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The Story: The Return Home Ezra 1-6

Last week, after a long, dark journey through evil kings and invading armies and exile, we finally caught a glimpse of sunlight! Heroes like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. God called these men to remain as a witness in captivity. But after 70 years in exile, God had another plan for about 50,000 of his people. They were going home... and they had a big job in front of them.

¹In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus to make a proclamation throughout his realm...: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ..."⁵Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem.

This is a picture of the "Cyrus' Cylinder." It was discovered in the ancient ruins of Babylon in 1879. It contains a decree by King Cyrus of Persia ordering that the Jews be allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple... exactly what we just read in Ezra—an amazing confirmation of the reliability of the Bible! And talk about a powerful God—He used a pagan king to authorize and finance the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians! For the first time in 70 years, God's people would be able to worship him again.

I shared a picture with you last week from my Bakersfield days. Here's one from ten years later taken on one of the most momentous days of my life: November 23, 1997—the day we opened our sanctuary. How many of you were here that day? After years of prayer and great sacrifice, we built a building far bigger than we needed because we believed God would bring thousands others to be a part of our family. The rest of you... you are the literal answers to our prayers and the fruit of that sacrifice!

The work on our sanctuary began in 1996. But imagine this: what if today, twenty years later, the sanctuary sat there unfinished! How do you think we who were there in 1996 would feel? Well that's exactly what happened to these Jews who returned from exile. They started their temple building project with great enthusiasm, but 20 years later it sat there unfinished!

This evening/morning, I'd like to walk us through the stages of that twenty years. We don't build temples anymore, but we are building something way more important—and we are going to face the same challenges they did. So, let's learn!

The first stage was Devotion. Twice we read God "moved hearts": the heart of Cyrus and the hearts of those who would leave Babylon and make a 900-mile journey to a place that most of them had never even seen. Most of the Jews stayed behind. Like Daniel—and Esther, whom we will meet next week. God didn't call every Jew in Babylon to do this, but those he called, he inspired. He stirred their hearts. He gave them a vision and purpose. I wish all of you could have felt the sense of excitement in this church 20 years ago when we prayed and planned and gave sacrificially, and finally broke ground for our new sanctuary. Every family decorated and signed a rock and threw it into the foundation. We shared a sense of purpose and vision and sacrifice; we felt like we were part of something that would change our world. We were devoted! Devotion.

The first thing the Jews did was build an altar so that the long-neglected worship of God could resume. Then came the exciting day when the foundation of the temple was laid.

Ezra 3:

¹⁰When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests... and the Levites with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD....and all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD... ¹²But many of the older priests and Levites... who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

Do you know what often follows the initial burst of devotion? Disillusionment. Some of the people were old enough to remember Solomon's temple—glorious, covered with gold, adorned with the finest of craftsmanship. That was the temple the old-timers thought they were going to rebuild. That was their expectation, but God had other plans. The days of opulence were over. God brought judgment upon them for their idolatry, and that judgment included the destruction of Solomon's temple. This new, modest temple would be a reminder of all they had thrown away. The older folks were filled with regret and disillusionment! This wasn't what they signed up for. But their dreams were not God's dreams. And so, while the youngsters were celebrating and shouting with joy, the old-timers were weeping for what had been lost and would never be again. Have you ever been disillusioned with what God wanted you to do?

[By the way, this is a powerful image of the church. On any given Sunday, you have shouters...and weepers. Those filled with joy for what God is doing and those

devastated by their circumstances. We need each other. The weepers need the shouters to be encouraged; the shouters need the weepers to be grounded. And together, we lift up one, precious voice of worship to God. Our tears and cheers joined together. It's one of the reasons the church matters; we need each other.] So, at first there was devotion... then disillusionment. What's next?

Ezra 4

¹When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, ²they came to Zerubbabel ...and said, "Let us help you build ... ³But Zerubbabel ...answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD..." ⁴Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. ⁵They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Neighbors came with what seemed like a gracious offer: We'd like to help you build your temple. But their motivations are clear from the first verse: "... the enemies of Judah and Benjamin..." They didn't really want to help. They didn't want the temple rebuilt and didn't want Jerusalem to be restored as a great power. Their offer of help was a ruse; they wanted to scuttle the project. And after their offer was refused, their real intentions become clear. "They hired counselors to work against and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus ...down to the reign of Darius...." That's 20 years of opposition!

What did this opposition produce in the people? Discouragement... that is often so. We start out with devotion, excited to be a part of God's mission. We move past our times of disillusionment. But then we face opposition which brings discouragement. I remember dealing with city bureaucrats on our project that made life miserable for us. They fought us at every turn and cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars. We worked and reasoned with them, but it was hugely discouraging and we began to think we'd never complete the project. But one night we packed out City Hall and after a presentation of what we wanted to offer, not just to ourselves, but to our entire community, the Council voted unanimously to overturn the staff and allow us to proceed. But I'm telling you, there were many, many moments of incredible discouragement when we thought we'd never get it done.

