

Study in Ezra 3-6

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Steve. And you remember that in introducing it, we saw that the book of Ezra and Nehemiah covers the history of the return of the children of Israel from the captivity of Persia.

By the time that they returned, Babylon had been overthrown by Persia. It covers the return of the Jews from Persia to Judah, to Jerusalem.

And that return was in three stages. The first stage, the 30 or 40 odd thousand who returned as a result of Cyrus' edict, predicted long, long before that by the prophet Isaiah.

That return is in the first six chapters of this book, and I hope to cover that period tonight. The second return was that which was headed by Ezra, and it covers the rest of this book from chapter 7 onwards.

And then the third return was under the leadership of Nehemiah himself, who was responsible mainly for the building of the walls of Jerusalem. And as we shall see later on tonight, the history of Esther comes in roughly in the middle of that whole period.

[1 : 35] Now, when they got back to Jerusalem, we saw last week, they got busy with the rebuilding, first of all, of the altar of God's offering. And when they built that altar, they then kept the Feast of Tabernacles.

And we saw that this must always be the emphasis that you begin from the inside. The altar was at the very heart of the religion of the Jews.

And whatever work you're going to do religiously, in the sense of religious work, you've got to begin within. And we saw in the application of this that the approach of beginning, first of all, with yourself, and beginning in your heart, in your relationship with God.

Because once you put that right, then everything else will sort itself out. And everything must come from the inside out, as it were. And remember the force of this application that it may apply to every single one of us.

I'm sure it does in one way or another. That we've got to start with this altar, where you and I worship the Lord. We've got to repair what has broken down and build up what may have become, in the course of time, just our own.

[2 : 52] And this is our life's work for each single Christian. And this is where the blessing of God begins as well, not just at the personal level, but at the congregational level.

Now, the next three chapters, which are before us here tonight, cover the very important, some would consider in some sense the most important aspect of the return, the building of the temple in Jerusalem.

And I want to look with you tonight at the building of that temple and the opposition that was encountered by the Jews and the way in which God helped them to counter that opposition and to bring the work of building to a successful completion, fulfillment.

First of all, then, we look at the laying of the foundations and the building of this temple. Now, you have that referred to from verse 8 of chapter 3 that we read here tonight in the book of Esther.

The interesting thing about the laying of the foundations was that the day in which the foundations were laid, the people read here in verse 11, sung together.

[4 : 21] All the people shouted out great joy because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many who were ancient men that had seen the first house when the foundation of this house was laid, before their eyes, wept with a loud voice, and many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people.

For the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off. Now, these verses tell us that there was a mixed reaction amongst the people to this work, a mixed reaction.

Most of them were rejoicing, but many of them were mourning. Many of them were weeping. And the reason we're taking that, or we look first of all at the reason for the weeping, and then secondly at the reason for the rejoicing.

The reason for the weeping was that the foundations of this temple indicated that it was to be far removed from the splendour and the magnificence of the temple which Nebuchadnezzar had left in ruins 50 to 60 years prior to this.

Many remembered the splendour of Solomon's temple. And no doubt they knew the history of that temple, the way in which David had prepared for years, spent no effort, gathered the best materials for the temple.

[5 : 58] And they had recourse to the expertise of the best craftsmen in the land. And then handed over the building of this temple, the responsibility of it, to his son Solomon.

And you know that in the course of time the temple was built, and became a magnificent, a structure built for the glory of God, to the honour and to the praise of his name, and for the purpose of worship in Jerusalem.

Now, many people knew the history, and many of them who were in present that day remembered the building. But of course, things were very different now.

This was a comparatively small and insignificant building. This was going to be compared with the previous one. And their thoughts gave place to a sense of depression, and doubt, and certainly disappointment.

And there are times when this is very evident in the Christian church. I suppose it's true of every age, almost of the Christian church.

[7 : 20] I know that it's true even in our own setup, here in Stornoway, and more generally in the island of Lewis. We have reason to thank God that he is still spiritually building his church.

There are still people being converted. But in comparison with the glory days of the past, things are, as it were, almost meagre.

There is little of the glory and the wonder and the sheer enthusiasm that gripped a people in the twenties and the thirties, and even in the forties and the early fifties in this island.

