

NOON BIBLE STUDY: EZRA 5-6

WE LEFT OUR STORY LAST WEEK WITH THE WORK ON THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM COMING TO AN HALT. FACING MUCH OPPOSITION FROM THE NEIGHBORING ENEMIES, THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM RECEIVE AN EDICT FROM THE KING OF PERSIA TO STOP BUILDING. THERE IS SUSPICION IN PERSIA, STOKED BY FALSEHOOD, THAT THE PURPOSE OF THE TEMPLE'S REBUILD IS TO CAUSE TROUBLE FOR THE KING. WE OBSERVED THE FOLLOWING LAST WEEK:

"AS WE CLOSE CHAPTER 4, WE ARE LEFT IN "PAUSE" MODE. THE WORK STOPS, BUT THE JUDEAN PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO DECIDE WHAT THEY DO NEXT. WILL THEY QUIT, WILL THEY COMPROMISE, OR WILL THEY PRESS ON? THE ANSWER AWAITS US AS WE READ ON..."

HERE IS WHAT WE'RE GOING TO READ IN CHAPTERS 5-6 - THE TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION WILL RESUME AND PERSIAN OFFICIALS ARE GOING TO COME TO JERUSALEM AND FIND OUT WHAT IS GOING ON. THEY WILL BEGIN AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE JEWS' CLAIM THAT CYRUS THE KING OF PERSIA HAD SANCTIONED THIS WORK YEARS BEFORE. REMEMBER IN THE LAST CHAPTER, THE WORK WAS CALLED TO BE STOPPED BECAUSE THE KING (ARTAXERXES) WAS NOT FAMILIAR WITH CYRUS' DECREE. THE INVESTIGATION WILL CONCLUDE AND WE WILL FIND OUT WHETHER OR NOT THE TEMPLE WILL BE FINISHED.

EZRA 5:1-2 - THE PROPHETS ENCOURAGE THE WORK TO RESUME

THE PEOPLE RESUME THE WORK AFTER THEY RECEIVE PROPHECIES ENCOURAGING THEM TO RESUME. LEST WE FORGET, THESE TWO VERSES REMIND US WHAT A SPIRITUAL TIME THIS MUST HAVE BEEN. LETTERS FROM THE KING OF PERSIA COMMANDING THEM TO STOP FOLLOWED BY TWO NOTABLE PROPHETS (HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH) COMMANDING THEM TO RESUME.

HAGGAI 1:2-8 (NLT) - "THIS IS WHAT THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES SAYS: THE PEOPLE ARE SAYING, 'THE TIME HAS NOT YET COME TO REBUILD THE HOUSE OF THE LORD.'" 3 THEN THE LORD SENT THIS MESSAGE THROUGH THE PROPHET HAGGAI: 4 "WHY ARE YOU LIVING IN LUXURIOUS HOUSES WHILE MY HOUSE LIES IN RUINS? 5 THIS IS WHAT THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES SAYS: LOOK AT WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU! 6 YOU HAVE PLANTED MUCH BUT HARVEST LITTLE. YOU EAT BUT ARE NOT SATISFIED. YOU DRINK BUT ARE STILL THIRSTY. YOU PUT ON CLOTHES BUT CANNOT KEEP WARM. YOUR WAGES DISAPPEAR AS THOUGH YOU WERE PUTTING THEM IN POCKETS FILLED WITH HOLES! 7 "THIS IS WHAT THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES SAYS: LOOK AT WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU! 8 NOW GO UP INTO THE HILLS, BRING DOWN TIMBER, AND REBUILD MY HOUSE. THEN I WILL TAKE PLEASURE IN IT AND BE HONORED, SAYS THE LORD.

