

The Lord Who Turns the Hearts of Kings

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now, and we're back in the Old Testament in the book of Ezra, which Paul was preaching on a little while before Christmas, coming back to now.

And we're going to be reading Ezra chapter 5 and Ezra chapter 6 today. And this is the story of how some of the Israelites, a small remnant, if you like, of the Israelites returned after the long exile to Babylon, then Persia, returned to the land of Israel, began rebuilding, but faced all kinds of opposition in different ways.

Building started and stopped. And here in chapter 5 and chapter 6, we have a remarkable story of how, once again, opponents of, well, opponents of the Lord and His kingdom and the advance of His kingdom tried to stop once again these faithful Israelites in their tracks.

So let's begin at 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.

[1 : 40] At the same time, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, and Shethar-Bosani and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish the structure?

He 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 Shethar-Bosani 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's being built with huge stones and timber is laid on the walls. The work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. And then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?

[2 : 57] 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 the 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 that were in Babylon to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem.

[4 : 26] 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 this 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, a place where sacrifices were offered. Let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be 60 cubits, 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's 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, Shetharbozni, and your associates and governors who are in the province beyond the river, keep away.

[5 : 45] 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 the 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 of 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.

And I also 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 at 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 and let it be done with all diligence. Then, according to the words sent by Darius the king, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, Shetharboznai and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.

[7 : 34] And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Edou. 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. And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the returned exile celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

They offered at the dedication of this house of God a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs and as a sinner offering for all Israel twelve 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 fourteenth 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.

[9 : 00] It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile and also by everyone who had joined them and separated themselves 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.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well please have Ezra chapters five and six open there in front of you and that will be helpful as we spend some time in this story tonight.

Proverbs 21 verse 1 reads this way the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord he turns it wherever he will and these chapters in Ezra are a very vivid illustration of that proverb the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord he turns it wherever he will you see God is the one who is directing history even the most powerful kings in our world he is able to direct to use for his own purposes there is as we've sung a higher throne a higher throne than the thrones of this world the thrones we can see there is a higher throne and when it comes to God's plans and his purposes there is nothing nothing and no one in this world that can stand against them there is nothing and no one that is beyond his use even a king like Darius even Darius could be used by God for his own purposes

God is able to move people's hearts hearts the hearts of kings but also the hearts of his own people it was his people that the Lord attended to first and we saw that some weeks ago as we looked at the opening verse of chapter five remember the situation at the end of chapter four inertia apathy after a very encouraging start to the rebuilding work at the temple remember the temple was in ruins so there's nothing there but the people returned and they began to rebuild they laid the foundations great celebration very encouraging but pretty quickly opposition arose God's people were afraid to build they stopped building for sixteen years sixteen years nothing happened nothing grew apart from the weeds and shrubs on the site of the temple but as we saw at the start of chapter five august 520 bc ticks around and everything changes the prophets haggai and zachariah preached and within a matter of weeks rebuilding work had begun again after sixteen years look again at those verses at the start of chapter five the prophets haggai and zachariah 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 zeddaq arose and began to rebuild the house of god that is in jerusalem and the prophets of god were with them supporting them god's people heard the challenging words from the lips of haggai and zachariah and they responded with the real repentance they obeyed the call of faith they heard what they said and they got building again god's preached word we saw is effective god's preached word does things they can transform a dull passive apathetic people and in an instance transform them mobilize them within a matter of days in this case from sixteen years of nothing within a few weeks rebuilding work is begun again god's preached word challenges it stirs up it transforms it convicts it drives us to repent but it also encourages us this wasn't a hit and run job by haggai and zachariah they brought the challenging word from the lord yes it had its effect the building work started but once it started look at end of verse two the prophets were with them supporting them for four years you get a sense of that encouragement from haggai let me read from chapter one it says in chapter one of haggai then haggai the messenger of the lord spoke to the people of the lord's message i am with you declares the lord just a few weeks before his preaching cut them to the heart they transformed them in their repentance they began building but once that repentance came the promise of god's presence with them as they began that work again haggai spoke words of extraordinary tenderness words that put steel in the spine of the builders the lord was with them be strong i the god of israel the creator of heaven and earth i am with you and there was this renewed realization the words of haggai ringing in their ears that now enables god's people to withstand the fresh opposition that arises

