

Restoration Under Zerubbabel
Ezra 1:1-6:22; Haggai 1:1-2:23
by Dellena Ludwig

Today's lesson finds us in the Books of Ezra and Haggai. The era of history in which they were written is that of the Persian Empire, in the year of King Cyrus who began his reign about 539 BC. Now it may seem strange that the Persian Empire had anything to do with Israel, but their connection with Israel's well-being was divinely orchestrated.

Israel became a great and mighty nation under the military leadership of King David. His son, Solomon inherited and expanded Israel until it reached from the Euphrates river down to the edge of Egypt's territory; from the mountains East of the Jordan river to the beaches of the Mediterranean Sea. But Solomon's son, Rehoboam was unwise as he took over the reins of his father's kingdom causing a rebellion of the Northern tribes. Jeroboam, son of Nabat, from the tribe of Ephraim led these Northern tribes to break from the nation of Israel, and from the faith of their fathers.

The Northern tribes called themselves Israel and the Southern tribes, who remained loyal to the royal line of David, became known as Judah because they were mostly comprised of the people from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The kings who ruled Northern Israel were all unfaithful to the Lord God. They quickly adopted the practices of the idol-worshipping nations around them. While Judah largely remained faithful to Jehovah and worshiped in the Temple in Jerusalem, corruption gradually engulfed them as well.

So, God sent nations to war against them, to bring them to repentance. But they would not repent. Finally, about 722 BC the kingdom of Assyria rose up to viciously conquer the Northern tribes and carry them off into captivity. The practice of the Assyrians was to displace the leaders of a captured nation with the people of another captured nation. So, a people who didn't know God were planted in the place of the Northern Kingdom, around the area that became known as the province of Samaria, Trans-Euphrates.

The Southern Kingdom endured for a little more than 100 years, because God protected the faithful kings of Judah. However, the Chaldeans later called the Babylonians, who themselves had conquered the Assyrians, attacked Judah about 599 BC. Finally, under siege by Nebuchadnezzar, the Southern half of the Kingdom was also defeated, Jerusalem's walls were breached and the Temple was razed. The people of Judah were captured and taken off into exile also.

It seemed as though God had forsaken Israel altogether. However, God spoke and encouraged His people even while Nebuchadnezzar brought battle to their doorstep. During the siege of Jerusalem the Prophet Jeremiah warned of Babylon's soon victory, but prophesied that this was not the end of Israel.

In Jeremiah 25:11&12, he said, "This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the 70 years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt' declares the Lord. 'and I will make it desolate forever.'" [Jeremiah 25:11,12] God does not take the defilement of His city and Temple lightly.

Just as God had spoken through Jeremiah, the nation of Babylon, that had seemed invincible, was conquered by the armies of the Medes and the Persians. Now, 70 years later, the Persian king named Cyrus was in his first year of reign over this vast empire comprised of many conquered nations. And God did an amazing thing for His exiled people of Israel.

Ezra recorded Cyrus's decree: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.'" [Ezra 1:2,3]

Has such a thing been heard of before? When has a conquering nation willingly released a portion of its people to go back to the land from which they had been exiled? Only our Lord God could

accomplish such a geopolitical feat! And so we celebrate this miracle by studying its account in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: the Nation of Israel is Beginning Again.

We know from the book of Daniel that the Babylonian king valued the wisdom that the leaders of conquered nations could give him. Daniel and other members of Judah's ruling families were given places of leadership in Nebuchadnezzar's government. Then, as the Persians took over the empire, perhaps the wise men of Israel shared the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah with Cyrus.

Isaiah 45:1 prophesied that a man named Cyrus was God's anointed shepherd over Israel. Isaiah 45:4 says, "For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me... I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty."

As King Cyrus pondered these prophecies, the Lord moved his heart that his purpose in history was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus was a polytheist; he worshiped many gods. But as he learned that the God of Israel was the God of creation; the God who made the heavens and the earth, he felt he must give honor to such a prestigious God and offer gifts to Him as well.

