

Whose decree and authority?

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we just ask, Lord, that your word be unhindered today. That, Father God, it might have its effect in our hearts. That, Lord, you might move our hearts to hear you and to obey you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. What comes to mind when you hear the greeting, Welcome to the house of the Lord.

Now, very often we think of a building, don't we? Certainly, the word house of God in Ezra refers to a physical temple. But there is no longer a physical temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem. However, the temple of God is present today in another form. Since Pentecost, you, me, and us, we make up the temple in which God the Holy Spirit dwells.

A living spiritual temple. Now, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that we individually are the temple of God.

[1 : 17] And the church as the gathering of God's people, as the gathering of Christians, not a physical building, is also the temple of God.

And Peter tells us in chapter 1 Peter 2.5 that this work of the building of the spiritual temple is never finished until Jesus comes.

He wrote, You also, like living stones, are being built, being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

So, we are being built into this temple. And how are we being built into a spiritual temple? It starts with the individual living stones.

You and me. We grow in maturity in our faith. We bear fruit. And we become more Christ-like. And that is made possible by us drawing near to God through His Word and through prayer.

[2 : 26] Hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and living it out. And we partner in this work of building the church, the temple, by participating and serving in it.

But, like in Ezra's time, there is opposition and obstacles to the building project. Today, the temple work is disrupted by preventing access to the Bible, by preventing access to sound preachers and teachers, by cutting off safe spaces where the Gospel can be heard and lived out, by making communities unsafe for Christians.

Satan uses civil authorities, religious authorities, false teachers, anti-Christian culture, disunity and squabbling in the church to hinder Gospel work.

In some parts of the world, Christians are killed. And church buildings destroyed. Obstacles to temple building may also come through careers, work, family and even our own downtime.

These are all essential, of course. And in different seasons in life, they make different demands on our time. Legitimately so.

[4 : 03] However, if we are not vigilant and intentional, personal time with God, service attendance, fellowship takes a toll.

Serving in ministry becomes difficult. Spiritual lethargy and complacency may set in. We may say to ourselves, building the temple can wait.

We are in our sermon series on Ezra and we are at Ezra 5. Do keep your Bibles open to Ezra 5 and there's an outline you may find helpful.

In Ezra 4, very soon after the foundation was laid, in 536 BC, neighbours led a campaign to stop the rebuilding of the temple with the help of corrupt Persian officials.

The Jews discouraged, the Jews discouraged, afraid, frustrated, they gave up. The construction stopped. We are at Ezra 5.1.

[5 : 18] We are now in the year 520 BC. 16 years has passed. The temple is in ruins.

The spiritual mandate to rebuild, forgotten. The Jews were contented with the altar without the building. They said in Haggai 1.2, the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. The temple can wait. They became spiritually complacent. The memory of their struggle with their neighbours filled them with dread and even fear.

They retreated to the business of making a living, raising a family and building their own houses. The land, however, was not yielding much.

It was not yielding as much as it should. The community has stopped flourishing. There was a general sense of want, of depression and dissatisfaction.

[6 : 31] Besides, they thought, why bother? We don't have the finance to make this temple grand. The prophecies for a rebuilt temple and a rebuilt Jerusalem are now in doubt.

God's reformacy is threatened. But surely God can make a way. But why would He? The passage tells us the reason why.

And it has to do with who God is and who the Jewish people are to Him. Firstly, in Ezra 5.11, if you see, Yahweh is the God of heaven and earth.

And in Ezra 5.1, He is also the God of Israel, the God over the Jews. He had chosen Israel to be His special people out of all the peoples of the world, purely out of His grace.

The Jews belong to Him. Now, if you belong to God, it means you have an obligation to Him. Right? If you belong to someone, you have an obligation to them.

[7 : 48] At the same time, because the Jews belong to Him, He extends His divine providence over them. In a way, He has also a responsibility towards the Jews.

And Ezra 5.5 says, His eyes are ever watchful over His people. His eyes are ever watchful over you, but not in a threatening sense, yeah?

In Psalms 33.18, it says that the eyes of the Lord are on His people to deliver them. He is like a parent hovering over His children in a reassuring and comforting sense, ready to rescue them.

