

The Work of Man and the Providence of God

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[0 : 0 0] We come now, friends, to our Bible reading from Ezra, Book of Ezra, chapters 5 and 6. So let's find that together. If you have the church Bibles, you'll find this on page 392.

392. But to give it a little bit of historical context, let me just remind you of the stories so far.

The exile, the famous, infamous exile of the Jews to Babylon has now come to an end. And Cyrus has become the Persian emperor.

And in 539 BC, he commands the Jews, or at least those that want to go, to return to Jerusalem so as to rebuild the temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians some 50 years previously.

So something like 50,000 Jews courageously make the journey back to Jerusalem. It's a bit like a second exodus. And they make a rapid and enthusiastic start to the work of rebuilding, led by Jeshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, who's a descendant of David's kingly line.

[1 : 1 6] They start off by rebuilding the altar on the site of the temple so that they can begin to offer sacrifices again. And then they lay the foundations, the foundation stones of the temple building itself.

And they celebrate the beginning of the building with great emotion, joyful shouting, and sobbing tears, as we noticed a couple of weeks ago. However, very quickly, opposition to the building work arises in the local Gentile population.

And pressure, great pressure, is put on the Jews to stop this rebuilding project. The Jews give in to the pressure, and the whole project grinds to a halt. Just look at the final verse of chapter 4, just back over the page.

Chapter 4, verse 24. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

And nothing further happened for about 18 years. So there's an 18-year gap between the end of chapter 4 and the start of chapter 5. Now, at the beginning of chapter 5, we'll discover that Jeshua and Zerubbabel, the leaders, are still alive, still leading the people, but nothing has been moving at the building site.

[2 : 3 2] And the people are clearly in a state of lethargy and indecision and half despair. Now, much of chapters 5 and 6, which I'm about to read, are a record of letters.

Letters exchanged between Tatanai, the provincial governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates, and King Darius, who is now at the beginning of his 35 years reign.

So here we go, chapter 5, verse 1. Enter Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets, the same Haggai and Zechariah, whose books appear at the end of the Old Testament. It's quite a long reading, friends, so pin back your ears, tighten your seatbelts, gird up your loins, and if your neighbor begins to slumber halfway through the reading, you're very much at liberty to dig him.

It wouldn't be her, to dig him in the ribs. So Ezra, chapter 5, verse 1. Now, the prophets Haggai 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.

Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, the son of Josedach, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

[3 : 45] At the same time, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, and Shetharbozanai 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? 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.

This is a copy of the letter that Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, and Shetharbozanai 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 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?

[5 : 00] We also asked them their names for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. 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.

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 Sheshbazar, 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 Sheshbazar 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.

[6 : 32] And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter. 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 Ekbatana, the capital that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which 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 60 cubits, and its breadth 60 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 its place.

You shall put them in the house of God. Now therefore, Tatanai, governor of the province beyond the river, Shethar Bozani and your associates, the governors who are in the province beyond the river, keep away.

[7 : 47] Let the work on this house of God alone. 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. 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.

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. 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. Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, Shethar Bosani 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 Ido. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes, king of Persia.

[9 : 25] 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. 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. On the 14th 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 everyone 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.

[10 : 52] This is the word of the Lord and may the Lord add his blessing to it for us this evening. Well, let's open up at Ezra chapters five and six again, page 392.

My title for this evening is The Work of Man and the Providence of God. Well, we are once again in ancient history tonight.

We're in the 6th century BC, in the 500s BC. And I wonder if sometimes we can be historical snobs. What I mean is that we can read stories of people who lived a very long time ago and we can perhaps imagine, without any good reason, that they didn't live life in quite the full-blooded way that we live it today.

They can almost seem like toy men and women. Because they've been dead and gone for such a long time, we can think that perhaps, in a way, they were playing with life. They can almost seem like puppets on a little stage.

This king went to battle in his shining armor. Then he built a city. Then he knocked down somebody else's city. Oh, what a nasty way to behave. Then he married a beautiful princess and they lived unhappily ever after.

[12 : 27] These things can seem rather unreal because it all happened such a long time ago. But they were not unreal. The blood that ran in their veins was every bit as red as the blood that runs in ours.

They ate and drank with the same enjoyment or disgust that we do. They worked. They slept. They got dirty. They washed themselves occasionally.

They laughed. They cried. They coughed. They sneezed. They broke their legs. They broke their hearts in the same way that we do today. This man, Tatanai, he was the real governor of a great province that stretched from the river Euphrates to the Mediterranean Sea.