The decree of Cyrus went on to say, "And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem." [Ezra 1:4] Cyrus also had 5,400 silver and gold articles confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar from the Temple, brought out of his treasury and offered them to be taken back to the Temple by those who would return. (v. 7-11)

And so, people from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin heeded the decree and undertook this journey out of Babylon back into their ancestral lands in Israel. Chapter 2 of Ezra records the names of the clan leaders and that there were over 42,000 in the company, plus slaves and singers. They brought their possessions, plus offerings, from those who did not come with them, plus many horses, mules camels and donkeys. (v.64)

Their leaders included Zerubbabel, of the royal lineage of David, who would be their governor under the empire of Persia; and Joshua, son of Jozadak who served among the priests and would later be the high priest when the Temple was rebuilt.

Each person settled into the towns of their heritage. Depending on the ravages of the wars against Israel and of the 70 or so years that each town had been abandoned, they may have had to repair their homes to make them livable. They were scattered exiles living scattered in the land of their past.

Chapter 3 revealed that the people gathered together in Jerusalem in the seventh month, Tishri, which meant they had been in the land about three months. The first order of business was to rebuild the altar which used to be located in the courtyard just in front of the Temple itself. Ezra 3:3 states, "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundations and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices." [Ezra 3:3]

The people recognized that their very existence in the land of Promise was due to the loving kindness of the Lord God Almighty. The best way they could express their gratitude was by offering these sacrifices. They were acknowledging their total reliance on God, here so far from the civilization of their captivity, among strangers who were not necessarily their friends.

The next step would be to begin rebuilding the Temple itself. They began by giving money to get the supplies they needed. Chapter 3 verse 7 says, "Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus King of Persia." [Ezra 3:7]

It took some time to gather and prepare the stones and cedars they would need. So, verse 8 tells us that it was "in the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem" that they began the work of actually building the Temple. They had probably been clearing away rubble as they waited for the stones to be cut and the cedars to be brought to the Temple site.

When the builders laid the foundation, there was a wonderful celebration, led by the priests. "With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: 'He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.' And the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord

was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.” [Ezra 3:11-13]

This dichotomy of “weeping and rejoicing” could well describe the rest of this saga as the people worked to rebuild the Temple. Such a roller-coaster ride is best explained by the series of four communications between the Samaritan governors living near Jerusalem in this Persian “Trans-Euphrates” region and the Persian leaders themselves.

Ezra chapter 4, verses 1 and 2 explained that “When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the families and said, ‘Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.’” [Ezra 4:1-2]

Now, these people had experienced the danger of wild lions when they first were transported to the area of Samaria after their captivity. To protect them, their Assyrian rulers sent a Jewish priest from the captured Northern Kingdom to teach them about Jehovah worship. So, they added to their pantheon of gods, the God of Israel. They never stopped worshipping their idols, and so mixed-in worship of Jehovah as well. (2 Kings 17:24-34)

The leaders of Judah and Benjamin had learned the lessons from their captivity. The Lord God Almighty, He alone is God. They could not have these polytheistic neighbors joining into their worship of Jehovah. So, Zerubbabel replied to their offer: “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.” [Ezra 4:3]

The result of this encounter is recorded in the next two verses. “Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius King of Persia.” [Ezra 4:4,5]

So, the first step of opposition tried to drown them in red tape! Secondly, the Samaritans sent a letter to the new king, Artaxerxes. In this first letter, they warned the king that Jerusalem had a reputation as being a rebellious city that would surely stop paying taxes if its walls were to be rebuilt. King Artaxerxes did have the history of Jerusalem researched and found the account of the long siege by Nebuchadnezzar, as well as the prior accounts of refusing to pay tribute.

So, the second letter was the reply by King Artaxerxes. He commanded that all work on the walls of Jerusalem should cease at once. The governors Rehum and Shimshai his secretary lost no time in relaying the King’s command to Zerubbabel, resulting in the work on the house of God coming to a complete standstill for about five years.

