

Lesson 10

Last week we read 4:11-16, which is a letter that the surrounding adversaries of the Jews wrote to King Artaxerxes. Recall that the section between verses 4 and 24 is a parenthesis in which Ezra looks forward in time up until his own day and gives examples of how the surrounding people had caused trouble for the Jews. Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes (the husband of Esther), who was the son of Darius the Great. It was during Artaxerxes' reign that Ezra and Nehemiah returned, and the evidence suggests that this letter was written between those two returns.

The word "Jews" in verse 12 is interesting. Today we use that word to refer to the entire Hebrew ethnicity, but that was not always the case. The word itself comes from Judah, just one of the twelve tribes, and later came to apply to the two Southern tribes, which also included Benjamin. (Simeon was also located in the South, but that tribe was divided and scattered and eventually absorbed into Judah. Jacob had said in Genesis 49:7 that Simeon would be divided and scattered.) Here in verse 12, the word "Jew" applies to entirety of the race, and it may have been one of the first such uses of the word.

Three different words for taxes are used in verse 13. (Some things never change!) They refer to a monetary tax, a payment in kind (oil, grain, etc.), and a duty tax. After his costly campaign against the Greeks, Artaxerxes could not afford to overlook any revenue. The opposition played on the king's fears that he might lose revenue or perhaps even lose the whole western province (verse 16). Of course, there is no mention of their true motives, which were *not* to help the king collect taxes or keep his kingdom intact!

Estimates suggest that between 20 to 35 million dollars worth of taxes were collected annually by the Persian king. The Fifth Satrapy, which included Palestine, had to pay the smallest amount of the western satrapies. The Persians took much of the gold and silver coins and melted them down to be stored as bullion. Very little of the taxes returned to benefit the provinces. (Again, not much has changed!)

The phrase "we have maintenance from the king's palace" in verse 14 is literally "we have eaten the salt of the palace," which is how the ESV renders it. Salt was often used to seal covenants, and thus came to symbolize loyalty. "Eating the salt of" was an idiom for "being in the service of" or "receiving a salary from." Our word "salary" comes from the Latin *salarium*, which means "salt money."

The Persian kings considered themselves the successors of the Babylonian kings, which is why the Babylonian kings are referred to as their fathers or predecessors in verse 15.

The book of records in verse 15 will play a major role in the book of Esther. What would it contain that is relevant to this letter? Many revolts by the Jews! Those by Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and possibly even by Hezekiah. In short, this book would not have helped the Jewish cause – and we know that it did not help their cause. Verse 19 will tell us that these records were behind the response that came back from the king.

One commentary calls verse 16 an absurd exaggeration – that rebuilding the walls around

Jerusalem could somehow result in the king losing the entire Trans-Euphrates province – and perhaps it was. But perhaps we should keep in mind the “mustard seed” of Matthew 13:31 that Daniel prophesied would sweep away all of the kingdoms of this earth!

Ezra 4:17-22

17 Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and unto the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time. 18 The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me. 19 And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein. 20 There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them. 21 Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me. 22 Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?

Verses 17-22 give us the king’s reply to the letter in verses 11-16. He apparently believes the threats against his reign are genuine, and he orders that the rebuilding be stopped. (Letters took about a week to travel back and forth between Samaria and Persia.) As we suggested, one reason the king took the threats seriously was likely the brewing trouble down in Egypt.

But this response by Artaxerxes raises the question of contradictory orders—how could this be the same king who later sends Nehemiah back to rebuild the walls?

The answer is in verse 21—the king said that the city would not be rebuilt “until another commandment shall be given from me.” Without that providential addition, Nehemiah would have had a difficult time gaining the king’s approval for his plans to rebuild. Esther 8:8 and Daniel 6:8 tell us that “an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked.”

The situation that moved Nehemiah to pray and act may have been the same events described here.

Ezra 4:23

23 Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power.