almost immediately look at verse three at the same time tathaniah and his associates they come with a fresh round of opposition their questions who gave you the decree to build this house to finish this structure give us the names i want a list of people who are building this temple would god's people fold like they had 16 years earlier would they crumble under the pressure again will they become afraid withdraw stop building well not this time god's word had spoken they'd heard and heeded the challenge from haggai and zachariah they'd obeyed the word of god they repented they got back to work this time there'd be no stopping the building there was steel in their spines look at verse five 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 the key reality to all we're going to read in the rest of these chapters the eye of their god was on them it is just as zachariah has just prophesied in his prophecy he says thus says the lord of hosts he who touches you touches the apple of his eye behold i will shake my hand over them and they shall become plunder for those who served you as the psalmist writes behold the eye of the lord is on those who fear him on those who hope in his steadfast love see the eye of the lord is on his people and that is key to all that follows someone put it this way what god's word had said in motion had no lack of his care his watchful eye would see it through at this stage only fear could have halted the work so they had heard the word of the lord within weeks of the rebuilding starting opposition arose but they stood firm they did not stop building and what follows in the rest of chapter 5 and 6 is the correspondence that took place between the opponents of the building and king darius and this correspondence demonstrates the reality that god's eye was on his people the temple was going to be rebuilt there was nothing that was going to stand in its way so i'm going to briefly summarize the content and then draw out some key lessons okay so we'll move quite quickly but let's look at this now so the opposition comes from tathani and shethar bozani and they put together a fairly straightforward and factual letter so it seems and you see the content of that from verse 7 they sent darius a report in which was written as follows and they get a copy of the letter and the letter states that they have discovered the resumption of the building works of the temple and the reports the two questions they put to the leaders of the

- [18 : 59] Jews namely who gave you permission to finish this structure and please give us the names of those who are building now as you read the letter it seems straightforward factual seemingly polite but in reality this was a letter designed to stop the building in its tracks don't be deceived despite the politeness there was a real opposition to the work of God here and we'll see later there is a deeper enemy who is behind these schemes and this would have felt like incredible pressure for the Jews put yourself in the shoes of Zerubbabel and Joshua 16 years of nothing happening suddenly there's a burst of activity following the prophecy of Hagar and Zechariah they regrouped the people they're there building and no sooner do they start no sooner are their boots on the ground than a fresh line of opposition comes a letter has been written to the king to Darius that's pressure officialdom has ascended and it's writing a report for the king of the empire how would God's people respond you can well imagine Zerubbabel and Joshua meeting with the key leaders to discuss the response what do we do well we see something of their response included in the letter from verse 11 and it's robust for the eye of the Lord is upon them look at what they say so this is Tathaniah and Shethar Bozani including the response the Jews gave to them and this is their reply to us they say verse 11 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 it goes on setting out what had happened and the permission that Cyrus had given so then Tethaniah poses the question to Darius can search of the archives be made please can it be sought out that this really is true that Cyrus really did give permission for the rebuilding of the temple can you check that this is real is this legitimate so the letter goes the letter goes to Darius and then chapter 6 we see what happens as he receives the letter Darius orders search to be made and sure enough chapter 6 verse 2 the document is found recording the decree for the rebuilding of the temple including the order that the cost of the rebuild will be funded from the royal treasury so

Darius then replies to Tathaniah and his pals and what Darius puts in his letter is beyond what God's people could possibly have hoped for not only does Darius instruct Tathaniah to leave God's people alone to get on with the building he instructs them on additional support he must ensure is given look at verse 8 make sure all the costs associated with the building are covered without delay and make sure they have the animals they need for all their sacrifices and so on to underline the point Darius adds sanctions should these terms not be met look at verse 11 10 I make a decree that if anyone alters his edict a beam shall be pulled out of his house and he shall be impaled upon it his house should be made a dunghill I think that's called a disincentive it's extraordinary isn't it this is far beyond what God's people could possibly have hoped for extraordinary and we see that it was done look at verse 13

Tataniah the governor of the province beyond the river Shethar Bosani and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered and so verse 15 we see the house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius four years later the temple is built it's finished after 16 long years of nothing happening suddenly a burst of activity on the building site after complaints are raised to the king the order is given to press on to provide all that was needed within four years the temple is done how do you explain that why was Darius so favorable well the text tells us it's the

[24 : 47] Lord it is God and his word that transforms the situation he is the one who is sovereign over his people he is sovereign over this world's kings it's the Lord and we draw out four things four lessons about God's sovereignty from these chapters number one God is sovereign over human hearts and human history look again verses 14 and 22 I think in chapter 6 I didn't tell you which chapter yeah chapter 6 so verse 14 and 22 of chapter 6 just look again at verse 14 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 this temple was built by the decree of God himself yes also these other kings Darius and so on but it's the Lord the God of heaven and earth who's decreed this building to be built look on to verse 22 they kept the feast of unleavened bread for 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 their work of the house of God the God of Israel it was God who'd done a work in the lives of his own people and in the life of the king God had stirred the heart of his own people but also stirred the heart of a king and there's a deeper reality yet and it's a reality exposed by Zechariah and his prophetic word to the people see Zechariah lifts the curtain on the seen world and he reveals a deeper reality to what's going on here behind the earthly expression of the opposition to the temple rebuilding there was another enemy there was the great enemy himself

