

## ***The Divine and the Human***

### **Ezra 5 & 6**

This summer we're thinking about the issue of restoration as we work our way through the book of Ezra. As a last resort God had taken the Jewish nation into exile in Babylon; it was a devastating thing to lose their identity in that way. But God had promised to restore them to the Land and to temple worship. The book of Ezra describes the process of their restoration. God brought them back to the Land after 70 years of exile and commanded them to rebuild the temple that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. Since worshiping at the temple was so central to the old covenant, God was essentially restoring their relationship with Him.

We've encouraged you to try to discern an area of your life with God in which you need restoration: an area of obedience that you've neglected, a relationship that isn't what God desires, an area of service, a closer walk with God.

We saw in Ezra 1 that ***God is a God who keeps His word***. He said He would bring His people back to the Land, and He did. We also saw that ***God stirs the hearts of people, giving them desires to do certain things***. We encouraged you to notice ways that God is stirring you up; when we pay attention to God and His Word, we notice that we have desires to obey and trust and please and serve Him. Those desires often point to areas of restoration in our lives.

We saw in Ezra 3 that when we face disappointments in our lives, ***we need to acknowledge that God might be doing something different today than He has done in the past***. At the end of chapter 3, Ezra recounted that while some people shouted praise because the foundation had been laid, others (the older men who had seen the temple that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed) wept just as loudly because the footprint of this new temple was smaller than that of Solomon's temple. Those who wept needed to acknowledge that even though the new temple would be smaller than the old one, God was doing a new and deeper thing: the Messiah, the Prince of Peace would enter this temple and on the cross would ultimately fulfill everything it foreshadowed.

In Ezra 4 we saw that as we pursue restoration ***we sometimes face opposition***. Chapter 4 describes how "the people of the land" (4:4) intimidated and discouraged the Jews from rebuilding the temple. If you pursue restoration some area of your life, you will experience opposition, sometimes from the most unlikely sources; people who should be for you might be against you. When we face opposition, that doesn't mean God isn't at work; it means we need to pray for strength, courage, and wisdom; it means we need to persevere.

In Ezra's day, the opposition intimidated and demoralized the people so severely that they basically gave up. Ezra 4:24 tells us:

24 Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The second year of the reign of Darius would have been 520 b.c. This means that the Jewish people hadn't worked on the temple for 16 or 17 years. You know what it's like to drive past an unfinished building, right? It's sort of a monument to not counting the cost or lack of resolve or weakness or calamity. We know from the book of Haggai that the people had become complacent and had lost the will to rebuild the temple.

In a similar way, you might have begun pursuing restoration in some area of your life, but you became so demoralized that you quit seeking God. Perhaps you're on the verge of concluding that God works in others' lives but not yours; you're beginning to think that you might as well quit expecting anything from God. Ezra 5 and 6 assure us that God's grace is still available even if we've "given up." These chapters tell us that:

***God's restoring grace comes in many ways: His Word, historical processes, decrees of kings, etc. (Ezra 5 & 6)***

Sometimes the grace we need seems to come directly from God; other times God's grace comes through normal, everyday events and through human agency. There's nothing incompatible with the two. We'll read a few passages in these two chapters, but I'll summarize most of the text. After 16+ years of inactivity on the temple, this is what we read in Ezra 5:1.

1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet 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, 2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

At the very end of the Old Testament, right before the book of Malachi, you will find the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah which challenged the people to resume work on the temple. In Haggai 1:4, for example, Haggai says, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" The reference to "paneled houses" suggests that they were living in relative luxury while the temple lay in ruins. Haggai challenged them to have the same commitment to God's house that they had toward their own houses. We read here in Ezra 5:2 that Zerubbabel and Jeshua responded and led the effort to rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel had been appointed as "governor" over Judah; we don't really know anything about Jeshua. But they led the work with the support/encouragement of the prophets.

God's grace came first and foremost through His Word. The people heard the prophecies (the Word of God) and responded with faith and energy. As we'll talk about in a few minutes, God's truth is always at the heart of any restoration we experience. If you have given up on experiencing restoration from God, it is essential that you put yourself in a position to hear His Word. God's Word gets us unstuck and gives us a renewed vision for our lives.

The plot thickens when the regional Persian governor learns that progress is being made on the temple in Jerusalem.

3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, “Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?”

We don’t sense that Tattenai and the other officials were especially antagonistic. They were just doing their job of making sure that the Jewish people had permission to rebuild the temple. And so they ask, “Who issued a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?” It’s kind of like, “Where’s your building permit?”

4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building. 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report could come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

Significantly, verse 5 tells us that the building didn’t stop while Tattenai checked out their story with their king, Darius.

The rest of chapter 5 (verses 6 through 17) records the letter that Tattenai sent to Darius the king. The letter informs the king that the Jews are building a house to their God and that the work is progressing with “great care” and success. He reports that the Jewish elders told them that because their fathers had “provoked the God of heaven to wrath” He had given them over to Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed the temple and deported the people to Babylon. The Jewish elders also reported that King Cyrus had issued a decree to rebuild the house of God. The letter ends with these words (verse 17):

17 “Now if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king’s treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter.”

Again, Tattenai was only doing his job. He didn’t want the Jewish people to rebuilt the temple and possibly become a powerful city-state without the king’s knowledge and approval.

