

## LESSON 14

Last week we started Chapter 6, which is the last chapter in the first half of Ezra. For those who have been waiting patiently for Ezra to show up in his own book, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that he shows up in the first verse of Chapter 7. But the bad news is that Esther shows up first – and our plan is to study Esther before we get back to Ezra 7.

In Chapter 5, the local Persian bureaucrats showed up and starting taking names and asking questions. The Jews explained what they were doing, why they were doing, and the reason they believed they had permission from Cyrus to do it. And the Persian officials put it all down in a letter back to King Darius.

Chapter 5 ended with a request that the king search for the decree of Cyrus that the Jews said had given them permission to rebuild their temple.

In Ezra 6:1-2 from last week, that search is made, and the decree is found in Cyrus' summer palace in Ecbatana. Verses 3-5 give us the text of the decree.

### Ezra 6:3-5

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; 4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house: 5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

This decree was a vital part of the God's plan. How do we know that?

One reason is that this decree had been planned for a long time! Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 both refer to Cyrus by name long before Cyrus was born. That tells us that Cyrus was important to God's plan.

Isaiah 44:28 – Who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"

But another reason we know this decree is important is that it appears three times in the Bible. We just read it here in verses 3-5, but we also read it back in Ezra 1. And if you turn back on page from Ezra 1 you will find the decree again in the closing verses of 2nd Chronicles.

And finally, we know the decree is important because we have read the decree! And we know of the prophecies and the promises of God that needed the faithful people of God to be worshiping in their rebuilt temple when the Messiah came into the world 500 years later.

Verses 3-5 provide a record of Cyrus' decree, and the first thing we notice is that it is different from the decree we saw in Chapter 1. How do we explain that?

This version of the decree appears to have been a memorandum to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for the rebuilding of the temple. The version of the decree in Ezra 1 was a public announcement. These two records of the decree are not two variants of the same record of the decree but are instead two independent records of the decree. The version in Ezra 1 was for heralds to announce and posters to confirm, while the version here in Ezra 6 was the official detailed reference.

Verse 3 says "its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits." If the intent of the "breadth" in verse 3 is to say that the temple would be 60 cubits square, then some point out that such a temple could not have been built in the place of the original temple because the original temple was sixty cubits by 20 cubits (1 Kings 6:2). What is the explanation for that?

First (and once again), inspiration tells us that this is what Cyrus wrote to his treasurer; it does not vouch for the veracity of what Cyrus wrote. Second (and also once again), Hebrew and Aramaic numbers were difficult to copy, and thus we may have simply had a scribal error here.

It is remarkable that Cyrus' decree in verse 5 regarding the gold and silver vessels agrees so well with what the Jews told the Persian official in Ezra 5:14-15. As one commentator noted, it certainly lends credence to the integrity of their report. Jeremiah had prophesied that these items would be carried off to Babylon and later returned. (Jeremiah 27:21-22) We discussed earlier how important that return was to the Jews.

One point on which this version of the decree is much more explicit than the public version is on the important issue of who was to pay for the restoration. Verse 4 says to "let the expenses be given out of the king's house." The public version in Ezra 1 does not include that explicit statement, but it is

likely implied by 1:2 – “he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem.” In any event, there is no doubt here about who was to pay for the rebuilding.

## Ezra 6:6-7

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence: 7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

After recording the decree by Cyrus, verse 6 picks up again with the message from Darius to the Persian officials, and that message in verse 6 is for them to “be ye far from thence!” Keep away! That phrase is actually a technical legal term that means that their accusations had been rejected. The Jews had won their case! “Let the work of this house of God alone!” How wonderful that command must have sounded to the Jews!

We would suppose that the governor in verse 7 is Zerubbabel, although he is not mentioned by name. In fact, after 5:2, Zerubbabel is never mentioned again in the book of Ezra, which may be good news to those tired of hearing about the Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel conundrum!

## Ezra 6:8-10

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. 9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: 10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

The Jews were likely very anxious about what Darius would say, but their fears turned out to be unfounded. They had likely imagined the worst, but God gave them the best. It reminds me of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes, “I’ve lived through many terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.”

In fact, what could have been bad news, turned out to be tremendously good news. Those Persian officials (prodded along by the Jews' troublesome neighbors) had indirectly done the Jews a huge favor – they once again had funding for their project from the king! As the poet William Cowper wrote, “The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy” – and that was certainly the case here.

