

A SCRIBE, A CUPBEARER, AND A KING'S GRANDSON REBUILD THE BELOVED CITY OF DAVID

Presented by

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Jerusalem—the beloved “city of David”—lay in waste. Seventy years earlier, in 586 B.C., the malicious monarch, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, had laid siege to the capital of Judah, captured it, and leveled it to the ground, along with Solomon’s famed temple—which had withstood every other foreign assault for 474 years. But 586 B.C. was a different time—different because God’s people had willingly abandoned Him, desecrated His temple by filling it with idols of false gods, corrupted the priesthood, and polluted both their daily lives and their worship with willful sin. As a result, God told the people of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah,

“Because you have not heard My words...Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, My servant, will come against this land and its inhabitants...and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and a perpetual desolation.... This whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and...shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:8-11).

Not long after Jeremiah presented his prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar’s assault on Jerusalem began. And by the time it was over, the royal city was in ruins. Its walls had been utterly pulverized by the Babylonians’ siege engines and battering rams. Its buildings and houses had been totally razed. And its famed golden temple had been completely demolished. Nothing remained of Jerusalem except charred stones, dusty ash, and stinking rubbish. And, just as God had foretold, the city remained in that deplorable state for **seven long decades**.

But through the prophet Jeremiah, God also had prophesied that He would not allow Jerusalem to continue in such a state forever. In Jeremiah 29:10-14 Jeremiah said on God’s behalf,

“After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you—thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, **and I will bring you back from your captivity**; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.”

The prophet Isaiah, in one of his prophecies, had given additional information regarding what God would accomplish at the end of Judah’s seventy-year-long captivity in Babylon—and exactly how He would accomplish it. Isaiah wrote about King Cyrus, saying on God’s behalf, “He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be built,’ and to the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’ ” (Isaiah 44:28). Sure enough, that is exactly what happened! The prophet Ezra recorded the events in his book when he wrote,

“In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, ‘Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem’ ” (Ezra 1:1-4).

As a result of King Cyrus’ decree, a man by the name of Zerubbabel, who was the grandson of former King Jehoiachin of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:17), along with Jeshua the high priest, led the first band of about 50,000 captives back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-2; 2:2)—a journey of 900 long miles that would have required approximately four months to complete. Zerubbabel eventually was appointed as governor of Judah (Haggai 1:1), and for some twenty years he worked closely with prophets, priests, and kings in his position as the prime mover behind the construction of the second temple on the same site in Jerusalem where Solomon’s temple had once stood. As soon as Zerubbabel and Jeshua arrived in Jerusalem, they almost immediately set up an altar for burnt offerings, reestablished the Jewish sacrificial system, began to observe the Feast of Tabernacles, and took steps to rebuild the temple’s foundation (Ezra 3:2-3,8).

The costs of the temple project were financed partially by the kings of Medo-Persia (including Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes), as well as by the Jews themselves. After rebuilding the temple’s foundation during their first two years in Jerusalem, construction efforts then came to a standstill for seventeen years. This unexpected and lengthy delay occurred basically for two reasons. First, the Jews met with serious opposition from settlers in Samaria who insisted that they be allowed to help with the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4:1-2). The Jews refused the Samaritans’ offer because of their association with heathen worship, and because the Jews recognized the Samaritans’ offer of alleged assistance for what it actually was—a way to slow down or stop the building project altogether by sowing internal discord among the Jews. When the Jews refused to allow the Samaritans to hinder their efforts, the Samaritans went to great lengths to disrupt the entire building project (Ezra 4:4)—even going so far as to hire counselors to misrepresent in court the motives of the Jews (Ezra 4:5), thereby causing the Persian king Artaxerxes to temporarily withdraw his approval and financial support of the venture (Ezra 4:21). Second, the delay in reconstructing the temple also was due in part to the Jews’ preoccupation with building houses for their own use instead of concentrating on rebuilding God’s house (Haggai 1:2-4).

When God saw that that the Jews had ceased working on the temple that they would need to once again worship Him as He had commanded, He sent two prophets—Haggai and Zechariah—to them. Haggai’s assignment from God was to rebuke the Jews for failing to complete the temple-reconstruction project. As a result, Haggai said some very stern things to the Jews. First, he scolded them for busying them-

selves with building their own beautiful houses, while failing to build God's house, the temple. Second, he warned them that if they continued on their present course, God would punish them by making whatever wages they earned disappear—just as if they had taken their money and put it in a bag that was full of holes.