He carried heavy responsibilities. Darius, he was the emperor of an enormous empire, great swathe of country which stretched from the borders of Greece in the west right the way through, think in the modern atlas, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and as far as Afghanistan in the east.

Would you sleep well if you were in charge of that lot? And the leaders of the Jews, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, they were anxious leaders of a struggling little Jewish nation that was trying to reestablish itself in its homeland.

[13 : 44] Life was real and life was tough for these people. Their average lifespan was probably closer to 40 than to 80. They were up against levels of harsh reality that we are often shielded from in our modern world.

These were real men and women. And the work that these Israelites wanted to do, the rebuilding of the temple and the city, this too was real work and very difficult.

Again, we might be tempted to be a little condescending about their building project. Oh, how nice. A little temple. It was only 90 foot high and 90 foot across.

Tiny compared with many modern buildings. And yes, a little city, big enough to accommodate just a few tens of thousands. But this was real work and it was God who planned it and God who made it happen.

And if we think that the work that God gave them to do bears no relationship to the work that God has given us to do, we would be mistaken. Their job was to build a temple, a dwelling place for God which spoke of his presence among them.

[14 : 49] And our God-given job is also to build a temple. Not a temple of stone and timber but of people. People who, in the Apostle Peter's phrase, are living stones.

And our God-given task of building this temple is a very glorious one because the temple that we are engaged in building by the grace of God is a temple that endures.

The Jews in 520 BC were building a temple which was destined to be knocked down in the end. But our temple, the living men and women in whom God dwells by his Holy Spirit, that is a temple that lives on into eternity, a multitude of men and women whom no one can number to be gathered around God's throne in the new world, worshipping him and Jesus, the Lamb who was slain.

So there's a very powerful connection between what the Jews were doing in 520 BC and what we are called to do today by the grace of God. If you're a Christian, you're engaged on a task which is unrivaled in its significance and glory.

It is the building of God's temple, the populating of the new creation with countless numbers of people, sinners who have been rescued to be ultimately transformed.

[16 : 08] So let's look at this task faced by Jeshua and Zerubbabel and we'll learn some good lessons from these chapters which will help us to see our own work and task more clearly. Now first of all, and I hinted at this a little bit earlier, let's notice the extraordinary contrast between the very end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5.

That last verse of chapter 4 is so depressing. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius.

Stopped and ceased. There's a ray of hope in the final phrase of the verse until the second year of Darius but the first half of that verse makes you want to weep. But then look at the first two verses of chapter 5.

Now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Josedach arose, it's a great verb, arose, and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem and the prophets of God, that means Haggai and Zechariah were with them supporting them.

So suddenly there is a sense of energy and determination. There's no suggestion that the opposition of chapter 4 had died down or gone away. So what can account for the transformed situation?

[17 : 32] Well, you might say vigorous prophets. prophets. That's the key factor. These men, Haggai and Zechariah, they must have had fire in their bellies and thunder in their voices. Who could resist them?

They were mighty men. Well, yes, no doubt they were lively characters. But to say that the transformation was due to the prophets misses the much greater reality because it was God who was at work.

The essence of the Old Testament prophet is that God is speaking through him. the prophet is the conduit of the message, not its creator. It's God who raises up the prophet and it's God who teaches the prophet what to say.

This is the work of God that we're observing here. Just look at the first three words of verse 1. As soon as we read now the prophets, we know that the Lord is rolling up his sleeves and bearing his arm and it becomes explicit as the verse unfolds.

The prophets prophesied to the Jews in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. God is over Haggai and Zechariah. He's the superintendent of the whole situation.

[18 : 42] Ezra, the author of the book, is telling us gently but very clearly who is in charge of all the wonderful developments recorded in chapters 5 and 6. Then look on to chapter 5 verse 5.

By this stage the Jewish leaders are being challenged by Tattani and the others over whether they have official authority to rebuild the temple. Who gave you a decree to build this house?

The governor asks them in verse 3. But in the face of this rather threatening approach, Ezra says in verse 5, but the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews.

Again, it's gently expressed but it's clearly telling us who is in charge of this universe. Then look on to chapter 6 verse 22, the very last verse of the chapter which records the reestablishment of the Passover festival after the temple has been completed.

And Ezra says, 6.22, 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.