So God looks down at the condition of His people, of His land. And because God is God, He will not fail them. He will not allow His plans or purposes to fail.

God moves. To kickstart the rebuilding of the temple, God would first deal with their hearts. They needed a push, and they also needed courage.

[9 : 00] So in 5.1, God sends His word through His prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. And their prophecies are recorded in their own books.

It is fascinating to read them on your own. Haggai first prophesied on the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, equivalent to our August 29, 520 BC.

Now the first thing He does is to scold them. In Haggai 1.4, He says, Is it time for you yourself to be living in your paneled houses while the temple remains in ruins?

Give careful thought to your ways. The Lord then goes on to reveal to them, because of the state of the temple, He had also withheld His blessings.

That is why their harvest was less than expected, meals were not satisfying, wages were never enough. Do we need to hear these words of rebuke today?

[10 : 17] Have we been pursuing other things while the temple of God is neglected and even in ruins? Are we satisfied with the things, the way things are, and so the temple can wait?

And I ask these questions of myself. But together with rebuke comes words of encouragement, assurance, and promise.

The references are printed in your outline. God told them, let me give you a sample. Do not be afraid. Whoever touches you, touches the apple of my eye.

I am with you. You have my spirit with you, not by might, but by my spirit. Do not fear.

Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built. Be strong and work. The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house.

[11 : 35] Is God saying the same thing to you today? It is time to work on the temple. Be strong. Be unafraid.

I am with you. My spirit is with you. You have all the strength you need. Resolve to spend personal time with Him daily.

Make it a point to meet God and His people on a regular basis. In church, in fellowship, in prayer groups, in Bible study groups.

Let the Word of God build us up. The equipped class on Ephesians is just around the corner. Sign up for it. Consider giving your time, talents, abilities, and gifts to serve the church.

And if you are already serving, already participating in the building of the temple of God here, continue to serve faithfully. Don't give up.

[12:43] If you are involved with the teaching of God's Word in whatever platform, continue to serve faithfully and joyfully, it is only by His Word we know the will of God and so live responsibly towards Him.

So, how did the Jews respond? Positively. Look at Ezra 5.2. The leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, set to work.

The prophets continued to support them, underlying again the importance of God's Word for God's work. Haggai 1.15 says that the construction started about three weeks from Haggai's first prophecy.

Now, God's people have not always responded in faith. In Ezra 5.12, many of their ancestors dismissed the words of the prophets who preached before the exile.

They would not give up their idol worship and were ultimately punished with defeat and banishment. But this present generation of returnees obeyed.

[14:04] Haggai tells us in Haggai 1.14 that it was the work of God. He is the one who stirred up the spirit of His people to respond to Him.

He turns hearts. It's all Him. So, let us ask God to move hearts, our own and others, in response to Him as He calls us to kingdom work, to the building of the spiritual house of God.

only He can change hearts. In fact, Ezra 5.8 tells us that they were so diligent that the construction made rapid progress.

They really worked very quickly, very hard. They responded so well. So rapid that it soon attracted unwanted attention. The first two years of King Darius' reign were characterized by troubles, revolts, especially in the western region of the empire.

That's where the people are now. When Governor Tetanai heard of the construction, he was alarmed. Why are these people using huge stones?

[15:29] Were they building a fortress? was trouble brewing in his backyard? So he goes down like a good governor to Jerusalem with his officials to conduct an investigation.

He wanted to know what the Jews were building, who authorized it, and he obviously did not know of the Cyrus decree given 20 years before.

The Jews were not overly troubled. They had a new confidence in the Lord through the word of the prophets. They were doing the Lord's work and they displayed common sense to take advantage of the rights they had as citizens of the Persian Empire.

So they presented the facts of the matter. They made a defense. They said, King Cyrus authorized the building. He even returned the gold and silver articles of the temple.

No, we do not have the documents to prove it, but surely the government should have records. Right? Tetanai agrees.

[16:43] And in his report to King Darius, he included a request for the government to check if the Cyrus decree was real. If the Jews lied, he already had the names of their leaders and was ready to punish them at king's command.