Satan and that's the second thing you need to grasp from these chapters God is sovereign over human history he's sovereign over human hearts but he's also sovereign over the great enemy the deeper reality was that God had broken the power of Satan and so the door to progress was open Zechariah's vision which God's people had heard those verses of chapter five summarized the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah but these are some of the words they heard Zechariah said the Lord rebuke you Satan the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you Zechariah was revealing a deeper hidden reality it was God who broke Satan's opposition it was Satan who was really behind the work to destroy the building of the temple it was he who had that 16 year delay but it was God who broke that opposition and it was this that meant that the earthly temple could be rebuilt because the spiritual force of darkness and evil had been set aside their earthly manifestations

Tatanai and all those others they could not stand in the way of God's progress for his people as James Philip notes on these verses he says God's people were not working towards victory with the outcome somewhat uncertain rather they were working from victory Satan had been set aside and so the outcome was assured and that changes everything doesn't it God's people having heard those words from Zachariah knowing that Satan was no longer in the way that changed everything knowing that the key moment lay behind them not in front of them that changed everything uncertainty becomes certainty fearfulness becomes fearlessness uncertainty becomes confidence it was grasping this reality and heeding

God's word that enabled God's people to carry on with the building work they could do it with confidence it wasn't merely hearing Zachariah's words it was living out in response to it obeying acting in light of the reality that Satan was no longer hindering their work that is what enabled them to keep building yes Tatanai comes around with his letter but they knew a deeper reality that Satan who lay behind that ultimately had been set aside the Lord was sovereign they were working not towards victory but from us and we too in a far bigger way are working from victory not towards us we can look back in history to the decisive moment in all of human history the life the death the resurrection of Jesus Christ he has struck the decisive blow against the enemy and so the church you and

[30 : 39] I together we are working from victory not towards it the outcome is in no doubt whatsoever and so in the same way that God's people then could carry on with the building work despite the challenge brought by Tatanai and the others despite the fact the whole question was being brought to the very highest authority in the land the letter was going to King Darius a word from him and it could stop the building altogether but they knew there was a higher authority than that there was a higher throne they knew that reality the Lord had spoken and so they need not fear they could carry on they could keep building and that remains the case for us today yes there are opponents there will be those who seek to target and derail

God's servants they'll write letters they'll seek to cast doubts on the whole church building enterprise they'll threaten to go to the authorities with their seemingly polite letters yes there are setbacks things can seem desperately hard and unfair at times but the outcome the outcome secure God has spoken fully and finally and decisively God will build his church the enemy has been defeated the gates of hell will not prevail against the building of Jesus church and the reality is we go about our building work together here in the small corner of Scotland we go about that work from victory not towards it and that reality should change everything the only thing that will hinder us as we go about our work is collapsing to fear but fear not says

Jesus fear not my little flock the outcome is certain the enemy he's defeated and a church that obeys God's word and keeps building even against the human odds will know the Lord's kindness and provision and encouragement even if it battles us sometimes that's the third thing we see in these chapters God's sovereign plan sometimes battles us that's clear from these chapters isn't it the Lord turns Darius's heart but it took a very unpromising set of circumstances to bring that about they had in the end more than they could possibly have dreamed of in terms of building the temple all the resources they needed all the animals for the sacrifices it was provided we we've just sung of

God's mysterious providence with Cowper's hymn and the third verse that we sung says this ye fearful saints fresh courage take the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head was that not the experience of these temple builders no sooner had the work began after 16 young years no sooner had that resumed then opposition arose again Tathani and his entourage appear that is a cloud big with dread you can imagine on the building site Tathani comes along who gave you permission I want all the names every single name I want to written down that's intimidation isn't it that's pressure what's going on we've just restarted after 16 years are you serious and yet in God's mysterious providence this difficulty which seemed to threaten the whole project actually proved to be the catalyst for providing all the resources and help they needed to complete the project and with

Darius' letter there was the additional bonus of freedom from interference Tathani was told to leave them alone let them crack on it was the best possible outcome but it didn't seem like that at the start did it the clouds that we often dread they're often big with mercy they will often break with blessings on our heads so take courage friends when the clouds loom overhead when opponents write their letters and seek to discourage God's builders know the Lord is sovereign ask that the Lord would vindicate you as he did with those we read off here in Ezra 5 and 6 they were acting absolutely in line with Cyrus Edict weren't they they were doing nothing other than what