[19 : 53] Who but God could turn the heart of a pagan king so that he would help the servants of God to build the temple of God? Now you might be surprised to see Darius, the Persian king, described in that verse as the king of Assyria.

I think the reason for this is that the Persian dynasty, Cyrus and Darius and so on, they had swallowed up the Babylonian dynasty which existed before them and the Babylonian dynasty had itself swallowed up the Assyrian dynasty about a hundred years earlier and the king of Persia now would style himself in more than one way because he was in a sense also king of Assyria.

You may know that Queen Victoria as well as being queen of Britain was also officially styled as the empress of India. That's probably the same sort of thing here in verse 22.

It makes the great monarch look even more magnificent. But the point is that Ezra is again dropping into his text a message about who is really in charge of all the history that he's recording.

The Lord has the king's heart in his hand. And just for a sneak preview glance forward to chapter 7 verse 6 where Ezra is beginning to write about his own part in the story many years later.

[21 : 11] Look at the end of the verse 7-6 The king granted Ezra all that he asked for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. Look at the end of verse 9 in chapter 7 For the good hand of his God was on Ezra.

Now he's so restrained in the way that he expresses it. He's not jumping up and down or shouting or stamping his foot but he's telling us in no uncertain terms that the will and purpose and provision of the Lord is the decisive factor every step of the way.

The human action is secondary and responsive. Our instinct because we're self-centered is always to put man in the center of the stage but Ezra is gently adjusting the tectonic plates of our understanding.

And just see how lovingly he describes the providence of God. Chapter 5 verse 5 The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews. Chapter 7 verse 9 The good hand of his God was on Ezra.

So the eye is lovingly parental seeing everything missing nothing. The hand gives the gentlest of pressure but guides the situation nonetheless.

[22 : 27] And the Lord whose eye watches and whose hand steers also chapter 6 verse 22 turns the heart of a pagan king so that he helps the Israelites.

That same thought is expressed in the book of Proverbs chapter 21 verse 1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he wills.

Well now we're going to turn to the human action now because it's very instructive but we do need to be clear first and foremost that what happens in this history indeed in all history is the outworking of God's good and purposeful will.

if we miss that element in the book of Ezra we miss the most important thing. The book of Ezra like all the Old Testament historical books is a book about God how God steers the fortunes of his people and works out his purpose for them.

Well let's move now from the decisive work of God to the energizing words of the prophets. And we've already noticed in chapter 5 verses 1 and 2 how their preaching acted as the catalyst to get this rebuilding project up and going again.

[23 : 42] Now that was in 520 BC the second year of the reign of King Darius. And you'll see that Haggai and Zechariah appear again in chapter 6 verse 14 which records the completion of the temple barely five years later in 515 BC.

Let me read those verses again 14 and 15 of chapter 6. 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.

The elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. So these two men were at it for five years.

Back in chapter 5 verse 2 we read that the two prophets were with Zerubbabel and Jeshua supporting them. Now they may have helped with the actual manual labor of the building work but I think we can be sure that they were constantly at the site of the temple encouraging the workers and strengthening the morale of the leaders.

[25 : 03] Now just imagine a scenario before the appearance of Haggai and Zechariah. They come in 520. So just think back to a scenario in 521 BC when the temple foundations have been laid but no work has been done on the site for about 18 years.

So here we are in a small street in suburban Jerusalem and two middle-aged men old friends bump into each other and have a chat. Good morning Yehudi and are you keeping well this fine morning?

Can't grumble Ehad no point grumbling is there whoever loved a miserable face. And what are you doing today Yehudi is it a busy day? Do you have a long to-do list today? Oh yes I'm quite busy.

I finished putting in our new kitchen you know a few months ago and now I'm working to finish the sitting room. I've got some lovely cedar wood some of the off cuts that came from the temple project you know been lying about and never got used.

It's a lovely pale red color this cedar wood doesn't even need staining just careful planing for a smooth finish and then tacked on in just the right right position. You know my Rachel she's always loved paneling.

[26 : 13] Even when we were stepping out together you know on the shores of Loch Lombe no it wouldn't have been even when we were stepping out together all those years ago she used to say to me Yehudi I love a paneled sitting room.

So restful on the eye I suppose she was dropping a hint wasn't she? So Ehad that's my job for the next few days plane down the last few boards set them in place and then invite my lovely Rachel to come and inspect them.

Now don't turn this up let's hear the opening blast of the message of the prophet Haggai addressed specifically to Jeshua and Zerubbabel.