Zechariah's task was not to rebuke the Jews, but rather to encourage them to remain strong in their faith and in their commitment to obey God. In doing this, Zechariah reminded the Jews of their past glory, and of the future glory that God still had in store for them.

The rebuke and encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah turned out to be exactly what the Jews needed! The messages of God's two prophets stirred the people's hearts within them, and helped Zerubabel and Jeshua get the people back on track regarding the temple-reconstruction project. However, as soon as the Samaritans realized that the Jews were back at work on the temple, they once again stepped up their efforts to bring the process to a halt. This time they wrote a passionate letter to King Darius Hystaspes (not the same as the earlier King Darius), complaining that the Jews claimed they were carrying out the temple building project because of a decree that King Cyrus had made that gave them permission to rebuild the temple. The Samaritans told King Darius that they did not believe any such decree had ever been made by King Cyrus. But, when King Darius checked the royal records, he found that Cyrus had indeed issued such a decree. He therefore told the Samaritans to **leave the Jews alone**—or he would send his soldiers to hang the Samaritans from the beams of their own houses, which would then be burned to the ground. He also told the Samaritans to take tax monies from their own treasuries to use in purchasing building materials for the new temple, and to even go so far as to use some of their tax monies to buy animals for the Jews to use in their sacrifices to God!

As a result of King Darius' decree, work on the temple resumed—and the temple was finished and dedicated four years later amidst great pomp and rejoicing (Ezra 6:16), which climaxed in the observance of the Feast of the Passover (Ezra 6:19). The entire temple-reconstruction project—from beginning to end—took **twenty-two years** to complete.

Finally—after almost 100 years—the Jews who had returned to Judah had their temple back! But they desperately needed someone to teach them God's Word so they could live and worship Him correctly. As a result, God called a scribe and priest by the name of Ezra to carry out that very task among the Israelites. Ezra had diligently studied God's law, and perhaps knew it better than any Jew living at that time. In fact, the Bible tells us that "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Ezra sought permission from the Medo-Persian king Artaxerxes (not the same one mentioned earlier, but another later king by the same name) to go to Jerusalem to teach God's law to the Jews who were living there. King Artaxerxes had a high regard for God, and even referred to Him as "the God of heaven." As a result, the king granted Ezra's request, and

even gave him the money he would need for the long journey. King Artaxerxes then issued a decree which stated that any Jews from his kingdom who wished to accompany Ezra in his trip back to Jerusalem could do so. As a result, Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a sizable group of Jews. But he also had something else in his possession—a decree from the king stating that the nations around Israel were to assist the Jews with their needs by giving them funds from their own treasuries. King Artaxerxes ended his decree by stating that anyone who disobeyed his order would be imprisoned, would have their possessions confiscated, and then would either be banished from his kingdom or put to death!

Ezra was thrilled to have the king's support for his efforts. But when he returned to Jerusalem, he was saddened at what he found. The Jews living there had once again forsaken God. They no longer observed the Sabbath. They no longer gave God one-tenth of their possessions as the Law of Moses commanded them to do. And they had intermarried with heathen people. Ezra immediately summoned all the people to meet him in Jerusalem so he could address and correct these problems. When Ezra confronted his fellow Jews regarding their sins, they admitted that they had disobeyed God by not worshiping Him correctly. They also told Ezra that they were sorry they had married heathens. Ezra told them to repent of their sins and return to God—**which they did!** They once more began observing the Sabbath. They once more began giving one-tenth of their goods to God. And they put away their heathen spouses so that they once again could live faithfully before God. Things in Jerusalem and Judah were beginning to look up!

But there was one more problem that had to be addressed. While Jerusalem now had a temple again, the fact remained that the city itself was vulnerable to attacks by enemies of the Jews—because the wall that one had surrounded and protected Jerusalem still lay in ruins, thus making the city an unsafe place in which to live. In those days, if a city had no defensive wall, bandits and looters could attack at any time to kill the city's inhabitants and steal their possessions.

The state of Jerusalem was of special concern to one man—who, as it turned out, was not living in Jerusalem, but was still in captivity in the Medo-Persian Empire. This man's name was Nehemiah. And, as it turns out, he was the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah had been praying about Jerusalem's situation for four months. And with each passing day, he grew sadder and sadder. One day King Artaxerxes noticed how sad Nehemiah looked, and asked him what was causing his distress. Nehemiah responded by saying, "Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" (Nehemiah 2:3). The king then asked Nehemiah, "What is your request?" (Nehemiah 2:4). Nehemiah replied, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it" (Nehemiah 2:5). The king granted Nehemiah's request, and he was allowed to return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the city's walls.

Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah arose in the middle of the night, got on his donkey, and rode around the city to assess its state. With the Moon shining brightly, he could see firsthand the terrible condition of the city. The walls were still broken down, and the burnt remains of the city's gates still lay in ruins. What a sad and desolate picture it was for the tender-hearted Nehemiah!

Up until that moment in time, Nehemiah had not told anyone why he had come to Jerusalem. But after his midnight ride, he knew that the time had come to reveal his intentions. The next day he gathered together the Jewish leaders and people and told them, "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach" (Nehemiah 2:17). **The people were so glad to hear what Nehemiah had to say!** They were happy that God had not forgotten them, and that He had sent Nehemiah to help them. In response to Nehemiah's challenge, they cried out, "Let us rise up and build!" (Nehemiah 2:18).

However, no sooner had the Jews set about attempting to rebuild the city's walls, than their enemies began to ridicule and mock them. Three men are mentioned specifically: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, who said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?" But Nehemiah answered them and said, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:19-20). The Jews did indeed "arise and build." In fact, the Bible tells us that "the people had a mind to work" (Nehemiah 4:6). When the Jews' enemies continued to threaten them—**even with physical violence!**—Nehemiah had a solution. As Nehemiah 4:17 informs us, "Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon."

As work on the wall continued, the Jews' enemies tried first one thing and then another to intimidate the Jews into ceasing their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem's wall. First, they sent a message to Nehemiah, asking him to meet them in a neutral spot—where, as it turned out, they intended to kill him! But Nehemiah told them, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3). When that evil plan failed, the Jews' enemies hired a false prophet by the name of Shemaiah to try to trick Nehemiah. Shemaiah claimed that he had a message from God for Nehemiah. That message was this: "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for your enemies are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you" (Nehemiah 6:11). But Nehemiah saw through this evil plot, and said to Shemaiah, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? **I will not go in!**" (Nehemiah 6:12).

In spite of all of the serious efforts of the Jews' enemies, the wall of Jerusalem was completed—**a mere 52 days after work on it began!** Once the wall-reconstruction project was finished, Ezra assembled the Jews to read God's law to them, and then dedicated the wall. Afterwards, the Jews then observed

the Feast of Tabernacles, for which they constructed small “booths” made of tree branches in which to live for a week—to remind them of the time in the past when God brought their forefathers safely out of Egypt. When the Jews heard Ezra reading God’s law, they realized how far away from the law they had moved, and they were moved to tears because of their sins. As a result, they repented publicly, and dressed in sackcloth and ashes as a visible sign of their repentance. They then promised that they would not give their daughters to men of heathen nations to marry, and that they would not take the daughters of heathen nations as their own wives. They also promised that they would observe the Sabbath, and that they would give one-tenth of their possessions to God.

By the time Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah had finished their God-given assignments, Jerusalem had been rebuilt, its walls had been re-erected, and the temple had been reconstructed—all because “the people had a mind to work.” God had promised His people, through the prophet Jeremiah, “I know the thoughts that I think toward you—thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope..., and I will bring you back from your captivity.” And because He is the God who “cannot lie” (Titus 1:2), **He kept His promise!**

Many years later, in the small city of Bethlehem, a baby boy would be born in a stable and laid in a manger. His name was Immanuel—meaning “God with us.” You know Him better as Jesus Christ, Whom John the Baptist once identified as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). All the efforts of people like Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and so many others in the past looked forward to the day when that baby boy would be born in Bethlehem, grow up in Nazareth, and carry out His earthly ministry from the “beloved city of David”—Jerusalem—so that He could give us “a future and a hope.” As God Himself once put it, “My word that goes forth from My mouth shall not return to Me void, but shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). Everything that the Old Testament prophets had predicted—from the Jews’ seventy-year-long captivity in Babylon, to the eventual reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem, to the birth of the Messiah “in the fullness of time to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5)—had come true just as God had predicted it.

The questions that come to mind, then, as I close this lesson, are these: Are we being as faithful to God as people like Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah were? Or have we become like the unfaithful Jews whom Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah scolded for their lack of faith and because of the sin that filled their lives? Each of us this afternoon needs to ponder those two questions, and then answer them in the privacy of our hearts. If there is anything we can do tonight to help you **become** a Christian, or to help be a **better** Christian, we are ready to do so if you will come forward to let us know your needs as we stand and sing.