[36 : 27] Cyrus said they could do they were absolutely above reproach it was a matter of the public record that they were well within their rights to complete the temple works and so too for God's faithful servants today trust that you will be vindicated trust that you'll be seen to have been acting absolutely in accordance not only with the law of the land but the side of the Lord of heaven we're limited aren't we by our creature in us we don't know the future but the Lord does those temple builders had no idea in chapter 5 verse 6 how things would turn out they didn't know how it would resolve but the Lord did in any and every situation where we find ourselves there will be clouds that fill us with dread

God knows what is coming things may seem very puzzling to us at times perhaps for many years decades even we don't yet see the whole story but God does as Derek Kidner put it God's frowning providence in allowing the opposition to raise the alarm had not simply concealed his smiling face it had given fresh impetus to events by evoking the faith encouraged the builders and releasing a truly royal flow of material help it's wonderful isn't it how things turn out in this story you see hard circumstances they are an opportunity for us to live out our trust in God's word to grow in maturity as his people he is able to do anything to keep his promises even to turn a heart of a king even one like Darius so hold on to that maybe you're facing difficult things opposition the clouds seem laden and heavy but the

Lord can use that he can turn it but it's not only the hearts of the great and powerful that God can turn the Lord also turns the hearts of those outside the people of God and includes them and this seems like a small point in the passage but I want us to notice it God is sovereign and he is sovereignly saving especially when the work seems hardest I don't know if you noticed this in the final paragraph it's easy to miss but just look at verse 20 this is as God's people celebrate the Passover says this 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 people of the land to worship the Lord the God of Israel in amongst the

Jews there were those who joined them in other words converts new believers and this is another great encouragement for God's people then I'm sure but also for us today yes a great result of their refusal to give in to fear to obey the Lord was the rebuilt temple that's the great thing in this passage the temple is rebuilt they didn't cower to fear they kept building but also there was it seems evangelistic fruit and this is what results from the obedience of faith when God's people are who they are meant to be i.e.

those who are obeying God's call no matter the cost when God's people are who are who are they meant to be there will be a magnetic draw those around will take notice and here's the key the church does not win the world by becoming like the world no it must insist the world leave when the world enters the church see real repentance must take place look at verse 21b second half of verse 21 says that these people separated themselves from the uncleanness of the people of the land to worship the Lord there is a price to pay when you join God's people there is a separation that must take place people must leave behind the world and follow the Lord and live his way see the way into God's people then and today is through costly and decisive conversion to choose to join with

[41 : 49] God's people even when they're in the firing line even when they're having letters written against them to the authorities it might seem costly before taking that step but once you've made it you realize you've gained everything all I once thought gain now I count as lost compared to knowing Jesus and that's what these folk here in Ezra 6 had to do they separated themselves from the uncleanness of the world they left it all behind to join God's people and perhaps that's the crossroads you're at today yourself you've been drawn in by the examples of Christians you've seen the vital life of the church well the Lord welcomes you but you must repent you must turn your back on your old way of life and follow

Jesus and you can do that today now but it is costly but it's worth it and for the church this is the key to abandon the fruits we won't win people by ceasing to be the church or by softening the message and cutting off the sharp edges that's a sure way to ensure the decline of the church no a people wholly committed to obeying God's words living God's way will be a people who are compelling to those who are searching for the Lord and it's perhaps and the work seems hardest and it's coming under the greatest pressure that the gospel shines brightest the Lord is at work drawing people to himself and maybe that's the case here the pressure was on Tath and I and his others were bringing great pressure against the

Lord and his people but by the end of this chapter not only is the temple built but his new life folk have joined become part of the people worshipping the Lord and so as we read these chapters we can be encouraged in the great church building project the Lord has called us to that we have been commanded to give ourselves to we can take great courage from these chapters the Lord is sovereign no problem or person can stand in the way of his keeping his promises to build his church the outlook may look very bleak to us at times but the Lord he sees everything he knows where everything is going and nothing and no one not even kings can stand in his way so will you trust him will you keep working even as the pressure comes trust him for he alone is sovereign well let's pray shall we and then we'll sing together to close our service let's pray how glad we are father that we come to the

Lord who knows all things sees all things is sovereign over all things and thank you as we think about the great call of the gospel to go and proclaim to make disciples of all nations we thank you that in midst of that task we can trust you and especially Lord when the clouds do loom overhead as we feel the pressure as opponents apply their pressure Lord would you put steel in our spines help us to know that you are with us you never leave nor forsake us that our great enemy has been defeated and please remind us that we are working from victory so help us to walk by faith not by sight we ask in

Jesus name Amen