

Survey of the Bible part 60 **Ezra 4:6 – 6:1-22**

By way of reminder, as we've been going through the book of Ezra we've seen that Ezra was a priest in service to God for the people of God returning to Judah to rebuild the house of God at the decree of king Cyrus as the Lord moved the spirit of Cyrus.

Ezra is recording for us the events of that move and how he and the captives met with opposition from the locals who had taken up residence in and around Jerusalem. And as we saw last time they weren't happy with this as you can well imagine.

What we see in the middle-east today, where there is animosity between the Palestinians and the Jews, is precisely what was going on in Jerusalem some 2500 years ago. Keep in mind that just as the Jews were forced to go to Babylon where they lived as a people group for the next 70 years, taking on some or much of the surrounding customs and language, so too, the non-Jews who moved into the Jerusalem area took up residence and made that place their home for the next 70 years.

And now Cyrus gives a decree to the people of that land stating that not only will he let the Jews return to a land that has not been theirs for the last 70 years, but now all of you who claim and live in that land as your own will now not only let them rebuild the temple to their God, who is not your god, but you will also submit to my decree and allow this rebuild to happen.

Ezra 1:1-3 ^{NAU} Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: ² "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

What does this decree imply to the locals in and around Jerusalem if they don't obey this command from Cyrus?

But as we move through Ezra we see a time frame in which Cyrus is no longer around to enforce his decree. Instead we have a man

by the name of Ahasuerus now in power in that region who is the king of Persia.

Ezra 4:6 ⁶ Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Those writing an accusation against the Jews are the same group who had hired counselors to harass the Jews as they were building the house of the Lord during the days of Cyrus. And so, the opposition never stopped, but now it's going to be taken to a new level as these in opposition will now try to use legal means to stop the work and kick the Jews out.

Since the decree of Cyrus could only stay in effect during the reign of Cyrus it is now an opportunity to re-address the problem with a new ruler, in this case Ahasuerus. But there were others in power in the region during this time who were the equivalent to governors, princes and other types who had authority.

And so, letters went out to all of them including Ahasuerus who, by the way, is the same Ahasuerus we read of in Esther.

^{NAU} **Esther 1:1** Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,

And so, essentially Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, Daniel are all contemporaries of each other and were writing around the same time. And so, there is cross-over between all of the books associated with these folks.

But what we see back in our text is that the people who were writing letters of opposition write a letter to a man by the name of Artaxerxes.

Ezra 4:7 ⁷ And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated *from* Aramaic.

And so, in the confusion of all of these different leaders in different regions we have conflicting interests. But the people who wrote to Artaxerxes knew that he would not be sympathetic to the Jews and the end of Ezra chapter 4 shows this to be true.

Ezra 4:17-24 ¹⁷ Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their

colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of *the provinces* beyond the River: "Peace. And now ¹⁸ the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me. ¹⁹ "A decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it, ²⁰ that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all *the provinces* beyond the River, and that tribute, custom and toll were paid to them. ²¹ "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop *work*, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me. ²² "Beware of being negligent in carrying out this *matter*; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?" ²³ Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms. 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.

So, here we are. The work stops and for all intents and purposes the work of the Lord has been stifled.

Again, how often do we see this even in our own day? A group of people don't like what the children of God have to say about the world and its sin and accountability before a holy God and the good news of how they can be reconciled to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so, they do everything they can do to shut them up.

In countries like Iran, Egypt, Africa they simply kill Christians to shut them up. In countries like America, England, Germany and others they invoke laws to shut them up.

What examples of this do we see in our country?

No prayer in schools. No teaching of creation science in any public school, no gathering in certain homes to have bible study and so on. If they can write letters to the authorities and intimidate them into creating laws that are politically correct in their favor they will do it.

But what is interesting is that even though it was the law of the land at the time of Ezra, not to continue to rebuild the temple, chapter 5 is interesting in that it shows civil disobedience against this law.

Ezra 5:1-2 ^{NAU} 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.

Well, what kind of word from the prophets would cause the Jews to begin to rebuild the temple in the face of a law that clearly says you will not rebuild?

Haggai 1:1-8 ^{NAU} In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, ² "Thus says the LORD of hosts, "This people says, "The time has not come, *even* the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt."'" ³ Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴ "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies* desolate?" ⁵ Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways! ⁶ "You have sown much, but harvest little; *you* eat, but *there is* not *enough* to be satisfied; *you* drink, but *there is* not *enough* to become drunk; *you* put on clothing, but no one is warm *enough*; and he who earns, earns wages *to put* into a purse with holes." ⁷ Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways! ⁸ "Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the LORD.

Zechariah 1:7-21 ⁷ On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, as follows: ⁸ I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine, with red, sorrel and white horses behind him. ⁹ Then I said, "My lord, what are these?" And the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "I will show you what these are." ¹⁰ And the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered and said, "These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth." ¹¹ So they answered the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees and said, "We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet." ¹² Then the angel of the LORD said, "O LORD of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been

indignant these seventy years?" ¹³ The LORD answered the angel who was speaking with me with gracious words, comforting words. ¹⁴ So the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "Proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. ¹⁵ "But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster." ¹⁶ "Therefore thus says the LORD, "I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; My house will be built in it," declares the LORD of hosts, "and a measuring line will be stretched over Jerusalem.'" ¹⁷ "Again, proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "My cities will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.'" ¹⁸ Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, *there were* four horns. ¹⁹ So I said to the angel who was speaking with me, "What are these?" And he answered me, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem." ²⁰ Then the LORD showed me four craftsmen. ²¹ I said, "What are these coming to do?" And he said, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah so that no man lifts up his head; but these *craftsmen* have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations who have lifted up *their* horns against the land of Judah in order to scatter it."