HAGGAI 1:12-14 (NLT) - THEN ZERUBBABEL SON OF SHEALTIEL, AND JESHUA SON OF JEHOZADAK, THE HIGH PRIEST, AND THE WHOLE REMNANT OF GOD'S PEOPLE BEGAN TO OBEY THE MESSAGE FROM THE LORD THEIR GOD. WHEN THEY HEARD THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET HAGGAI, WHOM THE LORD THEIR GOD HAD SENT, THE PEOPLE FEARED THE LORD. 13 THEN HAGGAI, THE LORD'S MESSENGER, GAVE THE PEOPLE THIS MESSAGE FROM THE LORD: "I AM WITH YOU, SAYS THE LORD!" 14 SO THE LORD SPARKED THE ENTHUSIASM OF ZERUBBABEL SON OF SHEALTIEL, GOVERNOR OF JUDAH, AND THE ENTHUSIASM OF JESHUA SON OF JEHOZADAK, THE HIGH PRIEST, AND THE ENTHUSIASM OF THE WHOLE REMNANT OF GOD'S PEOPLE. THEY BEGAN REBUILDING THE HOUSE OF THEIR GOD, THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES,

ZECHARIAH 1:2-6 (NLT) - "I, THE LORD, WAS VERY ANGRY WITH YOUR ANCESTORS. 3 THEREFORE, SAY TO THE PEOPLE, 'THIS IS WHAT THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES SAYS: RETURN TO ME, AND I WILL RETURN TO YOU,' SAYS THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES." 4 DON'T BE LIKE YOUR ANCESTORS WHO WOULD NOT LISTEN OR PAY ATTENTION WHEN THE EARLIER PROPHETS SAID TO THEM, 'THIS IS WHAT THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES SAYS: TURN FROM YOUR EVIL WAYS, AND STOP ALL YOUR EVIL PRACTICES.' 5 "WHERE ARE YOUR ANCESTORS NOW? THEY AND THE PROPHETS ARE LONG DEAD. 6 BUT EVERYTHING I SAID THROUGH MY SERVANTS THE PROPHETS HAPPENED TO YOUR ANCESTORS, JUST AS I SAID. AS A RESULT, THEY REPENTED AND SAID, 'WE HAVE RECEIVED WHAT WE DESERVED FROM THE LORD OF HEAVEN'S ARMIES. HE HAS DONE WHAT HE SAID HE WOULD DO.'"

SO THE WORK ON THE TEMPLE RESUMES BECAUSE THE PEOPLE BELIEVE THE LORD IS WITH THEM. REGARDLESS OF WHAT EITHER THE GOVERNMENT OF PERSIA OR THEIR LOCAL NEIGHBORS MIGHT THINK!

EZRA 5:3-5 - OFFICIALS INVESTIGATE

SOME PERSIAN OFFICIALS ARRIVE IN JERUSALEM TO SEE WHAT IS GOING ON THERE. THEY APPARENTLY HAVE AN OVERSIGHT FOR THIS REGION ("BEYOND THE RIVER") ON BEHALF OF THE PERSIAN GOVERNMENT. THROUGH THIS EXCHANGE THEY DON'T APPEAR TO BE COMBATIVE, BUT MORE NEUTRAL INVESTIGATORS. THEY ARE GOING TO BEGIN AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE JEWS' CLAIM THAT THEY ARE REBUILDING THE TEMPLE, LEGALLY.

EZRA 5:6-17 - LETTER FROM OFFICIALS TO PERSIA

THESE VERSES RECORD THE LETTER THAT THE OFFICIALS SENT TO PERSIA. THEY SEND THIS LETTER TO DARIUS, THE NEW KING TO REPORT WHAT THE JEWS HAD SAID WHEN THEY ASKED "WHY ARE YOU BUILDING THIS TEMPLE." THE LETTER SHOWS US THAT THE JEWS HAD REPLIED WITH A DETAILED NARRATIVE OF THEIR SIN AND FALL, THEIR CAPTIVITY TO BABYLON AND THE DETAILS OF THEIR RETURN AND COMMISSION BY CYRUS.

V. 9-11 - IDENTITY & CALLING - IT APPEARS FROM THESE VERSES THAT THE PEOPLE ARE CONVINCED GOD IS WITH THEM (AS HAGGAI HAD SAID). WHEN ASKED "WHO ISSUED THE DECREE AND WHAT ARE YOUR NAMES", THE ELDERS OF JERUSALEM ANSWER:

EZRA 5:11 (NLT) - "THIS WAS THEIR ANSWER: 'WE ARE THE SERVANTS OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, AND WE ARE REBUILDING THE TEMPLE THAT WAS BUILT HERE MANY YEARS AGO BY A GREAT KING OF ISRAEL.