Devotion, Disillusionment, Discouragement. And you know what came next? Dawdling! At first, the delays came from the roadblocks being thrown up by their enemies. But after a while, they liked dawdling—putting off what needed to get done—mañana! It was always mañana until soon, 16 years of mañanas had come and gone! And that great vision they once shared lay in ruins. How often is it so for us? We know what we need to do. We know we ought to pray more. We know we need marriage counseling. We know our kids deserve more of our time. We know we need to lose thirty pounds. But we dawdle, dawdle, dawdle... and the best things essential for our own temple-building get pushed into the distance. That's

what happened to the people of Judah. So God sent a prophet named Haggai to kick them in the butt:

²This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'" ³Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" ... "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

... "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. ⁹"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?... Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. "

Why did the people dawdle? Distraction; the people became distracted with their own needs. Once, they had been excited about building God's house. Now they were only excited about building their own paneled houses. Once they had given sacrificially to build something that would outlast them—to be a part of something greater than themselves that would honor God. Now, they were siphoning off God's tithes to their own pockets. And by the way, it didn't work. Did you notice God's judgment? He said, "You think you're going to save the money that should have gone to my work. But you are storing it in purses that have holes in them. And all these investments you made with my money... I'm going to curse them. Everything you put your hand to will suffer because you are so distracted taking care of yourself that have forgotten your God."

It is a sad fact that today, many of God's people are so distracted with building and accumulating and hoarding more and more beautiful things for themselves that they utterly ignore the work of God, leaving it to others to care for. I wonder, how many here who are hoarding God's tithes for themselves—discover that unexpected repairs and financial downturns end up stealing everything and more that they have stolen from God?

Anyhow, it was a hard, long road rebuilding God's temple. After the initial devotion, the people faced disillusionment, discouragement, dawdling and distraction. They intended to do something great for God but got derailed along the way. It reminds me of Jesus' warning to the Ephesians in Revelation: "I have this against you; you have lost your first love." But in the end, finally Haggai's words prompted repentance and action. ¹⁶Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. After twenty years of dawdling and distraction, finally the people finished the work. The temple was done!

There is a glimpse of the Scarlet Thread in this story. Remember, when the exiles returned from Babylon, they brought with them all the temple furnishings except for one piece. Do you know what it was? The Ark of the Covenant: the gold-covered box that held the Ten Commandments and a jar of manna, which once sat behind the curtain separating the entrance to the Holy of Holies. On the lid of the Ark sat two angels bowing the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat was where the holy God came in mercy to meet his people. Every year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would go behind that 4-inch thick curtain and offer prayers before the Mercy Seat seeking God's forgiveness for his people.

The Ark of the Covenant was the most important piece of temple furniture, and ironically, it was the one piece lost after the Babylonian invasion (until Indiana Jones discovered it!), so in the new temple, behind that thick curtain, sat an empty slab of stone. And on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest went behind the curtain, he would simply place his censer—the canister that held burning incense—on the empty stone slab. The smoke representing the prayers of the people went up, begging God's forgiveness, begging for him to replace the Mercy Seat; to provide some way of redemption for them.

Five hundred years later, God answered those prayers. His crucified son, Jesus, lay dead on a stone slab near that very spot. In the moment when he had died on the cross, that giant curtain in the temple, representing the separation between God and man, was torn in two from top to bottom. Those who prepared Jesus' body for burial on that slab did not know it, but they were touching the New Mercy Seat—the place where God's great grace and humanity's great need converged. Those temple builders had no idea that God himself would fill what was missing in the Holy of Holies.

But how does Ezra speak to us today? We're not Mormons; we don't build temples. Ahhh, let me remind you what Paul wrote in I Corinthians 3: 16. *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"* Y'all, we are God's temple today, so we are in the temple-building business. That's the mission of our church: "Working together to present everyone mature in Christ!" We are building us—this group, this body—into a holy place of worship, a place of witness, a place to which people point and say, "Look what God is doing there!"

And temple-building is still hard work. I wonder where you found yourself in this story? Are you at the place of devotion? Wonderful! Enjoy it! Have you reached a point of disillusionment—you feel let down because we aren't quite what you hoped for? Or maybe you are discouraged—experiencing opposition and hardship that is just wearing you down. Or maybe you are dawdling—you know exactly what God is calling you to do, but you just keep putting it off... mañana! Or maybe you are distracted—so busy taking care of your own needs, focusing on your own priorities spending your money and your time on yourself, that you have nothing left to offer to the work of the Lord.

Can I tell you, I've been in every one of those places at one time or another. And I'm the pastor! But here's what I've learned about temple-building. It is a long game. I keep showing up. I keep praying that the Holy Spirit will fill and empower and encourage me. When I am disillusioned, I try to realign my expectations to God's. When I'm discouraged, I try to remember God's faithfulness to me. When I find myself dawdling, I try to do just one thing... just one, next thing. And when I find myself distracted, I repent from focusing on my priorities and ask the Spirit to make me faithful and generous to his. That's what I do to stay in God's temple-building business.

May God build this temple into a place where the Holy Spirit is so present, so obvious, so powerful that throngs of people are drawn to us and discover the Mercy Seat of God.