Chapter 6 opens with King Darius conducting a search of the archives to see whether or not Cyrus had actually authorized the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra records that Darius’ men found a scroll that contained the original decree. Verses 3 through 5 record the contents of that decree that had been issued almost 20 years earlier:

3 “In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: ‘Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits; 4 with three layers of huge stones and one layer of timbers. And let the

cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 'Also let the gold and silver utensils of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

The decree confirmed everything that the Jewish elders had told Tattenai. Tattenai was supposed to let the work continue. And notice what Darius added (verses 8 through 10):

8 "Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay. 9 "Whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail, 10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

Darius actually told Tattenai to use tax dollars to pay for the building supplies and to buy animals and whatever else was needed for the sacrificial system. Once again, the wealth of the nations was used to supply what the people of God needed (as when they left Egypt and Babylon). As was (apparently) the custom, Darius also requested prayers for himself and his family.

In the following verses Darius promises to do horrible things to anybody who violates his edict. He concludes by writing:

12 "May the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence!"

Verse 13 explains how diligently Tattenai and the others complied with the decree.

13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent.

Verse 14 gives an insightful commentary on the completion of the temple. Ezra mentions both the influence of the prophets **and** the decrees of pagan kings. Here we have confirmation that God's grace can come in many different ways.

14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

As we've seen throughout Ezra, God's restoring grace came through His Word. Here we are reminded that God sent prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to speak words of exhortation and encouragement to the people. God speaks to us because we are responsible beings; "responsible" means that "we are able to respond." We aren't puppets or robots that are mechanically controlled by another. We have hearts and minds and wills that can respond to God's Word. The people began rebuilding the temple because God's Word stirred their hearts.

Any restoration we experience will involve our response to God's Word. This is why we preach the Word every week. This is why we encourage you to soak in God's Word daily. A wise person once told me, "What we don't do daily, we don't really do." That's a bit of an overstatement, but I think it's essentially true. The things we integrate into our daily habits are the core things that we do. We each need to get to the place where we soak in the Scriptures daily - not because we're supposed to, but because we are desperate for the fruit that only God's Word can produce in our lives. God's Word reminds us of Who He is and what He wants to do in our lives. God's Word reminds us of the response He expects of us. Next week Brian will talk about the centrality of God's Word when he teaches from Ezra 7.

As well, we see here in verse 14 that "they finished building according to . . . the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." In addition to the prophets, God's grace came through the decrees of pagan kings. God used normal historical processes to accomplish the restoration of temple worship in Jerusalem.

Of course this doesn't mean that God ***always*** wants to work through human institutions. In Ezra 8:22-23 that Ezra refused to ask for a military escort because he didn't want to give the impression that God couldn't protect him; in that circumstance, they sensed that God's protection would come exclusively in response to their fasting and prayer.

But Ezra 5 and 6 tell us that ***sometimes*** God's grace comes to us in the most ordinary of ways. Sometimes we experience God's restoring grace through ordinary, common relationships and structures. This is reflected in Scriptures such as James 1:17 which says:

17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

The decree from Cyrus allowing the people to return and rebuild was a good gift from God. The decree from Darius that required Tattenai to supply all the building materials for the temple was a good gift from God. If it's a good gift, it is from God. This observation suggests that ***as we trust God to restore some area of our relationship with Him, we should look for God's grace everywhere.***

We shouldn't lecture God and try to dictate how He should deliver the grace He's promised. After all, He has promised that if we draw near to Him He'll give us the grace we need. But in effect our attitudes and reactions sometimes say to Him, "God, I know

you're wise and powerful and omni-everything, but this is the exact type of grace I need. . . . and here's how You need to deliver it. . . ." Typically we want God to show up in some "supernatural" way - in a way that can only be interpreted as "from God." If the Jews in Jerusalem had told Tattenai, "Sorry, but no pagan king is going to give us stones and timber and animals to sacrifice," they would have missed the grace of God.

I think that much of the time we unconsciously accept that God's grace comes through normal processes and human agency. We pray for healing AND we go to the doctor and take medicine. Just yesterday our daughter Rose texted Brenda and me saying that she had a migraine headache and wanted to feel better (they were in Colorado about to go whitewater rafting). She said she'd taken some medicine and drank a bunch of water. But she wanted us to pray that she'd feel better. Brenda and I stopped and prayed for Rose. Less than an hour later we got another text that said, "Believe it or not my migraine is already feeling MUCH better!"

Was it the prayer that brought her relief? or the water? or the medicine that was available because of the good work done by researchers, lab techs, factory workers, truck drivers, and store clerks (who may or may not have been Christians)? We don't need to know the answer to that question because God can deliver His grace however He wants.

Since you and I desperately need the grace of God for restoration in various areas of our lives, and since God's grace can come from anywhere, we should pray/seek God AND we should keep our eyes open. We should be on the lookout for God's grace everywhere we go. Here are some of the ways that I have experienced restoring grace:

- Conversations. Much of the grace we receive comes through the words of others. You might even receive grace in a conversation this morning.
- Music. Sometimes a line from a song is exactly the word I need to think correctly.
- Counseling. People who are skilled in listening and providing perspective.
- Movies. If you're like me, you sometimes have "unexpected tears" that come while watching a movie. That's a clue that God is stirring something within me.
- Kindness of people.

So when it comes to the restoration you need, seek God and hear His Word, but also keep your eyes open for other ways that He is giving you grace. When you notice His grace, respond with thanksgiving and with faith.