Thus says the Lord of hosts these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet is it a time for you for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?

Thus says the Lord consider your ways you have sown much and harvested little you eat but you never have enough you drink but you never have your fill thus says the Lord consider your ways go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified says the Lord you looked for much and behold it came to little and when you brought it home I blew it away why?

[27 : 36] declares the Lord of hosts because of my house that lies in ruins while each of you busies himself with his own house then a bit later in Haggai chapter 1 we read then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Josedach the high priest with all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the word of Haggai the prophet and the people feared the Lord and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts their God on the 24th day of the 6th month in the 2nd year of Darius the king so our friend Yehudi left his Rachel in the sitting room to admire the cedar paneling on her own and he went down to the site of the temple and he rolled up his sleeves and spat upon his hands now there isn't time for me to read excerpts from Zechariah but he speaks a similar message but the point is this that the word of the Lord spoken by the prophets galvanizes the people and their two leaders into action and they get on with the job so diligently that within five years the building is finished so let's grasp this point and rejoice in it for ourselves it is the word of the Lord that concentrates the minds and activates the wills of the people of God

Haggai's words there that I quoted are very strong they came as a lashing to the people's consciences I must say when I read Haggai I tend to think of the Grand National did you watch the Grand National a week or two ago I did I'm no fan of racing but I do like to watch that one race because I think because it's so demanding and difficult and you can see there's such effort that has to be put into it but those jockeys you just think of these little Irishmen sitting up on the horses there they are on the home straight and they're lashing they've got the whip in one hand haven't they they're lashing the old horse to get going as fast as possible on the home straight the whip is applied very strongly and the old horse discovers just how fast he can run now that's what Haggai was doing in a way he was lashing the people with his words Zechariah's prophecy is gentler and more gently encouraging and I think we can assume that the Israelites like ourselves needed both the lashings and the encouragements but the moral of the story for us is that we need the word of the Lord to be forcefully pumped into our systems in big doses regularly if we're to get on with the work of building the Lord's human temple in 2016 don't stay away from church unless you want to end up like the three-toed sloth that hangs upside down in the forests of Brazil and doesn't move very much have you seen one of those beasts in the zoo the three-toed sloth it's a magnificent creature but it doesn't do much does it it's the word of the Lord that gets God's people into action working together enthusiastically we know that don't we in this church

I don't know if you ever listen to a program on radio three called choral even song anybody listen to that I was listening to it this very afternoon I very often do it's broadcast every week on a Sunday at three and I think on a Wednesday afternoon as well usually from a cathedral now the music of choral comes from an Anglican cathedral the music is lovely most of the words are Bible words set to music by skillful composers and sung beautifully by well-trained choirs but there is never a sermon and I listen to the lovely music which I enjoy and at the end of the service I always find myself wanting to say come on Mr. Preacher stand up in the pulpit and bring us a forceful sermon from the Bible we need it haven't you read in the Psalms that it's the unfolding of the word of God that brings light but there's no sermon perhaps because the gentle congregation of Gloucester Cathedral or some Oxford college don't want to have their cage rattled by the voice of heaven it can't have been very comfortable listening to Haggai and Zechariah back in 520 BC but their preaching brought the people the word of God and the people obeyed and what a blessing it was to them the words of the prophets energized the people so friends let's be constantly energized ourselves by the words of the Bible the preaching and the teaching and working together in groups and all this that brings the Bible into our systems well let's notice next the boldness of God's people the story of chapter 5 is told very straightforwardly and I think it's quite easy to follow the prophets preach in verse 1 and then the people led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua begin the rebuilding in verse 2 now that sort of activity when a big building site is full of working people that doesn't go unnoticed if you have hundreds of men working vigorously at a site you can't conceal it you can't disguise what's going on so in verse 3 the governor of the province and his colleagues see what is happening and they go straight to the Jewish leaders and ask them two questions first verse 3 who authorized you to do this building work in other words have you got planning permission that is what it is and secondly verse 4 a rather threatening question what are the names of the men who are building this building if you know people's names it strengthens your legal position if some kind of conflict develops but verse 5 because the lord was watching over the project the Jews were allowed to carry on with the work until a definite ruling could be obtained from King Darius and that could be done really very quickly apparently communication systems were rapid in the Persian Empire with fast horses and so on and letters could be exchanged between Jerusalem and Susa the capital of the empire in just a matter of days so in verse 6

