

Off of Square One  
Ezra 5:1-17

Most of this chapter is depressingly similar to the end of chapter 4, with another suspicious Persian official being concerned about the effort to rebuild the Temple. And he wasn't just being paranoid – historians tell us that the first two years of Darius' reign had indeed been marked by rebellions all over the Persian empire. So it was logical for Tattenai to wonder: couldn't all those huge stones and beams on top of a hill in Jerusalem just as easily be used for fortifications as for a Temple? And so, just as we saw in chapter 4, he fired off a letter to the Persian King, trying to put a stop to the efforts of God's people.

So, why do things turn out so differently in today's passage? Why don't the people give in to discouragement and despair as they had so many times before? After all, it had been 16 years since the events described at the end of chapter 3, when the foundations of the Temple had been laid. So why did God's people not allow themselves to be deterred by this latest round of bureaucratic opposition?

Well, it wasn't so much what the people themselves did. No, it turns out that God was the One Who broke through the 16-year-long impasse, and He did it by sending the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to speak to the people, just as verse 1 tells us. So it was God's Word that both challenged and encouraged the people to make a fresh start on the project.

So, what did the people learn from Haggai and Zechariah that got them moving off of square one? We find several clues in their answer to the Persian bureaucrats found in verses 11 through 16. And given what we learned when we studied through Haggai's prophecy last spring, the first point should come as no surprise – the people of God were finally ready to move forward because they had become willing to admit their sin.

Remember, Tattenai the governor had asked them why they were building a Temple, so they had to begin their answer with the fact that the first Temple had in fact been destroyed. And why had that happened? In verse 12 they admit that their ancestors had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, making Him angry by worshipping false gods. That was why God had given their ancestors into the hands of the Babylonians, allowing King Nebuchadnezzar to destroy the Temple and carry all the people away into exile.

But their ancestors weren't the only ones who were sinful, were they? For why were they, that particular generation building the temple? In other words, why was the project being undertaken at that time, during the reign of Darius? Well, it was precisely because they had not completed the project earlier, even though the previous Persian King, King Cyrus, had allowed them to return to Jerusalem specifically for that purpose. They admitted this much in verse 16.

It was this failure of their own, this sin of delaying the work of rebuilding, which Haggai had pointed out to the people in the prophecy He had given to them that very same year. Why, he had wondered, had they not moved forward with building the Temple when they had found it so easy to build fine houses for themselves, even fancy houses lined with cedar? Clearly, they had been more interested in their own projects than in God's plans. Clearly, they had been putting their own glory ahead of God's glory.

Now, before we go any further, we need to ask ourselves if the same thing could be true for us. Before we move on to see how God's people responded to the prophets in today's passage, before we see how they began once again to build the Temple in their day, we need to stop and ask ourselves – do we also need to confess our sin before we can move forward on our own Temple-building project? Has our sin been part of the reason that our own Temple, the body of Christ in our area, lies neglected?

Now, I know, we live in the buckle of the Bible belt, and it seems like everyone around here belongs to a church. Indeed, Gallup says that 75% of Mississippians claim to be Protestants, of one stripe or another. But in the same polls, when it comes to regular church attendance, only 47% admit to regular weekly attendance. It turns out that lots of folks claim to be Christians, but aren't really plugged in to any particular congregation.

Now, how can that be? There have been Presbyterians and Baptists and Methodists and Episcopalians living and working in this area for well over 200 years. So, how can there be so much work left to do? How can there still be so many people who haven't yet acknowledged Jesus as Savior and submitted to Him as Lord? Why is so much work left to do on the Temple, the Body of Christ in this place?

In Haggai's time, the problem was one of priorities – the people of God were more interested in themselves than in God. They thought it was just too hard to build the Temple. They were facing too much opposition, so they turned inward, becoming more concerned with their own houses, their own families, than they were with the House of God, the family of faith.

So, what about us? What about our priorities? Where it comes to our own prayer lists, where are the lost people all around us – at the top, or somewhere near the bottom? After we devote time to our jobs and our families and our friends, how much time do we have left to reach out to those who don't yet know the Lord Jesus? And let's go ahead and acknowledge the elephant in the room: how interested are we in having people of different races or different socio-economic levels joining us for worship on Sundays? How willing are we to reach out to those who are culturally different – including younger people with different tastes in clothes and music – in order to build the Temple, the Body of Christ? And if not, do we really have room to criticize those ancient slackers in their cedar-lined houses?

