

## God's Will Is Done

Ezra 6:1-15

As we learned last week, the people of God had, after some 16 years, finally gotten started on the project of rebuilding the Temple. They were doing what God wanted them to do, what His prophets had told them to do. They had permission from the governing authorities for their project – in fact, King Cyrus had allowed them to return from exile precisely for this reason. And yet, as soon as they got going again, they ran into serious bureaucratic roadblocks. The local governor was suspicious, and he fired off a letter to King Darius to try to put a stop to their efforts. They just couldn't seem to catch a break.

Maybe you can relate to these folks in their frustration and disappointment. Maybe you've been trying to do the right thing for a long time, and wonder why it always seems so hard. Maybe you've tried to run an honest business or maintain a struggling institution or repair a broken relationship, with little success. And maybe you're wondering, "I'm trying to do God's will, so why doesn't He make things easier?"

Well, the sobering truth is that on this side of glory, we'll never know how everything fits together in God's plans. Sometimes, we can get a glimpse of what God is up to, especially after some time and distance provide us with perspective. But some things happen to us or our loved ones that never will make sense.

Nevertheless, today's passage should give us some comfort in the midst of our difficulties. For in the first place, we find that God is able to bring great good even out of the hardest circumstances we encounter.

That was certainly true for those who were trying to rebuild the Temple. Yes, Tattenai's letter to King Darius was yet another roadblock that God's people had to face. Yes, Tattenai's letter threatened to bring the whole project to a halt once again. But when Tattenai's suspicions came to King Darius' attention, what was the result? Darius had the research in the archives done. He found that Cyrus had done exactly what God's people had told Tattenai, permitting them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Cyrus had indeed given them permission to take many gold and silver vessels back to Jerusalem, where they could be used for their original purpose. In short, Darius' research confirmed the claims of God's people and vindicated them.

Ah, but his research discovered something else, something that the people don't seem to have fully understood when they had set out for Jerusalem so many years before – at least, it wasn't spelled out in Cyrus' proclamation recorded in chapter 1. For it turns out that Cyrus had not only given them permission to return and build the Temple – no, he had also said that he would pay for the project himself, out of the royal treasury.

Now, when Darius read about such a generous offer, he did backtrack a bit. Instead of issuing a check on his personal bank account, he said that the money should come from the taxes assessed in the Province Beyond the River, the area in which Jerusalem was located. But to God's people, that didn't matter. The bottom line was that the Persian government had agreed not only to permit the project to go forward, but to bankroll it as well.

But here's the important part for us – it was precisely the opposition of Tattenai that led to the discovery of this royal grant. That means that if God's people hadn't first faced a frustrating bureaucratic hassle, they wouldn't have gotten any of that government support for their project. And so we see that God brought great good out of opposition to His people.

And He continues to do the same thing today. We've heard our missionaries tell us about the terrible violence taking place in Syria and Iraq. We've heard about how those ISIS thugs are targeting Christians, driving them out of their homelands, places where their ancestors had lived for thousands of years. But we've also seen that because these refugees have come into places where the gospel can be freely proclaimed, many of them have come to faith in Christ.

And the same sort of thing is true for us, albeit on a less dramatic scale. It's easy to lose hope when opposition comes our way. It's easy to let roadblocks and the hassles make us doubt God's call on our lives. It's easy to let frustrations convince us that we are completely off track. But if we are seeking to live our lives according to God's Word, and if we are trying to accomplish things that are in agreement with His Will, we need to remember what God's people learned in the days when the Second Temple was built: God continues to bring great good out of the most difficult circumstances.

But there's another important thing we can learn from this story: If God can bring great good out of hard situations, He also chooses to use imperfect people to accomplish His purposes. This was certainly the case where it came to Cyrus, the king who allowed the people to return to Jerusalem in order to build the Temple. After all, we have no reason to believe that Cyrus had converted to Judaism, so why did he permit such a project to go forward? And why did he insist on paying for it? Well, he was probably engaging in pure politics, reversing the harsh resettlement program of the Assyrians and Babylonians, encouraging people to worship their own gods in order to build loyalty to his new multi-cultural empire.

And Darius probably had similar motives. He wasn't very closely related to Cyrus at all, so he had to seize power by defeating another rival for the throne. As a result, during the early years of his reign, his empire was convulsed by rebellions. So, completing a project that Cyrus had begun would link his name to his famous predecessor. And solidifying the allegiance of God's people who happened to be living in a strategic area where three continents came together, well, that couldn't hurt.