In verse 22, the king ordered the Jewish adversaries to “take heed now that ye fail not to do this” act of stopping the rebuilding. That is one order he certainly did not need to worry about being followed! Verse 23 tells us that they showed no slackness at all in obeying the king’s command—they went in haste to do so. (But isn’t that always the way with troublemakers! They are seldom slothful!)

By force and power they caused the rebuilding to end. They likely also destroyed the work that had already been done, which may be the destruction reported in Nehemiah 1:3—"the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." Notice that the king had told them only to halt the rebuilding—he had not given them permission to destroy what had already been rebuilt.

Ezra 4:24

24 Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The word "then" at the beginning of verse 24 sounds as if this verse is describing what happened after verse 23, but that can't be the case since Darius in verse 24 reigned *before* Artaxerxes. Instead, as we discussed earlier, verses 6-23 should have parentheses or brackets around them. That parenthetical statement was inserted to show the real attitude of those who offered their help in verse 2 and to show the depth of their adversity against the Jews. Verse 24 is picking up from verse 5 (which also mentions Darius).

Thus, the work that started under King Cyrus has now ceased due to the opposition of the Jews' neighbors. That work would remain halted through the remainder of Cyrus' reign and through the reigns of Cambyses II and Smerdis. It would not begin again until the second year of Darius the Great's reign, which would be in 520—the same year that Haggai and Zechariah began to preach about the people's neglect of the temple rebuilding project. It would be completed five year later in 515.

This date in verse 24 is significant. During his first two years, Darius fought numerous battles against nine rebels, as recounted in his famous Behistun Inscription. Only after the stabilization of the Persian Empire could efforts to rebuild the temple be permitted.

Darius consolidated the administration of the vast Persian Empire, setting up satraps, introducing coinage, and establishing the famous royal road from Susa to Sardis and a system of mounted couriers, whose description by Herodotus forms the motto of the U.S. postal system – "These are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed."

Chapter 4 ends on a discouraging note – "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem." We will see a change of heart in Chapter 5, and, as with all such changes of heart, it will begin with the proclamation of God's word.

Ezra 5:1-2

Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. 2 Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.

There is a jump in time between the beginning of Ezra 4 and the beginning of Ezra 5. Work on the temple has now been stopped for about 16 years. How do we know that? The previous verse from Chapter 4 tells us that we are now in the second year of King Darius, which is 520 BC. Also, we can look at the book of Haggai, who is mentioned in verse 1. Haggai 1:1 begins with the same date as 4:24 – “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month.”

At the beginning of Chapter 4, we were in the reign of Cyrus. At the beginning of Chapter 5, we are now in the reign of Darius. The two Persian kings in between, Cambyses II and Smerdis, have come and gone. Cambyses died on his way back from Egypt rushing to remove the supposed imposter, Smerdis, who was soon killed by Darius the Great, who then took the throne. The Behistun Inscription shows Darius with his foot on Smerdis. When Chapter 5 opens, we are in the second year of Darius’ reign.

It seems that the people had used the opposition as an excuse to do nothing for God’s house, and instead had turned their focus to their own houses. They had given in to the fear we saw in 3:3 and to the discouragement we saw in 4:4-5.

“Discouragement bred idleness, which in turn gave birth to worldliness. Is the same true of ourselves? We ought periodically to ask ourselves questions such as, ‘Do I have the same fervour for the Lord’s work that I had when first converted, or has the rot of disillusionment and worldliness eaten its way into my soul?’ In days gone by the Bible was avidly read and prayer a delight. Once the prayer meeting was never missed and preaching was food to our souls, but now worldliness has drained away spiritual vitality. Worldliness is a constant temptation to Christians living in a materialistic age.”

We find from Haggai and Zechariah that the people had set aside spiritual concerns in favor of physical concerns. (This is just another example of the timeless messages of the Old Testament prophets. Yes, the prophets spoke to a specific people about specific problems, but their messages are as relevant today as they were when they were delivered.)