Tatanai the provincial governor pens a letter to Darius which starts in verse 7 to Darius the king and goes on to the end of the chapter and you'll realize that from verse 11 to verse 16 Tatanai is reporting to the king what the Jews have said to Tatanai by way of explaining their actions your majesty Tatanai is saying I asked the Jews who had authorized the rebuilding work and I asked also for the names of their leaders and this is how they replied so let's notice the reply because there's boldness in it but also there's a humble integrity quite often in the Old Testament the Israelites do things and say things which are not to be imitated by later generations but this is different this is a good example for us to follow let's notice first how they identify themselves in verse 11 they say we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth now isn't that a bold way to describe themselves they might have said cringingly we're poor persecuted Israelites we're trying to get a toehold back in the land of our fathers please cut us a little slack but no they say we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth a phrase which carries with it an implicit criticism of other religions it's a little bit like saying we're the servants of the one true God so they don't confess their identity in the human terms of family or ancestry or land they think of themselves as servants of the God of heaven and earth

I wonder if you found it very interesting I did two or three weeks ago that revelation of the Archbishop of Canterbury's true paternity did you hear about that now I would rather swim with piranhas than be the Archbishop of Canterbury wouldn't you it's an impossible job in a church which has been much undermined by liberal theology but I thought the Archbishop spoke very well about that question he had just discovered at the age of 60 that his real father was not Mr. Welby that he'd always thought was his father but somebody called Sir Anthony Montague Brown now if I discovered at the age of 60 that my real name should not be Lob but Bridlington Fosbury I think I think I would feel quite perturbed and unsettled by it but Justin Welby the Archbishop said family names and family history are secondary matters my identity first and foremost is that I belong to Jesus Christ that really warmed my heart to hear him say that it was a statement that was both bold and true and very similar to what the

[36 : 40] Jewish leaders say here in verse 11 so that's something about their identity who they belong to next they know their history verse 11 we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago which a great king of Israel built and finished that of course was Solomon more than 400 years before lesson for us know your Bible history the better we know our Bible history from the beginning to the book of Revelation the more unshakable our trust in the Lord will be next in verse 12 and this is a most important psychological and emotional factor in verse 12 the Jews show that they have deeply accepted and acknowledged the national sin and apostasy that caused the exile in the first place so they say in verse 12 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 now that's called fronting up to reality about one's own past what they're saying is we sinned we rebelled against the Lord and we were justly punished for our rebellion our chastisement was no more than we deserved but verse 13 you'll see begins with a big however and that indicates the hinge point in their thinking and shows that they're aware of God's grace for the future as well as his punishment for the past however they say in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt and they go on to explain the details of the golden silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken as spoils of war and how Cyrus had decreed back in 539 BC that these should be taken back to Jerusalem to serve their proper purpose in the temple so the Jews realized that they had a future of blessing as well as a past of punishment so Tatanai the governor includes all this information in his letter to the king and realizing that important legal questions are involved he ends his letter in verse 17 by asking king Darius to have the royal archives in Babylon searched to see whether the Jews were telling a load of fibs in claiming to have royal authorization for the rebuilding now we know that they were not fibbing because the very first verse of the book of Ezra records the very decree that king

Cyrus had made the decree on which the rebuilding program was founded the decree which fulfilled the God given prophecy of Jeremiah so the Jews trusting that God was working out his good purposes they behave with boldness truthfulness and integrity often as I said a moment ago often their behavior in the Old Testament is not exemplary but it certainly is here so far then we've seen the decisive work of God his gracious overruling and providence the energizing words of the prophets the boldness and integrity of God's people and now let's think finally of how God sometimes harnesses the power of pagan kings to fulfill his purposes because that is what is happening here in chapters five and six you can almost sense Ezra the author chuckling a little bit as he writes up his account at the amazing idea that this pagan king should be so helpful just look back for a moment to chapter four verse four chapter four verse four the year at this point is 538

BC the temple foundation has been laid but at chapter four verse four adversaries discourage the Jews and bring the work to a halt and then chapter four verse 24 as we saw the work ceases for 18 years until the second year of Darius no work at all from 538 to 520 18 years of wretched discouragement but what gets it all going again God raises the prophets to preach and God causes Tatanai the provincial governor to make inquiries which lead to the rediscovery of Cyrus's original decree it's all there it's all there they find in writing ink on parchment the beginning of chapter six tells us of how Darius discovered Cyrus's decree look at verse two in chapter six and in Ekbatana the capital in the province of Media a scroll was found on which was written the decree of Cyrus now I just want to have a word at this moment to the