But Haggai hadn't only spoken words of condemnation – he had also encouraged the people that the Second Temple they needed to build would in fact be more glorious than the first. And the prophet Zechariah had told them the same thing, adding many details of how this would come to pass.

For example, next month we'll celebrate Palm Sunday. We'll recall how Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem surrounded by a tremendous crowd singing His praise, calling Him the Son of David, and thereby claiming Him as their king. But we will also remember that Jesus came into the city in a surprising way – riding on a donkey's colt. He did this precisely in order to fulfill one of the prophecies of Zechariah, a prophecy given to those who had ceased their efforts to build the Temple: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."(Zech. 9:9 ESV)

So that's why Zechariah joined Haggai in urging the people to build the Temple: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Let your hands be strong, you who in these days have been hearing these words from

the mouth of the prophets who were present on the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built.” (Zech. 8:9 ESV). Zechariah urged them to let their hands be strong and get busy with the work of building, because it was to this Temple that the Messiah would one day come, even if He would be riding on a donkey’s colt.

And Zechariah told them that the coming King would be the One to restore the relationship between God and His people. And he was right, for in coming to them, Jesus would indeed bring the very presence of the Lord: “Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the LORD. And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. And the LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.” (Zech. 2:10-12 ESV)

So, what was the result of Haggai’s challenge? What happened when the Word of God confronted the people with their sin? What was the result of Haggai and Zechariah’s encouragement? What happened when the people heard the promises of God and believed them?

Well, in the first place, instead of continuing to focus on their problems and difficulties, they started remembering the blessings God had already given them. By God’s grace, King Cyrus had given them permission to come back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Moreover, King Cyrus had also returned to them the gold and silver articles that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen when he had destroyed Jerusalem. In other words, instead of focusing on their political helplessness, instead of lamenting their poverty, and instead of engaging in overt rebellion as the Persian governor obviously suspected them of doing, they gave Cyrus the credit he deserved, and they got busy doing what he had allowed them to do – building the Temple of the Lord.

And focusing on the blessings they had given them a fresh boldness in the face of their adversaries. Instead of trying to hide from the authorities, they bravely told them the names of the builders. And instead of cowering in fear, as they had done for 16 long years, they got back to work on the Temple, just as God and Cyrus had told them to do. They knew they were in the right, and they challenged the governor to look in the records and find out for himself.

But there was one more reason the people were able to be so brave and so busy: the prophets had given them a fresh confidence in God’s power. The prophets had reminded them that their God is the God of Heaven and Earth. And this was His house they were building – they were servants of God doing God’s work, accomplishing God’s will.

And once the people determined to stop letting their adversaries get the best of them, once they started focusing on their blessings instead of their problems, once they stopped being so afraid of human authorities and placed their confidence in God, once they set out to obey God’s will, doing what they knew good and well God wanted them to do, it turns out that God made their obedience possible. Verse 5 tells us that God’s eye was upon them, and He kept the Persian bureaucrats from being able to stop them. And as we’ll see at the end of chapter 6, God indeed made it possible for the people to accomplish His plans, to finish building the Temple.

So, what about us? Sure we’ve got problems, but we’ve also got blessings. God has placed all of us in the middle of an extended social network, full of people who need to know Christ or know Him

better. Unlike the people in today's passage, we have political freedom, including the freedom to tell people about Christ. Many of us are retired or have flexible schedules – since we don't have to punch a clock, we have the freedom to build relationships with those who most need Christ.

But most importantly, just like the people in today's passage, God has given us His Word, not just through the prophets, but the Living Word of Jesus Christ Himself. And God's Living Word has told us that it is God's will for us to build the Temple by making disciples – that's what Jesus told us to do in our responsive reading, isn't it? And He promised to give us the power to bear witness to Him, the power of the Holy Spirit Himself Who lives within all those who love Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord.

So, should we have any less confidence in our God, Who created Heaven and Earth? Should we be any less sure of His protection and blessing as we seek to do His will? Should we allow any opposition to prevent us from building His Temple?