What was the cure for that fear? What was the cure for that discouragement? Simple – the bold proclamation of the word of God. Haggai and Zechariah declared God’s word to the people, and, as we will see, it woke them from their stupor and cured their fear and discouragement. If we experience fear and discouragement today, the solution is the same – the bold proclamation of God’s word.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 2 are the same two leaders we have seen before. They are mentioned many times in Haggai and Zechariah, and, as we have discussed, Zechariah uses them as a figure of the perfect priest/king who was to come.

Haggai and Zechariah show that Zerubbabel was an important leader and refer to him as “governor of Judah.” Thus, it seems strange that he disappears from Ezra’s narrative and is not even mentioned in Ezra’s description of the completion of the temple. Some have conjectured that Zerubbabel was involved in a rebellion and was removed by the Persians. Some even suggest that Zechariah’s prophecies about the coming priest-king may have caused some to push him forward as the messiah in such a rebellion. But that is all just conjecture, and neither Haggai nor Zechariah speaks against the Persian government. A more likely answer is that Zerubbabel died before the

temple was completed, but we don't know for sure.

Let's pause for a moment and consider the two prophets who are mentioned in verse 1 – Haggai and Zechariah. Their preaching was so effective that work on the temple resumed almost immediately.

“The stimulus of the prophetic word and the energetic response of the leaders of the community are a powerful example of what God's people can accomplish when challenged. ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’ (Prov 29:18). But clear divine guidance powerfully proclaimed will move God's people to action and accomplishment, to his honor and glory.”

Isaiah 55:11 says: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” But for that to work today, we must proclaim the word.

Haggai and Zechariah each, of course, has his own book in the Bible, and the book of Ezra should not be studied apart from those two books. Let's look at the messages of those two books.

What was the message of Haggai?

Haggai began his ministry two months before Zechariah (compare Hag. 1:1 with Zech. 1:1). Haggai preached four sermons within the space of three months in 520 B.C. and then disappeared from public view. His short ministry was certainly a productive one!

We don't know too much about Haggai, but Haggai 2:3 might suggest that Haggai had himself seen the original temple, in which case Haggai would now be at least in his 70's and possibly older. That would also mean that Haggai had undertaken the difficult trip back to Jerusalem when he might have stayed comfortably behind in Babylon. But as we read Haggai we will see that Haggai would have been the last person to place his own comfort ahead of his obedience to God. His message to the people was that they were placing their own comfort and prosperity ahead of God's temple.

Was God upset because of their prosperity? We know that he was not. Why? Because God had commanded them to prosper while they were in Babylon. (Jeremiah 29:5-7) God wants his people to prosper, but for God's people that prosperity should naturally lead to a heart of gratitude that overflows with obedience and faithfulness. For some, however, the opposite happens – their prosperity leads to a heart of pride in which they exalt their own accomplishments and forget God.

These people had returned to Jerusalem with excitement and fervor, but then they had had built their homes and businesses and had settled down into a regular routine that did not include God. They had abandoned their original commitment, and Haggai proclaimed a message from God calling them back.

A central message of Haggai is that the people had developed a serious problem with prioritizing. Were they a focused people? Absolutely! They were focused on themselves! Haggai wanted them to focus on God. Yes, sometimes our problem is a lack of focus, but at other times our problem is that we are focused on the wrong thing.

Haggai wanted the people of Israel to have a changed heart, which he knew would result in changed behavior. Too often we reverse that process – we seek changed behavior in the hope that it will result in a changed heart. That works sometimes, but the other way always works. If we change our heart into a heart of obedience and faithfulness to God, then a change in behavior will always come as a result.

The theme of Haggai is captured very well by its most famous verse – “Consider your ways!”

Haggai 1:5-9 Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. 6 Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. 7 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. ... (9b) Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

We earlier looked at Haggai 2:6-9 and saw how those verses looked toward a time when the temple that was now being rebuilt would again be destroyed, but would be replaced by something eternal and immovable.

In Haggai 2:6-7, we read:

“For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will **shake** the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will **shake** all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.”

And then turn to Hebrews 12:26-29 –

“Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I **shake** not the earth only, but also heaven. 27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are **shaken**, as of things that are made, that those things which **cannot be shaken** may remain. 28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which **cannot be moved**, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

And what is this “shaking” in Haggai 2 and Hebrews 12 describing? Turn to Matthew 24:29 –

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be **shaken**.”