And that is why in many gatherings you have people who will speak about the wonderful days in Carlaway, and in Ness, and in South Lauges, and on the west side and in Point.

They will speak about the number of people used to attend the services. Speak about days when churches were full, packed, in the country area. When they, at communion times, there were overflow services in almost every area.

[8 : 43] They'll speak up at the caliber of the Christian of the day. And the depth and the penetrating power of the preaching of past ages.

And it's, it's almost a part of human nature, it's inevitable that people make comparisons. The past with the present. And the present doesn't come out very well.

And that is why in the midst, perhaps, of rejoicing, such as we have ourselves from time to time and other places where the gospel is being blessed, the voice of rejoicing is tinged at the same time and mixed with this voice of the yearning for the past, recollecting better days and better people and better preaching, remembering the good old days.

and people have just caused many cases to make these comparisons. But the trouble with comparisons is that they do tend to depress you.

They do tend to leave this element of, as I said, this element of yearning for what was better. And the the the the trouble with it is that and perhaps the reason why people are like that is that they tend to focus attention on things rather than on God.

[10 : 11] Of course things have changed. Of course the church is not what it was. Of course much of its glory and splendour has been lost.

Of course a lot of the best emphases have been left behind. Of course these things are true. But you see, God hasn't changed. God hasn't changed at all.

If you and I have been living in the early part of the century in 1900 in Scotland when there was so much religious upheaval there were people present then who would have remembered maybe 40 years previously when as many as it is reckoned 300,000 people converted in Scotland immediately after the days of the disruption around 1850 and 1860 and comparing the time

beginning of the century with that period of course they would have wept.

But you see God hasn't changed and this is what you and I have to remember in the midst of all that makes us maybe sad God hasn't changed at all.

And it's significant that in every age you tend as I said to have this spirit this attitude. I remember myself when I was converted in Glasgow at a time of great spiritual blessing in that city certainly in our church's circles.

[11 : 49] Tremendous movement in many congregations there were lots of young people converted at the time and as young converts we were full of the joys of this new found saviour and zeal in his name and for his sake.

And I well remember an old lady there are good old Christians speaking about ah if you only knew what we had ourselves and she was speaking about a particular place in Lewis where there had been a wonderful revival in the 30s.

No that was true but for us you see it was just as wonderful as it had been for her in the 30s. And this is something that we tend to forget you see when people find the Lord in our day.

and we tend to feel that things today aren't what they were then yes but for the people who find the Lord things are just as wonderful as it was for us. And it's natural we can understand then why the voice of joy was mixed with the sound of weeping.

There was rejoicing. There were many who were taken up now with the newness of their involvement who were caught up in the wonder of being delivered from Babylon who were caught up in the thrill of being a part of this wonderful work of building the temple.

[13 : 17] It may not have been like the past but it was still the work of the Lord after all the barrenness and the desolation of captivity. They were stirred up to build and so it may be for you here tonight newly come to the faith and to the things of God and a newfound interest in the Bible and the gospel, in conversion, in religion, in the church.

The past is gone, the barrenness has been left behind and one can well understand how you can be so full of wonder and praise and joy while perhaps others may be thinking of the joy that they had 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago and probably concluding that things today aren't as good as they were then they may be so.

Let's always remember that you have these two elements always together in the work of the Lord.

And then the second thing that you have here is the opposition that arose in verse chapter 4 the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of captivity built the temple unto the Lord God of Israel and they came to the chief of the father and said unto them let us build with you for we seek your God as he do and we do sacrifice unto him as well but Jerusalem and Joshua and the chief of the father of Israel said unto them he may do with us to build a house to God but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel as king Cyrus the king of Persia had commanded us then the people of that land weakened the hands of the people of Judah and troubled them and hired counselors against them and so on and the whole of this chapter tells us what they did they wrote a letter to Artaxerxes and they requested that he stop this work and they accused the Jews here of being seditious and accused them of being enemies of Persia and accused them of plotting against Persia as they had plotted against many people in the past and it would be in Persia to stop this work now this is interesting these people probably certainly in Nehemiah's day they were known as the Samaritans that was people who some of the captivity some of the Jews at the time of captivity were left in the area of Jerusalem and they intermingled in marriage with heathen mainly people from Assyria and some from Babylon and formed this race which became known as the Samaritans now they were really the sworn enemies of the Jews and it seems to note how Jerubabal and Joshua dealt with these people notice they claimed to be on the same wavelength as it were we worship the same name we seek