Now we can see that the charges against Judah were false. They were rebuilding the Temple, not the city. But they got discouraged because of all of the opposition. They had the order of Cyrus, but instead of refuting this counter-order, or trying to explain their true mission, they stopped the work on the Temple entirely.

The workers had forgotten who their boss really was. It was not the retired King Cyrus. It wasn’t even the new King Artaxerxes. The Lord God was the architect, builder and protector of this building and He would not have His people neglect the building of His Temple.

Therefore, God contacted His messenger, a prophet named Haggai. “In the second year of King Darius, on 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 Jozadak, the high priest. This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘These people say, “The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.”’ 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 in ruin?’” [Haggai 1:1-3]

God charged that His people were selfishly remodeling their own homes, while leaving the house of the Lord still in ruins! God’s punishment was that the crops they planted were barely bringing in a

harvest to sustain them. They were not prospering personally because they had forsaken their pledge to God to rebuild the Temple.

Haggai's message from God revitalized the people to obey God's voice. (Haggai 1:12) The Lord spoke again to them encouraging them with the words, "I am with you." [Haggai 1:13] Then the people feared the Lord and began to work together once again to build the Temple together "on the twenty – fourth day of the sixth month." [Haggai 1:15]

Their renewed determination to rebuild the Temple did not go unnoticed by the adversarial governors around Samaria. Soon Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai gathered a group to approach the Judahites, asking: "'Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?' They also asked, 'What are the names of those who are constructing this building?'" [Ezra 5:3,4] They were writing down a report and taking names!

However, verse 5 records: "But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and a written reply be received." [Ezra 5:5] Hearing God's rebuke from Haggai and encouragement that God was on their side gave them the courage they did not have fourteen years ago when they stopped because of the first letter.

But listen to their reply to the adversarial request for their names: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our ancestors angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon. However, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God..." [Ezra 5: 11-13]

The full reply by the people of Judah was included in the third letter the Trans-Euphrates governors sent to King Darius with their complaint about the rebuilding. (Ezra 5:7-17) But what boldness was evident in this reply! What made the difference in the Jewish reaction between the first and third letter? It was that the Lord brought them to repentance and re-dedication through His prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

They knew the Lord was with them. They were being obedient and would not be swayed by criticism or manipulation. They boldly continued the work until the months passed when King Darius could hear the complaint and then send his response, the fourth letter, in return. The people of Israel were determined to obey the Lord their God.

When King Darius received the third letter, he did research, again, to discover that every word of the elder's reply had been recorded by Cyrus. He really had commissioned this project, supplied the people who traveled back to Jerusalem, and had ordered regular support from surrounding members of his empire while the work was done. But the final part had not been carried out.

So Darius commanded, "Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop." [Ezra 6:7,8]

He further commanded that out of the tribute these Trans-Euphrates provinces usually had to send to the Persian Empire, that part of it must be given to the province of Jerusalem instead. "Whatever is needed – young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem – must be given them daily without fail so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons." [Ezra 6:9,10]

And much to the chagrin of these antagonistic neighbors, the king added a penalty if his wishes were not completely obeyed. "Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defied this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. May God who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence." [Ezra 6:11,12]

It seemed that these displaced people who claimed to worship the God of heaven and earth, did not really fear Him. If they had truly worshiped Jehovah in spirit and in truth, they would not have tried so diligently to discourage His people from obeying His commands.

But now that Darius had been led by the Lord to issue such a strong edict, they finally had the motivation, and fear, to leave the people of Israel alone, and actually help them complete their task.

Ezra gives Haggai and Zechariah the credit that their prophecies had encouraged the people. "So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. The temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius." [Ezra 6:14,15]

Why was it so important to go through all of this trouble to rebuild the Temple of the Lord on its exact spot in ruined Jerusalem? God revealed to His prophet, Haggai that He had a special plan for this Temple. In Haggai chapter 2 the prophet received another message to give to the hard-working Jewish leaders.