Verse 34 of Matthew 24 confirms that verse 29 is describing a **first century event** – the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in AD 70.

And what replaced that temple? Hebrews 12:28 just told us – “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved.” Verse 27 tells us that the church cannot be shaken. That immovable unshakable kingdom of Hebrews is the indestructible kingdom of Daniel 2:44 –

“And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

This rebuilt temple in Ezra was never intended to be permanent, but rather would be replaced by something that was permanent and indestructible and immovable – the church of Christ.

The church was established in Acts 2, and the Jewish temple was destroyed about 40 years later in AD 70, just as Jesus had described in Matthews 24. “Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)

Haggai 2 also contains an important lesson when it comes to purity. Ivory Soap may advertize that it is 99 and 44/100 pure, but there is a word for that – “impure.” If you start with a vat of sewage and add a teaspoon of pure water, you still have a vat of sewage. If you start with a vat of pure water and add a teaspoon of sewage, what do you have? A vat of sewage.

Haggai 2:11-14 proclaims that message: “If one bear holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and with his skirt do touch bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any meat, shall it be holy? And the priests answered and said, No. Then said Haggai, If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean.”

Haggai ends with a beautiful Messianic prophecy of the perfect king that was to come from the line of King David, through Zerubbabel.

Haggai 2:21-23 Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth; 22 And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. 23 In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts.

What was the message of Zechariah?

We know a little more about Zechariah than we do about Haggai. While Haggai was likely an old man, Zechariah was a young man, as he is referred to as such in Zechariah 2:4. The first verse gives us the name of his father and grandfather. Why? Because those names give us the theme of the entire book!

Zechariah’s name means “God Remembers.” The name of his father, Berechiah, means “God Blesses.” His grandfather’s name, Iddo, means “in time.” Put them together and you have the theme of Zechariah, God remembers and blesses his people at his set time. And Zechariah will tell these people about God’s greatest blessings, which would not come until much later – about 520 years later to be exact.

For some reason Zechariah is a neglected book. Perhaps it is because it is a difficult book. It has many signs and symbols and visions that are hard to understand, and, in fact, it has been called the Apocalypse of the Old Testament. It contains 8 visions by the prophet that are difficult to unravel. The number 8 is interesting in this context, though, because it is symbolic of a new beginning. (A week has 7 days, so the 8th day is the start of a new week.)

The book of Revelation quotes Zechariah about 30 times making Zechariah second only to Ezekiel in that regard. (As a quick aside, sometimes you will see Revelation commentaries that make

statements such as “this language can only mean X.” The problem with that argument is that the language under discussion from Revelation often comes from the Old Testament where it clearly meant something other than what the commentator is saying it must mean in Revelation! If you ever pick up a Revelation commentary that does not spend a great deal of time in the Old Testament, then just put it down! If you ignore either the time frame of Revelation or the Old Testament, then you have no hope of understanding Revelation!)

Difficult or not, there is a very important reason why Zechariah should never be neglected. Zechariah is second only to Isaiah in its number of Messianic prophecies. It is wonderful to think about the returned exiles listening to Zechariah in 520 BC. They were focused on their current situation and the need to restore their temple – and Zechariah was preaching Christ to them! It makes me think of Matthew 12:6 – “But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.”

Here are some of the key prophecies in this short book, and, as I read them, think about the people who first heard them – who they were, where they were, and what they were doing. God lifted the curtain for them to provide a glimpse of the perfect priest-king who was to come – including both his eternal glory and his perfect sacrificial death.

Zechariah 3:8 For, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH.

Zechariah 6:12-13 And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Zechariah 11:12-13 And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prised at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the LORD.

Zechariah 12:10 And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

Zechariah 13:7 Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.

Zechariah 14:8 And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.

Zechariah proclaimed Christ to God's people 520 years before Christ came into this world – and some of the descendants of those people were ready and waiting when that great day came.

Luke 2:25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.