That's not to say that Cyrus and Darius didn't have religious reasons for their actions. They were pagans after all, believers in many different gods. As such, they saw little harm in encouraging the many different peoples of their empire to worship lots of different gods – as long as they said some prayers for the Persian King as well. Darius makes this point explicitly in verse 10, and he is even willing to devote some additional tax money to pay for sacrifices to be offered on his behalf in the Temple once it is completed.

In sum, we have no reason to believe that either Cyrus or Darius were true worshippers of the One True God – they were more likely just politicians currying favor and hedging their religious bets. As such, they weren't the most likely of instruments God might have chosen to accomplish His will.

But God's people weren't a whole lot better, were they? Oh, unlike those pagan kings, they may have had their theological ducks in a row. They may have known more about Who the true God is, but where it came to putting their faith into action, they didn't have much of an advantage. After all, verse

14 reminds us of what we learned at the beginning of chapter 5 – that God had to send Haggai and Zechariah to chastise and encourage the people to get off of square one after taking a 16 year break from their Temple-building project. They had allowed despair and discouragement to stop them from doing what they knew God wanted them to do.

But we see this theme running all the way through the Scriptures, don't we? Jacob deceived his brother and stole his father's blessing, but God chose him instead of Esau to be the father of His people. Moses was a murderer, but God chose him to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. David killed Uriah and committed adultery with Bathsheba, but God chose him to be the ancestor of Jesus.

And the same thing is true in the New Testament as well, isn't it? Sure, Judas betrayed Jesus for money, but did any of the rest of the disciples stick with Him when He was arrested? That same night, Peter denied Jesus three times, but God chose him along with the rest of the disciples to be powerful witnesses to the truth of the resurrection. Paul persecuted the Church, even consenting to the murder of Christians, but God chose him to carry the good news of Jesus all the way to Rome.

In short, God chose to use all these flawed, imperfect people to accomplish His will. Even though Cyrus was a pagan, the very first verse of this book tells us that God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to let the people return and build the Temple. Then in chapter 1 verse 5, we learn that God moved the spirits of those who made the long journey back to Jerusalem, even though many more stayed behind. And once the project bogged down, God spoke to Haggai and Zechariah to get the people moving again. None of these human actors were anywhere close to perfect, but God still chose to work His good and perfect will through their lives.

And we need to take this lesson to heart, don't we? For if difficult circumstances can make us doubt God's power to help us, when we look at our own weaknesses, it is also easy for us to doubt whether God would want to use us at all. When we look at the continuing sin in our lives, it's easy for us to doubt that God could ever love people like us. But if God could use pagan kings and fearful, reluctant people to build the Second Temple, He can use people like us to accomplish His purposes today.

And that brings us to our third and most important point. For if God brings great good out of difficult circumstances, and if God chooses to use imperfect people to accomplish His will, He remains the sovereign over all the events of history. We've already seen how God stirred up the hearts of Cyrus and many of the Jews to get the project started. And last week in chapter 5, we saw how God's eye was upon His people so that even while Tattenai sent his accusatory letter to the Persian King, the people were able to keep working on the Temple walls while they awaited a response. And in today's passage, we see the whole building project summarized in verse 14: Yes, the people built and finished their work according to the commands of King Cyrus and Darius – and Artaxerxes is thrown in for good measure, because he would later permit the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. But the verse says first that it was the commandment of the God of Israel that made it all possible.

And isn't it interesting that even a pagan king could make this point, whether he meant to or not? In chapter 1 verse 2, Cyrus said, "All the kingdoms of the earth, the Lord God of heaven has given me, and He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem." How true, how true. Since God is sovereign over all the events of history, there was nothing that Cyrus or Darius, or Tattenai or his sidekick Shethar-boznai, or even the sixteen-year-long delay of His people could do to stop His command from being obeyed, to stop His Temple from being built.

And there's nothing that anyone can do to stop His new Temple from being built either. Just as John saw in our responsive reading this morning, God's New Temple will be made up of a great multitude of people that no one can number, from all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, people who have come through the great tribulation, who have faced tremendous opposition. And John is careful to say that they have no righteousness in themselves – instead they have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. In other words, it is only because they have trusted in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus to pay for all their sins that they, that we have been made holy, fit to serve God in His Temple.

So, no matter how imperfect we may be, let us join in the service of the saints today. No matter what tribulation, what opposition we may face, let us endure. If there is no human king who can stop us, let us not allow any disappointment to deter us. Let us rise up and build the Temple, knowing that God's sovereign power cannot be thwarted, and God's sovereign will cannot be denied.