Iranians downstairs brothers and sisters can you see me can you hear me I hope so can you hear me in Farsi I hope so I looked at this city of Ekbatana chapter six verse two and I got my bible atlas and I set it out next to my modern atlas to see just where Ekbatana is well apparently it's in Iran in more or less the same place in fact perhaps exactly the same place as modern Hamadan are you glad to hear that downstairs Iran is in the bible is that good news Britain is not you will not find Achta Mahdi in the bible or Stratford upon Avon but you will find Iran Ekbatana the old capital of the Median empire so Cyrus's unalterable decree they were always unalterable it's discovered and it says verse three let the house must be rebuilt the place where sacrifices were offered and let its foundations be retained its height shall be 60 cubits and its breadth 60 cubits with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber now look at the next sentence and be amazed let the cost be paid from the royal treasury god is causing the pagan emperor to pay the cost of putting up this building for the honor of the god of israel and then in verse five

[43 : 19] Cyrus orders the restoration of all the gold and silver vessels to the temple so in verse six Darius who's now the emperor says to Tatanai and his colleagues keep away in other words don't interfere with this building program moreover verse eight pay the full cost of the program without delay and verse nine supply all their needs for their sacrifices and other rituals animals for burnt offerings wheat and salt and wine and oil as required why verse ten that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the god of heaven oh and also pray for the life of the king and his sons you see there's almost a superstitious self-interest there isn't there then there's this horrific deterrent given in verse 11 to anyone who might be foolish enough to cross the king's wishes 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 it's enough to make even a prop forward quiver so what happens verse 13 they obey the king's orders you would wouldn't you verse 14 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 Darius's reign that was 515 BC now that verse 14 it's a great summary of the forces that brought the building project to completion there were three things involved first the prophesying of the prophets secondly the decree of God which is of course the primary cause and also the decree of the kings Artaxerxes is mentioned there because although he lived much later in the middle of the following century it was he who allowed both Ezra and Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem so I think he's included here with Cyrus and Darius as another monarch who supported the work of God's people now there is a mystery and an ambiguity in all this because kings and governments and states very often oppose

God rather than assist the work of his people as Psalm 2 puts it the kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed that's the norm I think we can say and over 20 centuries many regimes have been very uneasy with the church sometimes persecuting it fiercely why because earthly kings crave the allegiance of their people and Christian people like to give their primary allegiance not to an earthly king but to a heavenly one the Bible of course teaches us to be good citizens and to submit to government Jesus says render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's Paul says submit to the governing authorities they've been instituted by God Peter says fear God honor the emperor and yet John the apostle in the book of Revelation describes the Roman state as the great prostitute now those ideas are not contradicting each other they each need to be read in their own context but one thing we can be sure about and that is that the hand that rules the world is the hand of God not the hand of kings and presidents so when government is favorable as it is here in Ezra chapter 6 the people rejoice and the work goes forward when government enacts laws that counter the Bible's teaching let's be patient and let's pray let's lobby and exercise our democratic rights so that we can reduce the degree to which the law of the land counters the will of God but patience is required and endurance well the temple is finally rebuilt and what happens next well the final paragraph of chapter 6 tells us the Passover lamb is slaughtered and by slaughtering the

Passover lamb the people of God are looking back 900 years to their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and they're looking forward over 500 years to the great deliverance that is to come the sacrifice of the final lamb of God whose shed blood has set us free from the fear of death and judgment so our task today friends is to keep on building the Lord's temple by the grace of God with the living stones of human beings who are born again and who are being transformed into the likeness of Christ let's allow the preaching of the word of God to energize us then like the Jews let's speak about God with integrity and boldness and let's rejoice that the eye of the Lord is upon us and the hand of God is gripping us to steer our work forward finally chapter 6 verse 22 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 who is the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ let us pray we do thank you dear heavenly father for the assurance of these chapters and indeed of the whole Bible that your kindly and loving father's eye is upon your people and your good hand is upon us to exert pressure to guide and steer the work help us to be responsive help us to love your word your words preached your words studied and taught and discussed together and we pray that you will help us to be bold servants of yours unashamed of the one to whom we belong and always willing to speak of him and please bless the work of this church and other churches that seek to honor you and we ask it all in the name of

[49 : 52] Jesus Christ our Lord Amen Amen fursties unable to pelvic■■■