

Notes on Ezra Chapter 5

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V. Prophets Encourage the Work to Continue – Chap. 5

Verse 1

EZR 5:1 Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who {were} in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, {who was} over them.

Sometime later, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the people and urged them to continue the work on the temple. Haggai's teaching is recorded in the book of Haggai (see Haggai 1:1ff), and Zechariah's is recorded in the book of Zechariah (see Zechariah 1:1ff).

Haggai 1 gives helpful additional information regarding the events recorded here in Ezra. Haggai 1:1 says his prophecies began in the second year of king Darius. This agrees with Ezra 4:24, which had told us that the work on the temple stopped until the second year of Darius. Waldron says this would have been 16 years after they returned to Judah. So the work had evidently been neglected for quite some time.

The book of Zechariah adds little about the current situation, although he later gives some prophecies indicating God's determination to bless the people in their work. Most of his prophecies are symbolic, and many are predictions regarding Jesus and the coming New Testament.

Why the people had not been working

Haggai 1:1-11 also helps us understand why the work on the temple had stopped and what God's attitude was toward the people for their neglect of the work. In 1:2 the people said ***it is not time*** to build the Lord's house. They were neglecting and postponing the work.

But 1:4 says that they themselves were now dwelling in paneled houses. They had plenty of time to build their own houses, and even had made them quite nice. They had provided better homes even than just basic necessities. But they had allowed the temple of God to continue to dwell in ruins.

So the temple was neglected because the people thought they did not have the time or the means or the ability to build. But they had built more than adequately for themselves. They may have used the decree of the king as an excuse to stop working on the temple (Ezra 4:24). But this was, at least to some extent, an excuse. As discussed on Ezra 4, they should have obeyed God even if that required them to disobey civil rulers. But they even had the authority of Cyrus behind them, which we will see was enough to authorize them to continue the work, had they been willing to do so. The truth is that they just preferred to go about their own affairs and seek their own prosperity instead of working on the temple.

Haggai points out that the real problem was in them and their conduct: "Consider your ways" (1:5,7). Here is the real problem! The problem was not their circumstances: It was them! Instead of working on the temple, they had sought their own prosperity. But they had failed to really achieve even that, because God hindered them. 1:6 - They worked at providing food and clothing for themselves, but they found the results inadequate. It was like working to earn money, then storing the money in a bag with holes – it is just lost. The effort does not produce the intended benefits.

God said the reason they had so much trouble meeting their own needs was that He was working against them, because His house was still in ruins (1:9). He had called for droughts on all the produce of their land (1:10,11). So the solution was for them to go get the wood and build the temple, so He could be properly glorified (1:8). Then He would bless them.

Lessons for us

Wouldn't God have much the same to say to many members of many local congregations of His people today? How often do we see members of the church who have plenty of time to provide themselves with nice houses, clothes, cars, and plenty of food? They live beyond necessities to the point of luxuries.

Yet in so many cases we neglect the Lord's work. We may have built nice meeting houses to assemble in; but remember the temple today is the church, and the work He wants in the church goes far beyond just assembling. He wants us to spread the gospel to every person in our community and then beyond into the whole world. How active are we in that work?

How many are saying, "It is not time to do that work." We don't have the time now, we don't have the money, we are too small, people are not interested in the gospel, etc., etc. We have excuse after excuse, but the real problem is the same as with the Jews. The problem is not our circumstances; the problem is us! We are just more committed to our own interests than we are to the work of the Lord!

God may or may not withhold physical blessings from us when we fail to work for Him, yet surely He will often withhold His spiritual blessings. If we seek to please Him, we too need to "consider our ways." We need to be about the work He has given us and not let the work be hindered because of opposition or just plain indifference!

Verse 2

1. What prophets spoke to the Jews about their work on the temple? When did this occur (Haggai 1:1)?
2. Read Haggai 1:1-11. According to Haggai, why had the work on the temple stopped? What had people been doing instead?
3. What did Haggai say the people should do? (Think: What does this show regarding the fact the people quit work in chap. 4?)
4. Application: What lessons should we learn from the people's failure to work? How are people today sometimes similarly guilty?

Stirred up by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the leaders of the people got to work and led the people to get back to work on the temple. The leaders led and the teachers taught, so the people went to work!

This is also described in Haggai 1:12-15. Zerubbabel and Joshua (cf. 2:2) determined to lead the people to get back to work. Note that Haggai 1:1 calls Zerubbabel the governor of Judah. He was a civil leader, where Joshua was the high priest and the leader of spiritual worship. Together they again led the people back to work. This began in the sixth month of the second year of the reign of Darius.

As a result, God spoke through Haggai and assured the people that God was once again with them (1:13). They had repented of their neglect and had gone back to work, so once again they had His favor. Various passages in Haggai and Zechariah continue to assure them of God's favor.