Now this letter to Darius, just read to us, was professional, factual, unlike the clearly hostile letter we read in Ezra 4 last week.

But don't be fooled. There is a real danger that it could result in the rebuilding project being stopped permanently.

King Darius may not order a search of the documents. He didn't have to. Or, he could have found the Cyrus decree and decided to overturn it.

I want us to have a quick look at verse 11 and 12 in the report. Now see how the Jews identified themselves. Remember, they were a discouraged and defeated people until Haggai and Zechariah preached to them.

[18:02] Something had changed. With confidence, they identified themselves as the servants of the God of heaven and earth. That is where their real authorization came from.

they were telling the Persians that their God was not a local deity as they thought. No, he is the God who governs the whole universe including the Persian Empire.

We must not downplay the boldness of this confession. Both the Babylonians and then the Persians taught Yahweh a lesser God compared to theirs for losing Israel and Judah.

the Jews were saying not true. A proclamation bristling with defiance. Their boldness can be compared to the early Christians who declared Jesus is Lord when the rest were shouting Caesar is Lord.

And they told the Persians the need to rebuild the temple was due to their shameful past as a people. Their ancestors had angered the Lord by their relentless unfaithfulness by bowing down to other gods.

[19 : 17] It was the Lord himself who punished them and he delivered them to their enemies allowing the destruction of his own temple and their deportation. Now this new generation had learned the lesson their ancestors did not.

You shall have no other gods before me. According to scholars and historians, these and subsequent generations never again bowed down before other gods.

We saw last week how they rejected the offer of their neighbours precisely because of their neighbours' idolatry. Now the Jews knew their theological history and they were willing to talk about it even to their pagan overlords.

How about us? Are we willing to tell others about our own faith journey? Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3, In your hearts, revere Christ as Lord.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Having now removed the spiritual obstacle that was in his own people, watch God pull out other obstacles, turn the tables on his opponents and bless his people in ways they never imagined.

[20 : 50] Did you read in this passage of the water of the Euphrates turning into blood or the plague that killed the hostile neighbours and Persian officials while sparing the Jews?

Or the ground that opened up and swallowed tetanai and company? Some of you are checking your Bibles wondering which adulterated version I'm reading.

No, it's not there. Those events never happen. Some people think that God is at work only when he displays spectacular signs and wonders.

They are blinded to the work of God in the ordinary. The book of Ezra shows us that God can and more likely than not does his work behind the scenes, invisible to us, quietly and unnoticed, and through the most ordinary of ways.

In the Bible, signs and wonders are actually very rare and far between. Here, God works behind the scenes and uses a king and his administrators with their routine administrative SOP to bless his people.

[22 : 12] See in Ezra 5.5, tetanai makes an executive decision to allow the elders to continue the work as they waited for an official reply.

Ezra tells us he pulls the curtains of heaven and says actually, it was God. The eyes of God were watching over the elders of the Jews and they were not stopped.

Ezra 6.1, a scroll was indeed found, but not in the royal capital of Babylon, but in the summer palace of the Persian kings at Abathana, a great distance away.

Again, we must not fail to see God's hand in this. As Darius and his administrators could have simply stopped searching when no record was found in Babylon.

Tak ada. Hilang. Apply baru. But they didn't. King Darius then issues a memo in reply.

[23 : 14] Now watch as God uses King Darius to bless his people. Imagine their amazement, joy and disbelief as Darius's memo was read to them.

Their eyes widened, their jaws dropped. Here is what God provided for his people. Firstly, authorisation.

Look at Ezra 6.3-5. Darius confirms the truth of what the Jews had said. The rebuilding was authorised by a decree of Cyrus.

And the gold and silver articles of the temple was written to the Jews also by Cyrus' order.

Secondly, God provides financial sufficiency.

Remember, the Jews didn't have much. The Jews must have whispered excitedly at a part of the Cyrus' decree that had been kept from them.

[24 : 15] You would see this memo quite slightly different from what we read in Cyrus 1, the Cyrus declaration in 1. That was like a general declaration that they can go back and build a temple.