Some are surprised by Darius' concern for the details of the Jewish worship in verses 9-10. As before, the most likely explanation is that Darius had some help from a Jewish scribe in writing this letter. Many, and in fact most, of the Jews were still living in Babylon. Had Daniel died by this time? Perhaps likely, but not necessarily. It is possible that Daniel was working behind the scenes as an adviser to King Darius. (But this king was **not** the same Darius who threw Daniel into the lion's den.)

Verse 10 shows us that Darius took these religious matters seriously. He wanted the Jews to pray for his life and the lives of his sons. We see a similar request in the famous Cyrus Cylinder – “May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me to him.”

## Ezra 6:11-12

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. 12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

In verse 11 we find the penalty for anyone who would alter the king's edict, and it is quite severe: “a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be hanged or impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.”

Once again, a Jewish scribe may have had a hand in crafting this penalty! But we know that it was common for ancient covenants to include curses against those who broke them, and many ancient decrees include punishments for those who disobeyed. Here the justice is a bit poetic – anyone who harms God's house will have his own house destroyed.

The word “hanged” in verse 11 is better translated impaled. Impalement on a sharpened pole was an excruciatingly painful and deadly form of punishment. It was practiced earlier by the Assyrians as portrayed in the reliefs depicting their conquest of Lachish in the time of King Hezekiah. These were

recovered from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh by Austen Henry Layard in the mid-1800s. This method of punishment was apparently taken over by the Persians. It was certainly no idle threat. History tells us that Darius once had 3,000 Babylonians impaled to crush a rebellion.

Verse 12 contains an additional curse. The phrase "the God who has caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people" recalls Deuteronomy 12:5 and is the strongest indication that a Jewish scribe helped Darius prepare this letter. And Darius was almost speaking as a prophet here because we know from Daniel 2 that God would indeed overthrow kings and peoples as part of his plan to usher in his eternal kingdom.

So far we have read the letter to Darius and the letter back, which included a decree by King Darius. Next we will see the reaction to that letter.

## Ezra 6:13-15

13 Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily. 14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

In these verses we are reaching the grand conclusion of the first half of Ezra – the rebuilding of the temple. God's providence has been seen throughout, but no more so than here at the end where Darius the Great is seen moving to help God's people as God pulls Darius' strings.

As one commentator noted, this victory of God's people clearly displays the providence of God at work through these pagan potentates. I'm sure that Darius the Great thought he was completely worthy of that title "Great," but he was just a tool in the hand of God.

God used foreign kings and foreign peoples to accomplish his plan. God raised up prophets from among his own people to accomplish his plan. God used his own people to accomplish his plan. God opened doors using the enemies of his people (such as those who reported the building efforts to the local Persian officials), and God opened doors using royal decrees.

We, too, are a part of God's plan; we, too, have a role to play in that great plan; and we, too, are presented with great open doors. These people rushed through that door. Do we?

Are we on the look out for ways in which God is using those outside of his church to help us in our mission? As new technologies are created, are we thinking of ways to use them to spread the gospel? As economies collapse and industries falter, are we looking for hurting people who may now be more receptive to the gospel? God opens doors – and when he does, God expects his people to go through those doors while they remain open.

Verse 14 says that the people “finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” The most powerful word on earth at that time was the decree of a Persian king, but that king was being directed by an infinitely more powerful decree.

The inclusion of King Artaxerxes in verse 14 requires an explanation because he didn't become king until much later than these events in 520 BC. Instead, Artaxerxes was the king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned in 458 and 445 BC. Why is Artaxerxes included here along with Cyrus and Darius?

The most likely answer is one that we have seen before – the author (Ezra) jumped out of the chronology for a moment to make a point.

Remember, this book was written after the walls had been built under Artaxerxes, and the author was looking back through history to the times of Cyrus and Darius. Just as he included the (then future) opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes in Chapter 4, here in Chapter 6 he included the (then future) support for the Jews that also occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (although, as we will see, that support involved rebuilding the **walls** rather than rebuilding the temple).

Ezra is using all three kings involved in the restoration as illustrations of how even mighty kings are tools to accomplish the command of the God.

