

From the Pulpit of



Sovereign and Sustaining

No. 5

Ezra 5:1-6:22

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Series: Ezra

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Jesus once said in Matthew 16:18, "...I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Those who have been redeemed by faith through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are part of the church. No amount of satanic persecution shall stop the building project. God will have a people who worship Him. This has been true historically as God always has a people who worship Him even in the Old Testament. In His sovereign and providential control, He will make sure that He sustains and builds His people even as they pass through suffering and persecution. Today we are going to get a glimpse of His sovereign and sustaining work of His people as we go back to the book of Ezra.

God's people had been exiled to Babylon to their sin, but now they were returning to Jerusalem to worship once again. Main Theme: God doesn't scrap His wayward people, but restores and renews them so they can worship Him. ****The way God restores and renews comes through His sovereign and sustaining work in history that we are going to see this morning.****

Last week in chapter 4 we saw the opposition of a syncretistic people (Samaritans) who opposed the work of God. They even bribed some officials to 'frustrate their purpose' so that the Jews stopped working on the Temple all during the reign of Cyrus and even into the reign of Darius. ***This work stoppage on the Temple lasted for approximately 16-20 years.*** What's called for from the people of God during times of trials is faithful patience. It's also been called "the long obedience of waiting." Someone once said that sometimes times you have to 'wait in the unplanned place and endure the unplanned pace.'¹ Anyone in here currently waiting in an unplanned place and enduring an unplanned pace? I recently read a good book by Betsy Childs Howard intended for women entitled "Seasons of Waiting: Walking by Faith When Dreams are Delayed." She describes the sometimes painful seasons of waiting to get married, waiting to have children, waiting to be healed, waiting for a prodigal child to return or a marriage to reconcile. Are some of you waiting in that unplanned place and enduring the unplanned pace? How can you keep going? Patient faithfulness is fueled when you see that God is sovereign and sustaining His people. God is up to something while you wait and endure.

As chapter 5 opens, we are in the second year of the new king, Darius, and we find the prophets stirring up the Israelites to get back to work. Ezra 5:1: "Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name

¹ John Piper

of the God of Israel who was over them.” Part of their prophesy centered around the Israelites getting back to work on the Temple. In chapter 1 of the book of Haggai, the prophet rebukes them for living in their ‘paneled houses’ while the Temple ‘lies in ruins’ (Haggai 1:4). God had restored them to the land so that they could worship Him and part of that meant rebuilding the Temple. The people were to quit cowering in fear and focusing on their prosperity and get back to their main priority of working on the Temple of God.

The leaders and the people responded to the Word of God. Ezra 5:2: “Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.” This is quick obedience by the leaders “Zerubbabel and Jeshua” and notice that ‘the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.’

Verses 3-4: “At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: ‘Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’ They also asked them this: ‘What are the names of the men who are building this building?’” Tattenai is the ‘governor’ who is in charge of the province and exerting his rightful authority. Some have suggested that with the reign of a new king that there has been unrest in the kingdom over the last two years. Now the governor sees the Jews building a Temple and he wants to know two things: 1. Who authorized the construction? 2. What are the names of the workers? He’s checking for permits. I’d be so discouraged if I were a worker. The work has been halted for almost two decades and when it finally gets going the authorities question the work. But they kept on working as verse 5 explains: “But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.” God was sovereign over the whole operation as His ‘eye’ was on them and blessing them with continued work while the inquiry was made. God in His providence was sustaining the work.

Providence means that God was caring for them and orchestrating the details for their good and His glory. One scholar, Dale Ralph Davis, sees these two chapters displaying God’s Providence and Sovereignty.² The three aspects of God’s providence that can be seen are His Restraining Providence, Disciplinary Providence and Extravagant Providence. So far we have seen God’s sustaining “Restraining Providence.” It’s seen in ‘what God does not allow to happen.’³ God does not allow the work on the Temple to stop while the inquiry is made. As humans we naturally focus on the calamities like the automobile accident, the cancer diagnosis and the people who make decisions that wound us. But many times in our lives we have a variety of threats and trouble that do not come our way. The reckless car does not strike, the fatal diagnosis does not come and our bosses, teachers and loved ones make decisions that do not harm us. There is a lot in God’s sovereignty that He does not allow to come your way. Restraining Providence.