Likewise we need preachers, teachers, and elders like Haggai and Zechariah who see the real problem and will speak God's message and warn the people of the need to get to work! Sometimes people will be stirred up to get the job done if they have the leadership they need. With the effort of dedicated teachers, like Haggai and Zechariah, and the leadership of committed men, like Zerubbabel and Joshua, God's people today may be stirred up to get to work. If we do, we can have confidence that God will also be with us and bless our work for Him.

Verses 3-5

5. Who led the people to get back to work (Ezra 5:2)? What lessons should leaders in the church today learn?

6. Who questioned the Jews about their work? What temporary decision was made (v5)? The governor questions the Jews about their work

The people were questioned about this work by Tattenai, the governor of the region, along with another man named Shethar Bozenai and other companions. Tattenai is called the governor of the region beyond the River – presumably this is the river Euphrates. So he was a higher authority than Zerubbabel. The latter was governor of Judah, but Tattenai was governor over the whole region. So he had a right to investigate.

He began by asking what authority the Jews had for their work – who commanded them to work on the temple. This was a legitimate question. In fact, it was the question that should have been asked and answered properly in chap. 4. We will see that these rulers are evidently not prejudiced against the work of the Jews. They are a different group of people from those who lived in the land and actively opposed the work of the Jews in chap. 4. These people have proper authority; and as good rulers, they simply wanted to know what the law was and apply it properly. So they asked what law or authority the Jews had.

The Jews also responded respectfully and wisely this time. They told the rulers who all their leaders were in the work. And, we will see from the later story, that they told them of the authority that had been given them by Cyrus.

The civil rulers determined to check the matter out to see whether or not the king had a record of the authorization that the Jews claimed to have received. But in the meanwhile they decided not to stop the work until they had consulted with Darius. Obviously, these rulers, not being from among the people of the land, were not hostile as had been the people in chap. 4. But the passage also says this happened by the power of God. He worked with the Jews so the rulers were favorable.

All this also shows that the Jews had been without excuse for stopping work in the first place. Had they told about the authority they had, and had they been determined to continue the work, God would have blessed them before so they never would have stopped the work. The fact He was displeased with them shows they should have continued working all along.

Verses 6-10

7. How did Tattenai summarize the Jews' work to the king (vv 6-10)?

The letter of the governor to King Darius

These verses then record the letter Tattenai the governor, along with Shethar Baznai and his companions, sent to King Darius to inquire about the Jews' work on the temple. They began by explaining that the people of Judea were building a temple to their great God, making it of timber and heavy stones. They said the people were diligent in the work and the work was prospering.

They then told the king about their inquiry as to what authority they had to build the temple, and they had asked the names of the chief men among them. All this was being reported to the king, and it was an accurate record of what had happened.

Verses 11-16

8. What answer had the Jews given regarding why the temple had been destroyed?

9. What authority did the Jews give for their work?

This part of the letter then records the response the Jews gave to the rulers, including more detail than had been recorded in v4. The Jews had first said that they were servants of the great God who ruled heaven and earth, and the temple they were rebuilding had originally been built

by one of their earlier great kings. This, of course, was a reference to Solomon, who had built the original temple (1 Kings 6:1,38).

The Jews then explained that their ancestors had later become unfaithful to God, so He had punished them by allowing the Babylonians to take them away into captivity (2 Chron. 36:16,17). At that time the temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

They then explained that, when King Cyrus of the Persians had come into power, he had decreed that they could return to Judea and rebuild the temple (see on 1:1). And in fact, he had returned to them the articles of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple when he had destroyed it. All these had been given to a man named Sheshbazzar, who had been named governor and who had been commanded to bring these articles to Judea (1:7-11). This man had brought the articles as commanded and had begun building the foundation. But the temple had not been completed. Of course, the point was that they were now finishing what had been authorized by Cyrus many years before.

This was the reply that the Jews should have given in chap. 4 to the people of the land who stopped them from their work. If they had then the same commitment to the work that they had here in chap. 5, they would never have stopped the work. And that is why God was upset with them. Fortunately, they were now back on the job, and they have given a proper explanation to these rulers. And the rulers have given an accurate explanation of the matter to the king.

Verse 17

10. What did Tattenai request of the king?

11. How did the Jews' response in this case differ from chap. 4, when their enemies then insisted they stop work?

Tattenai's letter to Darius accurately conveyed the situation as it was. Tattenai then requested that the king check this out in the records to see if Cyrus really had made such a decree as the Jews claimed. Then he asked the king to write back and tell the governor what the facts were and how he wanted them to handle this matter. The results will be recorded in the next chapter.

Note that this demonstrates an important Bible principle: God's people should submit to civil law, but it is Scriptural for us to appeal to the authority of human rulers to protect us from enemies and wrongdoers. Civil rulers are ordained of God for the punishment of evildoers and the reward of those who do good (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:11-15). If that is their purpose, then God approves of our calling upon these rulers to protect our righteous cause. Paul used this principle several times when he was threatened with harm by those who opposed his work (Acts 22:25-29; 25:10-12).

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