Verse 14 makes it clear that the building (not just of the temple but also of the city and the walls) would continue with divine direction and Persian support through the time of Artaxerxes. One commentator describes verse 14 as the key verse in the book of Ezra.

And finally in verse 15 the temple was completed! Haggai and Zechariah began preaching in 520 BC, and the temple was completed about five years later on March 12, 515 BC (converting to our own calendar). This great event occurred 72 years after the destruction of the first temple in 587.

Solomon's temple had stood for 400 years. This second temple stood for over 500 years until it was largely replaced by Herod's temple in 19 BC. Herod's temple and whatever remained in it from this second temple were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

## Ezra 6:16-18

16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy, 17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

Now comes the celebration! The term translated “dedication” in verses 16-17 is Hanukkah, the name of the Jewish holiday that celebrates a similar dedication of this same temple after its defilement by the Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 BC. Unlike that event in 165 BC, we have no indication that this dedication became an annual celebration.

We can also compare this dedication with that of the first temple under Solomon in 1 Kings 8. There the number of sacrificed animals was much greater: 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats.

In verse 17, the people offered 12 male goats as a sin offering “for all Israel.” Again, we see the theme of continuity. Even though most of the former exiles were from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, all of the tribes were represented by this sacrifice. They were collectively the people of God, and they were collectively the heirs of his covenants.

In verse 18, the organization of the priests and the Levites was reinstated as it was practiced before the exile. And how did they know how to do that? Verse 18 tells us how: They did “as it is written in the Book of Moses.” Restoration must begin with a return to the word of God.

But that book was so dated! It was so old! These people were much more sophisticated now! They had much better ideas about how to do things! Surely God was looking for a modern approach to go along with their new modern temple – right? Wrong! They turned back to the unchanging word of God to discover what God wanted them to do, and people today must do the same thing if they want to be pleasing to God.

The Aramaic section of Ezra that began in 4:8 ends in verse 18. From verse 19 onward the text is once again in Hebrew. We earlier discussed some possible reasons for the switch to Aramaic.

## Ezra 6:19-22

19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 20 For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves. 21 And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat, 22 And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The fourteenth day of the first month was the day stipulated in Exodus 12:6 for celebrating the Passover. In 515 BC it would have been on April 21 according to our calendar.

Although Passover's were celebrated yearly, they were typically only recorded when they were celebrated in relation to some important event, and most often when associated with revival movements, such as under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 30, under Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35, and here in Ezra 6.

The Passover, as we know, commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt and also prefigured our redemption by Christ's death ("For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." 1 Corinthians 5:7) So, as we saw that Zechariah was proclaiming Christ to the people, this feast was also pointing forward to the perfect sacrifice that was to come.

The purification of the priests in verse 20 would have involved a ritual washing with water as described in Exodus 29:4 and Numbers 8:7. Hezekiah's great Passover celebration had to be delayed because there were not enough ceremonially pure priests. (2 Chronicles 30:3)

Verse 21 confirms that this group included some Jews who had remained behind when the others were taken away into exile. Apparently, many of them had assimilated themselves with the non-Jewish people who lived there, and some of them had been encouraged by these returning exiles and by the prophets to return to the religious requirements of the Law of Moses.



These non-exiled Jews were welcome to join the exiles, but only if they “had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel.” They were not allowed to have one foot in Canaan and one foot in Jerusalem; they had to decide whose side they were on. Some of them chose God’s side.

Verse 21 is important because it corrects the false impression that the returning exiles were some sort of a bitterly exclusive group that wanted nothing to do with their neighbors. For those who wanted to join in on God’s terms as opposed to their own terms, what they found was an open door.

Jeremiah 29:13 – And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread in verse 22 was a separate feast that started the day after the Passover and lasted for seven days, but it was so closely associated with the Passover that the two were often treated as one feast.

The theme of verse 21 is joy. Throughout the Bible, joy is the characteristic of those who trust in God. In the Old Testament, thirteen different Hebrew roots (27 different words) are used to express joy in worshiping God, which tells us how important that concept was to the Jewish people. As Nehemiah would tell them later in Nehemiah 8:10, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The deeper we go in our study of God’s word and our desire to know God and please God, the more joyous we become. If we lack joy, it is an indication that we are living on the surface – that we have just enough religion to make us miserable! That is a very sad place to live, which explains the misery!

#ezra-esther