This part of Cyrus' decree was like a memo to the treasury. And you look at Ezra 6.3-4.

the allowable dimensions of the temple is mentioned. Okay. Then the material to be used is mentioned. Okay. But wait, wait. What is this?

They never heard of this? The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. All this while they were paying out of their own pockets.

The previous governors have been holding out on them. That tonight, you owe us big time. When God provides blessing pours and overflows, the memo from Darius shows that he is letting the Cyrus' decree stand.

[25 : 34] But he wants to be one up over Cyrus. Look at Ezra 6.8-9. Teth and I, here is my decree.

This is what you are to do for the elders of the Jews as they work on the construction. Pay them. What? Pay them out of the royal treasury from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates so so that the work will not stop.

The taxes you collect from my subjects there, use it to pay the Jews. If it doesn't strike you, let me make it obvious. Their hostile neighbours were going to help finance them indirectly through the taxes they paid to the Persians.

Interesting, eh? And what did this mean for the Jews? It meant that they could now concentrate on the rebuilding work without worrying where the next meal for the family was coming from.

They could concentrate fully on rebuilding. And what about the cost of the materials? Supply. Wait, wait, wait, there's more. Tetanai asked the priests in Jerusalem what they need for daily offerings.

[27 : 00] You, yes, you, must arrange and give them whatever is requested. Young bulls, rams, lambs for burnt offerings, wheat, salt, wine, and olive all supply daily without fail.

What a reversal of fortunes. Wait, should they receive these funds? Sure, why not?

Unlike the neighbors in Ezra 4, the Persians had no interest what goes on in the temple. Right? The Jews were left alone to build, to practice their faith and worship according to the laws given by Yahweh to Moses.

There was no pressure to compromise. It is as if the government of Sarawak wants to give us money to build a church building. We would gladly accept the gift provided the government does not dictate what is preached and how our faith is practiced in the building.

Lastly, we see God put a complete end to any and every opposition that the Jews faced, had faced or can potentially face.

[28 : 22] Look at Ezra 6, 6-7. To the Persian officials, Darius gives this decree. Stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work.

Allow the Jews to get on with the work. No more official interference except to give money. And verse 11, Tethanai make sure no one defies my decree.

Anyone who defies me will face the death penalty by impalement and loss of house. Even their family suffer. A severe warning to anyone who interferes with the work or anyone who did not carry out his orders to give state financial support for the work.

Don't play play with Darius. He impaled 3,000 Babylonians to crush a rebellion. So, he is ruthless. And in verse 12, Darius then calls on the God of Israel to overthrow any king or people who tries to change the Darius decree or destroy the temple in Jerusalem.

[29 : 46] But of course, with the coming of Jesus, God allowed this second temple to eventually be destroyed by the Romans. The sacrificial death of Jesus had rendered the physical temple obsolete and unnecessary.

But for the spiritual temple of which we are part, God will indeed punish anyone who destroys the church. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3, 17, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.

For God's temple is sacred and you together are that temple. It is a serious New Testament warning that anyone who would destroy God's church faces punishment.

Those who throughout history have destroyed God's churches through persecution, killed Christians, who have destroyed the church by their false teaching, are in grave danger on the last day when Jesus comes to judge.

So, after years of interference and opposition, the world of the temple rebuilding can now proceed quickly and unhindered.

[31 : 05] No more opposition from enemies, no more financial restraint. Why do you think Darius issued such a decree? It was certainly not out of pure altruism.

Look at chapter 6 verse 10. He was soliciting prayers from the Jewish priests for the perpetuation of his empire.

Any additional prayer for him and his sons from any corner of the empire to any gods out there is welcome. But for whatever selfish reasons Darius had, God used to turn a potentially dangerous situation into tremendous blessings for his people.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 3.20, God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. What transpired is truly beyond the wildest imagination of the Jews.

God is indeed their great provider and protector. Thinking of the weeks the Jews waited nervously, anxiously as they anticipated Jairus' decision, it must have been nerve-wracking for some of them.

[32 : 28] 400 years later, another group of people thought everything had failed. God had failed. Their master is dead in the tomb, died on a Roman cross.