This new Temple was being built amid the rubble of Jerusalem, without the decorations of Solomon's Temple or the Temple courtyard or the glory of Jerusalem around it. But God reminded His people that He was still with them. (v.4) God would keep His covenant with the descendants of Abraham and of David. He had future plans for this Temple they could not even comprehend.

In chapter 2:6-9 of Haggai, the Lord said, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord Almighty. The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the Lord Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty." [Haggai 2:6-9]

Why did the remnant of Israel travel all the way from their homes after 70 years of captivity, back to the ruins of their ancestral land to work against the opposition and elements to finally rebuild the Temple? Because God had made them a promise. One day, "the desire of all nations", the One who could actually make peace between sinful mankind and God, would grace this very Temple with His physical presence.

Jesus, as an eight-day-old baby, came to this very Temple in Mary's arms to be consecrated to His Father. (Luke 2:22-24) A man called Simeon had been told that he would not die before he would see for himself the Lord's Messiah. (v.26) In Luke 2:28-32 he testified that Messiah had indeed come. "Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.'" [Luke 2:28-32]

Jesus returned to this Temple several times: when he was 12 years old, for many holy festivals and finally as a young man of about 33. In this Temple He preached and later was tried so that He would be turned over to the Roman authorities to be crucified, just down from the Temple mount on another hill called Golgotha.

The Messiah, Jesus Christ would visit this Temple and give His life for Jews and for Gentiles so that He could grant peace with God to all who would believe in His finished work on the Cross. Truly the glory of this Temple would be greater than all the glory of Solomon's Temple ever displayed! The Prince of Peace Himself would walk along its walls someday.

In the second year of Darius, while work continued on the Temple, Haggai received another message from the Lord. It came in the form of a question relating to sanctification of holy sacrifices. He asked the priests a two-part question. First, would carrying a consecrated piece of meat in a garment pocket that then touches some bread or other food make that food become consecrated? The Priests answered rightly, "No." (6:12)

The second part of the question was about defilement. "Then Haggai said, 'If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?' 'Yes,' the priests replied,

‘it becomes defiled.’ [Haggai 2:13] The priests understood the Law of Moses concerning consecrated things as given in the books of Leviticus and Numbers.

The point God was making through Haggai was that the people who were rebuilding the Temple needed to be reconsecrated to the Lord, just as the altar, the implements of sacrifice and the priests themselves needed to be consecrated to perform their priestly duties.

The Lord had turned the people to Himself through hardship. “‘I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me’ declares the Lord. ‘From this day on, from this 24th day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord’s Temple was laid. Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not born fruit. From this day on I will bless you.’” [Haggai 2:18-19] So the people must live consecrated and purified as children of the Lord God Almighty.

Finally, the Temple was completed. “Then the people of Israel – the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles – celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.” [Ezra 6:16] The priests were installed to serve in the Temple, (v.18) and many sacrifices were offered to dedicate the Temple to the Lord.

Soon, it was time to celebrate the Passover in their new Temple and verse 20 of Ezra chapter 6 explained, “The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their relatives the priests and for themselves. So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel.” [Ezra 6:20,21]

How amazing this portion of history is! It teaches us first, that the Lord God is above any other god. He alone places kings and governors in place to accomplish His will on the earth.

Second, The Lord God is a jealous God. He disciplines His people to bring them into a dedicated relationship with Him.

Third, The Lord God Almighty delights to use His dedicated people to accomplish great things. One day He would walk up to those very walls and accomplish peace for all mankind as our Savior.

Are we ready to be His dedicated people? To offer our hands for His use as He builds His church? One day Christ Himself will stand in the city of Jerusalem as King of Kings fulfilling all His promises to His people.

Let us not grow weary and apathetic, but rejoice in the work that He has given each of us to do in the building of His kingdom. Marantha! Come Lord Jesus!

Let us pray

Please stand as we sing the Doxology