While they are working on the Temple an inquiry is made by Tattenai in the form of a letter written to King Darius. Verses 6-10: “This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the governors who were in the province Beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. They sent him a report, in which was written as follows: ‘To Darius the king, all peace. Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and

² Dale Ralph Davis, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” page 3.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” page 3

timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?” We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders.” This is a recap so far but look at what the Israelites say as to their plight; it is an example of “Disciplinary Providence.”⁴ This is where God disciplines His people for their sin. Look at the Israelites reply in verses 11-12: “And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.’” Solomon once built a great Temple but it was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Israelites were exiled to Babylonia. Why? It was because ‘our fathers had angered the God of heaven.’ Interpretation: They worshipped idols and false gods and refused to repent so they were disciplined through destruction and exile. God still disciplines His wayward children today. In His sovereignty He intervenes in history through hardship to bring you back to Him. It is an act of love as Hebrews 12:6 says: “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” Do you believe that some of the hardships in your life are actually discipline from the Lord? To wake you up in your sin and restore you to Himself. Can you recognize them and repent?

On the other side of discipline is restoration for those who repent and are trained by it, as the Israelites continue to explain what happened after the exile. Verses 13-17: “‘However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; and he said to him, “Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.” Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.’ Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.” After the exile was a return and a restoration all in God’s providence as the Temple work resumed. Tettani is now trying to determine if the story is true and the rebuilding was authorized.

Now a search is made for the original permit (decree) and it was found as we see in chapter 6:1-5: “Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: ‘A record. In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis.

its place. You shall put them in the house of God.” Not only was the temple to be rebuilt, but the original articles of gold and silver were to be returned. And here’s the kicker, the ‘royal treasury’ was to pay for it. The pagans were to pay for the worship of God to continue among the Israelites. Wow. You are not going to believe what happens as we move into an example of “Extravagant Providence,” which is God’s hand of blessing. Verses 6-12: “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. Let the work on this house of God alone. (ie. leave them alone – stop messing with them.) Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. (Amazing that the work is billed to the ‘royal revenue.’) And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. (Their sacrifices are even paid for by the Persians as they want to appease the God of the Israelites and have them pray for the ‘king and his sons.’) Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. (That is graphic – impalement and dunghill.) May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

Our God is the God of extravagant providence. Look at the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Evil men put Jesus on the cross and Satan thought the defeat was certain, but it was all part of God’s plan of extravagant providence. On the cross, Jesus bore the wrath of God in the place of sinners, was buried and rose three days later conquering Satan, sin and death. Now through faith in Christ we can experience this extravagant providence of forgiveness, reconciliation with God and life everlasting. Ephesians 3:20: “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us...” That God would save a 19 year-old promiscuous and foul-mouthed man like myself and allow me to marry a faithful woman and to preach His Word is “extravagant providence” in my own life. If you have experienced God’s love through Jesus Christ, you have experienced God’s extravagant providence as well.

Let’s see the Temple get finished. Verses 13-15: “Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.” Check out the double decrees in verse 14: “...They finished their building by the decree of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes.” God’s decree is what matters and he moves the kings to decree to benefit His people. Proverbs 21:1: “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” God works in a mysterious way by using kings for the sustaining and flourishing of His people.

Let's finish up with worship and joy from verses 16-18: "And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses." Worship is reinstated at the house of God through extravagant sacrifices and the sin offering for the forgiveness of sins. The Priesthood is reinstated and all of Israel is unified.

Verses 19-22: "On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." The 'Passover' was celebrated along with the 'Feast of Unleavened Bread.' Those who participated were not only the returning exiles but 'also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel.' Repented people were allowed to worship the Lord. In sovereignty, God incorporated others into His salvation plan. God's extravagant providence includes saving many people. And the people are filled with joy 'for the Lord had made them joyful.' In God's sovereign and sustaining purpose, He blessed His people so they could rebuild and worship.

Conclusion: God is sovereign and sustaining His people so that they can worship Him with joy. The end goal of God's work in the lives of His people is always worship and joy in Him. But the whole project took about 21 years to develop between the laying of the foundation and the completion of the Temple. During that time the people needed to press on with patient faithfulness, or "the obedience of waiting." Sometimes you have to 'wait in the unplanned place and endure the unplanned pace.'⁵ If things aren't clear in your life then just remain patient and faithfully obey the Word of God. God is a turn-around God. Patient faithfulness is fueled when you see that God is sovereign and sustaining His people, including you. May you find joy in God's sovereignty over your life and His sustaining you to worship Him.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, June 12, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.

⁵ John Piper