THEY CALL THEMSELVES "THE SERVANTS OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH." THAT'S HOW THEY ARE THINKING OF THEMSELVES (AS OPPOSED TO THEIR INDIVIDUAL NAMES).

THE LETTER FROM THE OFFICIALS WILL BEGIN A SEARCH OF THE OFFICIAL ARCHIVES OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE.

EZRA 6:1-5 - THE FACTS ARE CONFIRMED

AFTER RECEIVING THE LETTER AND INVESTIGATING THE JEWS' CLAIM, THE SEARCH BEGAN FOR DOCUMENTATION OF A DECREE FROM CYRUS. SURE ENOUGH, THE ORIGINAL DECREE WAS FOUND AND READ. THIS WHOLE PROCESS IS VERY TRUE TO LIFE AND ONE CAN IMAGINE A SIMILAR PREDICAMENT IN OUR NATION TODAY IN REGARDS TO LAND RIGHTS, OWNERSHIP OR OTHER LEGAL MATTERS.

THE ESV STUDY BIBLE GIVES US SOME HISTORICAL INSIGHT INTO THIS FIND:

"THE SEARCH FOR CYRUS'S DECREE IS MADE FIRST IN BABYLONIA (V. 1), WHERE CYRUS HAD DECLARED HIMSELF KING IN 539 B.C. AND WHERE MANY EXILED JEWS LIVED. BUT THE SCROLL CONTAINING THE RECORD OF THE DECREE WAS FOUND IN ECBATANA (V. 2), A SUMMER RESIDENCE OF THE PERSIAN KINGS, WHERE CYRUS MAY HAVE GONE SOON AFTER HIS TRIUMPH OVER BABYLON. THE PROVINCE OF MEDIA (V. 2) WAS FORMERLY THE SEAT OF AN EMPIRE ITSELF, BUT CYRUS HAD MADE IT PART OF THE PERSIAN REALM. LEATHER SCROLLS ARE KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN USED IN PERSIA FOR OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS IN ARAMAIC. THE DOCUMENT NOW DISCOVERED IS CALLED A RECORD (V. 2) AND IS APPARENTLY A MEMORANDUM CONCERNING THE DECREE RATHER THAN THE DECREE ITSELF (WHICH WOULD PROBABLY HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ON A CLAY TABLET)." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, EZRA 6:1-2)

EZRA 6:6-12 - DARIUS SUPPORTS CYRUS' ORIGINAL DECREE

THESE VERSES RECORD DARIUS' OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO THE DISCOVERY AND CONFIRMATION OF CYRUS' EDICT MANY YEARS BEFORE. DARIUS IS A ZEALOUS KEEPER OF PERIAN CIVIL LAW (AS WE KNOW FROM THE STORY OF DANIEL & THE LION'S DEN) AND SO ONCE HE CONFIRMS THE FACTS ABOUT THE ORDER TO REBUILD THE TEMPLE, HE WANTS IT TO RESUME IMMEDIATELY AND WITH ROYAL SUPPORT.

DARIUS GOES BEYOND JUST A CASUAL "ALLOWING" OF THE PROJECT, HE ORDERS A RENEWED FINANCIAL AND MATERIAL SUPPORT OF THE PROJECT!

VERSE 8 TELL US THAT "THE FULL COST IS TO BE PAID FROM THE ROYAL TREASURY OF THE TAXES PAID BY THE PROVINCES BEYOND THE RIVER!" IN OTHER WORDS, THE TAXES THAT THE NATIONS AROUND JERUSALEM ARE PAYING ARE GOING TO GO TOWARDS THE BUILDING OF THE TEMPLE! AND ANIMALS WILL BE GIVEN FOR THE SACRIFICES TOO! IN ADDITION, IF ANYONE DOESN'T GO ALONG WITH THIS WILL BE EXECUTED! WHAT A TURN OF EVENTS.

EZRA 6:13-18 - IT WILL BE DONE

THE ORIGINAL OFFICIALS RETURN WITH THIS NEWS AND THE SUPPORT OF THE KING. AS A RESULT, THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD IS COMPLETED, AND THE PEOPLE CELEBRATE WITH JOY! GOD HAD WORKED IN A NUMBER OF WONDERFUL WAYS, INCLUDING THE PROPHETIC WORD AND ENCOURAGEMENT THAT CAME THROUGH HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH.