God your God as you do and we do sacrifice and we worship the same God and we seek him just as you seek him yourself so whatever whatever whatever do offer of help cooperation can we not serve together now this is very interesting and I think very instructive because there are always people who maintain that everyone who's engaged in the work of the Lord and service for the Lord could come together and could work together and certainly in evangelistic outreach and enterprise ought to be together now I know that the argument is very plausible and at times difficult to resist but resisted Sir Mabel and Joshua did and I think that we are perfectly warranted at times to retain and to maintain the distinctiveness

[17:24] I speak of course as a member of the free church to maintain and to retain the distinctiveness of the church because whatever else you can do whatever you want to say about cooperation and evangelistic outreach togetherness whatever else you're going to say about it nothing that you say will ever alter the fact that a church is distinctive for biblical reasons you can never after that fact you can argue as you will but you cannot by argument obliterate a church's distinctiveness you must never do it not even in the interests of cooperation and service why do I say it for the simple reason that we believe that the distinctiveness of our church is holy and I underline the words holy on biblical grounds you obliterate the biblical grounds then you've obliterated its distinctiveness and

I was going to say something but I better refrain from saying I don't think personally and I probably put my head on the chopping block in saying this but I don't think that ministers in my position ought to be afraid of that we shouldn't be afraid of that if we are going to give leadership and guidance people won't accept leadership and guidance that's by the way but we have to give it we have to give it and then accept all the brick bats that come with trying to give leadership and guidance anything that is going to mean and I think this was Rupert and Joshua's position and the attitude anything that was going to involve them in compromise was refused by them and events proved that they were correct events proved at because what you and I don't realize very often is this the devil is far more subtle than any one of us far more subtle and I think the history of the church proves and if you know your church history you may very well agree with me on this I think the history of the church proves that cooperation at the expense of principle instead of strengthening a church has weakened it and you study your history so that you would then corroborate what I've said and I repeat it I think that cooperation at the expense of principle weakens instead of strengthens a movement and this is what happened with this opposition had they taken them on board as it were they would have had with themselves people who weren't really on the same wavelength at all they thought they were but they proved that they weren't and so this opposition was a was awakened against the Jews and opposition always has the same effect on people at the end of the day the sheer push of it tends to weaken people in their resolve and it tends to discourage people it makes you look to circumstance you know there are some people who think that it's easy to oppose things it's easy to stand up against this and the next thing but it isn't easy at all to do it and when people begin to malign you and vilify you and misrepresent you and slander you that gets through that gets through and then you begin to look to the opposition itself rather than to look to God this is what happened to the Jews we read here in verse 4 the people of the land weakened the hands of these people and they troubled them in a building and this is how the devil works he tries to weaken people and very often he works behind the scenes verse 5 they hired counsellor to oppose him you see you and I don't know half of what's going on behind our back as there was a church in the same way as we don't know half what's going on inside the church we don't know who may be weakening our hands in the service and the cause of the Lord we just don't know at times how the devil is working and who the devil may be employing without your knowledge without your knowledge and the opposition goes on and on and on and on you know I feel that the devil sometimes seems to have far more staying power than we have we try to get involved in work and it doesn't last very long if we don't see success and instant success we give up how often do you stop playing because of that but the devil doesn't give up he goes on and we adhere that they hired counsellor against frustrated purpose verse 5 all the days of Cyrus even to the end of the reign of Darius king of Persia during the period of four reigns in Persia this opposition was going on year in year out the devil never flags he never sleeps he doesn't give up he goes on and he'll always have willing help he'll always find counsellor to help him in his work and he'll always slander the Christian church they not elect to be known of the king that these Jews are building rebellious and the bad city they've set up the walls they're of a lie they haven't set up the walls at all they've joined the foundation of the temple oh yes be it known now unto the king that if this city be built and the walls set up again then they will not pay toll tribute custom and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings look at that great and lies but the devil isn't worried about the truth if he'll use the lie he'll use it he was the father of lies was always the father of lies and always will be the father of lies and so it is that the church is misrepresented very often by the devil at many levels and he has his own mouthpieces in many circles today on the media education circles within the church itself the church is doing this and the church is doing that the church is repressive the church is browbeating people into submission the church is

