4 – "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."

In 515 BC, the Temple in Jerusalem was completed, 70 years from the destruction of the earlier temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and about 5 ½ years after Haggai and Zechariah called the people back to work on the temple restoration. The Jewish remnant had finally completed the task God called them to do. What followed was the joy of celebrating and the joy of remembering through feasts and celebrations. They were all the way "home" in Jerusalem.

And this is where I felt the connection to the return of the remnant from their exile in Babylon to their home and the temple.

With my "exile experience" in Cleveland and returning home, our family lived 6 months with my aunt until we could move back into our home in Anaheim. The first Sunday in our own home I attended Knott Ave Christian Church where we were members before we moved away. During the service I felt compelled to walk forward at the invitation time. The pastors wondered why I was there, having been a member and all. I felt that even though I was home from Cleveland for 6 months, I didn't feel "all the way home" until that moment. In the same way, God's people were not "all the way home" until the Temple was completed and dedicated.

So, I have a question for you ....

- Have you taken a good, hard look at your life? Are you living your priorities and your will instead of God's priorities and God's will?
- Take courage and walk bravely. Get to work!
- Because God is with you and He has chosen you as his own.
- And finally, dedicate the Temple within yourself, until you are "all the way home".

May the God of Israel and of Jerusalem be with you. - Amen

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