But just as God came true for the Jews here, God came true for them. He would not let his anointed sea decay. Three days later, night changed to day, tears turned to laughter at the resurrection of the Son of God, and forgiveness of sin was made possible.

verse 12 ends with this, I, Darius, decreed it, let it be carried out with diligence. Darius thought it was by his decree, but we know better whose decree it is.

Darius thought he had the authority, we know better who the authority really belongs to. The psalmist sings in Psalms 47, 7-8, God is the king of all the earth, he reigns over the nations, God is seated on his holy throne, and this king has his eye on his people, those who have his name over them, and we know this name today, it is Jesus.

From Ezra 1 until the passage today, God has been moving events and people to ensure the restoration of his people into the land of Judah and the rebuilding of his temple.

[34 : 07] Now, why is this community so important in the plan of God? Prophet Jeremiah was one of those who prophesied the return of the exiles, and he also prophesied that God will rebuild Jerusalem and fill it with sounds of joyful people with the temple as the center of worship.

Then Jeremiah in chapter 33 15 says, God will cause a righteous brunch to spring up for David in this community.

This was the Davidic king promised by God, his Messiah. That anointed king was coming through this renewed community.

of course we know the Messiah is none other than Jesus our Savior, the Son of God. The safety of this generation, of the Jews in various times is essential for our salvation.

It is notable that the same Zechariah of Ezra 5 1 will speak of events 400 years into the future that will be fulfilled by the life of the Lord Jesus.

[35 : 30] It is through Zechariah that we will read of the prophecies of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, of Judas betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, of the scattering of the disciples at Jesus' arrest when God struck the shepherd.

Of the method of execution Jesus would suffer entailing the piercing of his body. The references are in your handout. And Zechariah wrote that one day a fountain will open that will cleanse people from sin and impurity.

Today we know that what flows from the fountain is the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of all humanity.

Jesus said, Destroy this temple and in three days I will rise up again. He was speaking of his body, delivered over to death for our sin, raised to life after three days for our justification.

He is the greater and perfect temple of God through whom we can meet God, have fellowship with him, find forgiveness and all spiritual blessings. Now the temple of stone and wood was just a type and shadow of the Lord Jesus himself.

[36 : 57] But for then, back in 520 BC, that generation of Jews were called to honour their time, their place in the salvation plan of God, to build the type and shadow in preparation for the real thing to come.

We see in the passage today that God works in the background to move nations, peoples, and events to fulfil his purposes.

He controls his dream. We know this is what God has been doing since he called Abraham way back in Genesis 12 as he set in motion his rescue plan for the world.

God's salvation plan will culminate in the life, death and resurrection of his incarnate son Jesus Christ. God will replace the Persians with the Greeks and then the Romans.

He would prepare the political, religious, social, and cultural climate of first-century Palestine to be ripe to receive his son and would determine the way he would die.

[38 : 20] Today, we may be troubled as we see what's happening in the world. Wars, rumors of wars, natural disasters that strike ever so often, food shortages brought on by conflict and climate change, the increasing persecution of Christians even in countries with a Christian heritage.

Do you believe God is in control? He is still the king who sits on the throne of heaven. He is still watching over his people.

The next great event in his salvation plan is the return of Christ and the ushering in of the new heaven and the new earth.

In his timing, he will get us there. If you are not a Christian today, know that God has a plan for your life.

The fact that you are listening in is an invitation to you to trust this mighty and loving God. The fact that Jesus has not yet come back is because God loves you and he's giving everyone a chance to say yes to Jesus now, to accept his offer of salvation.

[39 : 37] If you are a Christian, what are you to do in the meantime? We are still in the business of temple building. both the individual and the church.

It is essentially the task of disciple making, of making the gospel of Jesus Christ known and the call to live it out.

This is our mandate given to no one else but to Christians. But gospel work will always be opposed. When faced with opposition, we can learn from the Ezra generation.

We are to depend on his word, be confident in our identity in Christ, pray and trust him, make our defense if possible, and simply continue with the work of temple building.

We trust he will work things out for us as he continues to watch over us. It is his building project after all. Jesus says he will build the church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

[40 : 52] It's a done deal but it is a difficult journey. So hang on to Jesus. Thank you. Thank you.