Why then are the sons of Israel rebuilding the temple in light of the fact that the state has issued an official decree that they do not rebuild?

Because when God speaks all other authorities take a back seat. And you and I in Christ are also obligated to speak and act as people of the Lord who must obey God rather than men when it comes to His clear teaching delivered at the hands of His prophets and apostles.

Acts 5:12-32 ¹² At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. ¹³ But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*, ¹⁵ to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. ¹⁶ Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed. ¹⁷ But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and

they were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, ²⁰ "Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." ²¹ Upon hearing *this*, they entered into the temple about daybreak and *began* to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent *orders* to the prison house for them to be brought. ²² But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, ²³ saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside." ²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple *guard* and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. ²⁵ But someone came and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" ²⁶ Then the captain went along with the officers and *proceeded* to bring them *back* without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned). ²⁷ When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. ³¹ "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³² "And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Well, that should be enough. God has spoken and His power is demonstrated and you pagans will now submit to the Lord God creator of heaven and earth, right?

Acts 5:33-42 ³³ But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. ³⁶ "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away *some*

people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ "So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." ⁴⁰ They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ.

It's not always popular to stand for the truth of the gospel but when God speaks clearly on this issue we have a mandate, not from men, but from Jehovah Himself, that we should follow and obey Him in love and humbleness.

The Jews in Jerusalem had to obey the Lord, knowing that the government would come down on them sooner than later.

Ezra 5:3-5 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?" 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.

What do you suppose it means that the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews?

God is the One who issued the only decree that matters for His people and the peoples of Judah. And that decree would be backed up by His protecting hand. Tattenai, who was the governor of the province asks the only question he could. "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

Now in all fairness to the governor he was obligated by law to confront the Jews, but his attitude was one of wanting to get to the bottom of this matter, not necessarily restricting the Jews in their project. And so he sends a letter, not to Artaxerxes, but to Darius the king of Persia. Remember, Artaxerxes was a usurper of power and he only lasted 8 months. But in those 8 months he halted the work of God.

Ezra 5:7-17 ⁷ They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace. ⁸ "Let it be known to the king that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands. ⁹ "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?' ¹⁰ "We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head. ¹¹ "Thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² 'But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, *who* destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon. ¹³ 'However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. ¹⁴ 'Also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor. ¹⁵ 'He said to him, "Take these utensils, go *and* deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place." ¹⁶ "Then that Sheshbazzar came *and* laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction and it is not *yet* completed.' 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*."

In a relatively short letter Tattenai succinctly but fairly gave a good history of why the Jews were back in the land building the temple. But notice what is not said in this letter. Nowhere is it accusing the Jews that they are doing something wrong, nor does it even mention the mandate created by Artaxerxes, but rather it simply asks whether the first decree by Cyrus was true and official and to send back word to the effect that the work that Cyrus initiated should continue.

God can take a bad situation, even one that may seem insurmountable where even the highest powers of the government is involved and turn it around in His power to accomplish His will.

And so, sure enough, long before any letter was written to Darius regarding the violation of the law not to rebuild the temple, God was going before the Jews to pave the way for this rebuilding to God's glory.

And just in case anyone, like Tattenai, wanted to know under whose authority this rebuilding was taking place, the clear answer, was not Darius's authority, but the authority of God Himself. Darius will get on board because God will make sure of that.

Ezra 6:1-12 ^{NAU} Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. ² In Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum-- 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.' ⁶ "Now *therefore*, Tattenai, governor of *the province* beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and your colleagues, the officials of *the provinces* beyond the River, keep away from there. ⁷ "Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. 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. ¹¹ "And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this. 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!"

This is definitely a God thing. And God is still doing a work in the world where His name is being exalted among His people with the ultimate outcome not being a temple built with hands in the middle-east, but a temple and a dwelling where God will be with His people forever in the New Jerusalem on the new earth surrounded by the new heavens.

Well, Tattenai submitted to Darius' letter and the Jews continued to build.

Ezra 6:15-22 ¹⁵ This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. ¹⁶ And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷ They offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸ Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses. ¹⁹ The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. ²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover *lamb* for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves. ²¹ The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to *join* them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate *the Passover*. ²² And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Why is the Passover being celebrated so important in this part of Israel's history?

Because it is God showing again that He is the One who has called a people out for His own possession as He purchases them with the blood of the lamb, and no one will be able to snatch them out of His hand.

This theme of God bringing His people to the Promised land is one that was always pointing to the ultimate day in which His people would be brought into the eternal dwelling of that promise and that land where we would dwell with Him forever as people of the living God.

It started in the Garden of Eden.

Genesis 2:7 ⁷ Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Adam was God's personal possession created in His image. After the fall God continued to remind us that He still had a people for His own possession.

Deuteronomy 7:6 ⁶ "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Jeremiah 32:38-41 ³⁸ "They shall be My people, and I will be their God; ³⁹ and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for *the good* of their children after them. ⁴⁰ "I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. ⁴¹ "I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul.

This people Israel that Jeremiah spoke to is now clearly identified as all people of the new covenant.

Hebrews 8:10 ¹⁰ "FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

The same people of the Old Testament who are called God's own possession are the same people who are described in the New Testament who are described as God's own possession, both groups ultimately being spiritual Israel, the Israel of God.

Titus 2:11-14 ¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴ who gave

Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

This is who you and I are in Christ.

1 Peter 2:9-10 ⁹ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.