indoctrinating its people and the very people who accuse the church of doing that are the worst indoctrinated of all but it suits their purpose you see to accuse someone else of doing what they're doing and very often they'll hide behind the facade of that accusation this is how the opposition goes on this is how the church is my life something new as we've been seeing in Ecclesiastes there's nothing under the sun for someone to stand up and say of the reformed Christian churches including the free church it's opposed to this that's the next thing it's holding people back it's holding progress back it's holding the life of people that's nothing new they've been saying that for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years and they always will it's inevitable that the church will have opposition and notice something yes especially if the work of the gospel is prospering you watch this whenever you see the gospel working powerfully efficaciously in the connection of souls assured of the sun and the heavens you're going to have opposition the devil is going to use people to attack the church do you not think the devil is operating in laws today because the gospel has been blessed in the past 10-15 years and more of course he is who's behind all these attempts at death getting the Lord's day think it's men no the devil is behind it using them these Jews that don't realize it they're in his hand and he's using them because this is one of the great bulldogs of the church that's only one aspect of the opposition and very often the opposition is successful as it was here after Cersus we're here in chapter in this chapter got the letter and decided well this work is going to stop so he sent a command stop that work so the work came to a stance for 5 years for 16 years this work came to a stance now we look at [27:16] God's way of counting this work and this has gone far longer than I thought this address so just now in our word how did God counter this opposition well chapter 5 tells us then the prophets Haggai and the prophet the prophets Haggai and Sechariah prophesied unto the Jews that were in Jude and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel even unto them and I'll read myself for you just the opening verses of these two prophecies just to set them in their historical context you can read them as I said when you get home chapter 1 of Haggai in the second year of Darius the king in the 6th month in the 30th month came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet unto Cerebral and unto the son of Shaltiel thus speaketh the Lord of hosts and similarly at the beginning of the prophecy of Sechariah in the 8th month in the 2nd year Darius came the word of the Lord unto Sechariah now here we have an account of God's way of countering the opposition as I said for 15 years the work of temple rebuilding was discontinued and then God did something wonderful he raised up in Jerusalem two prophets

Haggai and Sechariah so that through them Sarubabel the ecclesiastical leader and Joshua the high priest would in turn be encouraged so that they themselves would move the people to resume the work and that's exactly what happened the work was taken up again now here you have an account of the effectiveness of the word of God and we know from Haggai and this is what you this would have been interesting if we had read these chapters and if we had time to go into this in greater depth you would discover that during these 16 years the people fell into a spirit of discouragement and apathy and neglect about the things of God stones had rubbish laid for years round his temple a ruin but what happened in their own country well they were passing through times of fearful depression economic and political depression there was national depression the economy was on all time low the crops were failing and why because they were saying as Haggai or as God says to Haggai these people are saying it isn't the time to build the house of God you see this is what happened a spiritual malaise had settled over these people they were far more concerned about their own house than they were about the house of the Lord and because of this they weren't recognising the real connection between their spiritual blood and their national depression they weren't realised that there was an inseparable connection between their attitude to God and the state of their nation signs of the present time correct when the Lord stood up Haggai and Zechariah they came and they spoke to the people about these things and they reminded them consider your ways look to yourself are you really what you are to be in your relationship to God have you forgotten his word to you have you forgotten his covenant have you forgotten his house his water have you forgotten your own relationship to him do you realise that you depended upon him at every level of your life is God has he got his rightful place in your life and the truth was blessed to them within three weeks they were moved to action they were moved to action and you read in