EZRA 6:19-22 - THE PASSOVER IS CELEBRATED

TO FULLY COMMEMORATE THE BUILDING AND DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE, THE PEOPLE CELEBRATE THE PASSOVER AT THE APPROPRIATE TIME. THE PASSOVER WAS THE GREAT FESTIVAL OF CELEBRATION AND REMEMBRANCE OF THE ISRAELITES' DELIVERANCE FROM EGYPTIAN SLAVERY, AND THEIR COVERING FROM THE FINAL PLAGUE, THE "PASSING OVER" OF THE ANGEL OF DEATH. IT WAS A CELEBRATION OF FREEDOM AND THANKSGIVING FOR WHAT GOD HAD DONE IN THE PAST TO REDEEM AND CARE FOR HIS PEOPLE AND SURELY THIS YEAR'S CELEBRATION WOULD HAVE BEEN COMMEMORATED WITH GREAT MINDFULNESS OF THAT BECAUSE OF THE RECENT EVENTS.

SIDE NOTE: USAGE OF "KING OF ASSYRIA" IN 6:22 - ESV STUDY BIBLE NOTE: "THE REFERENCE TO THE KING OF ASSYRIA (V. 22) AT FIRST SEEMS ODD BECAUSE KINGS OF PERSIA HAVE SUPPORTED THE JEWS IN EZRA. THE REFERENCE HERE, HOWEVER, IS BASED ON THE CONTINUITY OF THE VARIOUS EMPIRES. THE KING OF PERSIA NOW RULED OVER THE TERRITORIAL EMPIRE OF THE ASSYRIANS, AND

THUS HE COULD BE CALLED "KING OF ASSYRIA" (CF. HERODOTUS, HISTORY 1.178, IN A DISCUSSION OF CYRUS'S CONQUESTS, WHERE BABYLON IS CALLED THE STRONGEST CITY "IN ASSYRIA"). THIS WORDING EMPHASIZES THE TURN IN FORTUNES, UNDER GOD, SINCE THE ASSYRIANS HAD BEEN USED AS GOD'S AGENT OF PUNISHMENT CENTURIES BEFORE (NEH. 9:32; ISA. 10:5—11).

THIS MOMENT IS A VERY SPECIAL MOMENT FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD. THEY HAVE BEEN EXILES AND OPPRESSED AND NOW THEY ARE WORSHIPPING AGAIN IN GOD'S TEMPLE IN THE CITY OF JERUSALEM. THEY ARE CELEBRATING THE PASSOVER AND MAKING SACRIFICES ON THE LORD'S ALTAR. THERE IS JOY, CELEBRATION, MEMORIAL, AND WORSHIP. THIS IS HOW THINGS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE. GOD'S PEOPLE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, WITH HIS PROVISION AND IN SERVICE TO HIM. WE CLOSE THESE CHAPTERS MINDFUL OF THE GOODNESS AND FAITHFULNESS OF GOD.

ALSO, IT'S A GOOD WINDOW IN TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD'S PEOPLE AS WELL. WE SAW THEM PERSEVERE EVEN WHEN IT SEEMED LIKE WHOLE PERSIAN EMPIRE MIGHT HAVE OPPOSED THEM. ONCE THEY GOT GOD'S WORD (IN THIS CASE FROM THE PROPHET HAGGAI), THEY GOT TO WORK AT WHAT GOD HAD CALLED THEM TO DO - NO MATTER WHAT THE NATIONS AROUND THEM MIGHT HAVE SAID.

AND THERE IS A GOOD LESSON AND REMINDER FOR US IN THIS EXAMPLE. WHEN YOU KNOW GOD HAS CALLED YOU TO DO SOMETHING, IT DOES NOT MATTER WHAT OTHERS MIGHT THINK. HIS WORD SUPERSEDES EVERYTHING. WHILE SOME MIGHT USE "GOD TOLD ME SUCH AND SUCH" AS A COVER TO DO THEIR OWN THING, WHEN THE SPIRIT AND WORD OF GOD ARE TRULY BEHIND YOUR CALL, YOU CAN STEP OUT IN FAITH UNAFRAID. IF "HE IS WITH YOU", HE IS ALL YOU NEED.