Haggai chapter 2 what happened then when the Lord spoke through Haggai to these people he said to them some of you here he says you remember the glory of the former temple well I tell you I

tell you he says that this place is going to see far more glory than the old temple did a reference to the coming of the Messiah to that very place that they were then in the process of rebuilding stirred them up reminded them of his own covenant of his own power is the God of hosts I am the God of hosts I am in control of all things I am with you remember that I am a God who is faithful to his covenant and the people when they heard this from Haggai and Zechariah through Zerubabel and Joshua they said to the world and within four of a years it was completed that's the effectiveness of the truth upon our people nothing will move a person to action quite like the word of God being blessed to him this is what you and I need all that the spirit of God would impress the truth with power upon our minds you know what it's like when a son is blessed to you when the world is blessed to you you will do anything that's what happened think of Britain today if this world came like that from Canterbury from York from Durham from St George from every pulpit in our city thus saith the Lord think what that would do to Britain as it did in Jerusalem this is the answer to a problem of course it is don't just be afraid to say it we need the truth whatever you find whatever you find the church strong this is its strength as God said through Zechariah at the very same time not by my not by power but by my spirit saith the

[33 : 35] Lord that's how he countered the opposition through the world being blessed Paul said exactly the same thing in his day you Greeks you're looking for wisdom you Jews looking for miracles we've nothing for you but one thing we preach Christ crucified Christ crucified this is what our nation needs this is what the town needs this is what you and I need and that will move us then to action in other areas of our lives areas of responsibility now then notice this in conclusion even even though God used these means and used them with wonderful efficacy there was still this inevitable devilish opposition to God at the same time as God began to work came to them Tathnai governor on this side of the river and

Shethar Bosnai and their companions who's commanded you to build this house and to make up this wall so they did the same thing as their companions years before they wrote a letter to Darius of course in this case Darius searched through the records of the country and discovered that Cyrus had made a decree and given them a grant of money to build the house and no way was he going to stop the work he wasn't a Christian but he acted on Christian principles more than after Sertus had done why Darius should have done this and after Sertus shouldn't have done the same thing 16 years before that we don't know we don't know except that God we have to accept this that God was at work but the one point I want to make with here is notice this same opposition again stop the work stop the work ruin what's going on this is what the devil is trying to do he try to stop the progress of the gospel in your life if it's been blessed to you or blessed to you recently be sure of this you're going to meet opposition we haven't met already he's going to try and spoil it all make it out of it and you know it's fearful when you think of some things to do

I remember when the general secretary of the national bible site was here in the summer Reverend Fergus Macdonald telling me that I can't remember if he told it in the church or not telling me that there was a group of satanists in Edinburgh who were actually meeting for prayer to Satan so that he would ruin the marriages of Christian people in Edinburgh and particularly prominent Christian people you and I don't realize the extent to which satan will go in the interest of his cause to destroy the cause of Christ and that is why you have Seheriah chapter 3 where you have a picture of the high priest Joshua standing before the high priest and Satan at his right hand to resist him that was typical of the day whatever they tried to worship whatever they tried to do the devil was there he said with you as well remember whatever you tried to do in the name of the

Lord the devil is there to resist you and your own life in a congregation life in the town on the island he's at work and the only recourse that we have is to the Lord as Joshua did may the Lord resist thee or say and the other thing we can do is just carry on with work carry on witnessing carry on speaking carry on preaching carry on presenting the truth in the hope that the Spirit will bless that's how God counter the opposition of the devil and you know it's wonderful how the word of God does work how dynamic a force it is in the hand of the Spirit read there at the end of chapter 6 that when they finished this work almost nearly 25 years certainly over 20 years after they began it when they finished the building of the temple they kept the feast of the

Passover and the feast of unleavened bread but they weren't alone the children of Israel verse 21 of chapter 6 who were come out of captivity and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heath and the land to seek the Lord God of Israel to eat you you see at the same time as the opposition was going on God was working same here God will work he that keeps

Israel he slumbers not nor sleeps how thankful you and I ought to be my friend that in the midst of all the opposition difficulty God is at work adding to his own church as he did in those days and that wasn't all in the last verse of chapter 6 they kept the feast with joy for the Lord had made them joyful and isn't this wonderful he had even turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God are you reminded of the text is anything too hard for the [39 : 12] Lord when you're here yourself tonight nothing is too hard for the Lord and when he brought you here you remember this he can bring many more than you into this place and with that strength and encourage your hands as you remember that in the face of all the difficulties God is at work and it was during this time that he was also using Esther without her knowing it to protect the lives of Haggai and Sechariah and Serubabel and Joshua and Ezra God was using her in another place because as we saw last week God has a glorious purpose for his own church and nothing will thwart it