

Ezra 5 & 6

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[0 : 0 0] what possible relevance this passage can have to us living in Scotland in 2013. But I hope to show you today that it contains principles and truths of abiding importance to all of God's people in every age. I want to start by asking some questions of the passage, which are the sort of questions I am often asked. How are Christians to relate to those who govern us? Does God really work through us in relation to those governing over us? And if so, how?

Can our influence on those who govern us really make a difference to God's work in our world? I hope by the end of our study that we will be able to give clear answers to these important questions. But first of all, a little background to this passage. At the beginning of the book of Ezra, the exiled Jews have returned to Jerusalem under the decree of King Cyrus in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah, who had predicted that the exile would last 70 years, which in fact it did. God's word never fails. King Cyrus gave clear instructions to allow the people of God not only to return to Jerusalem, but also to rebuild the temple. This was an amazing decision, given that Cyrus was a pagan king, an unbeliever who did not know God. It is an example of what Solomon had written many years earlier. The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a stream of water wherever he pleases. And of course, Ezra himself confirms this in chapter one, when he says of Cyrus that the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all the kingdom, all his kingdom. It's so encouraging for us to remember that the Lord is sovereign in the hearts of all men, that he rules over the nations, and he changes times and seasons.

He sets up kings. He removes them from power. The wisdom of those who are wise comes from him. He gives knowledge to those who have understanding. Daniel 2.21. And we'll see more of this as we move through the passage. Now, although King Cyrus has permitted the rebuilding of the temple, by the time we get to chapter four, some people are not happy about this. And so we see that God's enemies persecute God's people. In chapter four, verses four and five, we are told, then the people around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.

They brimed officials 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. So opposition to the work of God was intended to discourage and demoralize the people of God, to instill fear in them, and to bring the work to an end. It involved corruption, and it was relentless. It went on for years and years.

Some things never change, do they? The opposition to biblical Christianity here in the UK has been going on for many years, especially in recent times, as churches across the denominations have been returning to the reformed faith of old and rebuilding congregations on biblical foundations.

[3 : 5 1] As Christians, the lengthened bread of the country take a stand on biblical truth in a public way that has not happened for many generations. Such bold faith is still facing opposition, as it has always done.

The enemies of the gospel still seek to discourage and demoralize the people of God, to instill fear in them, and bring the work of the gospel to an end. They may not be guilty of outright corruption, but they twist facts and put spin on their allegations, even giving false assurances that the proposed change in the law will never affect Christians in an adverse way.

We've seen this in so many ways in the work of the Christian Institute, where Christian people are easily discouraged and demoralized when biblical values and standards are trampled down, especially regarding the current plans by politicians to redefine marriage. Some Christians are afraid to speak out in defense of the meaning of marriage in law, lest it adversely impact upon their careers.

And the enemies of the gospel still try on occasions to misrepresent God's people in the media, the law courts, or in parliament. Christians are often accused of bigotry and homophobia when we speak out in defense of traditional marriage. The biblical voice is increasingly being marginalized in the public square. Government decisions are increasingly influenced by the views of pressure groups like Stonewall and the equality network. They seek to influence political leaders, just as Rehum and Shimshai did in Ezra's day when they persuaded King Artaxerxes that to allow God's people full liberty to carry on God's work would not be politically advantageous. Chapter 4, verse 22.

In Ezra's day, it was the risk of losing part of the kingdom. Chapter 4, verse 16. And in our day, it's the risk of losing the next election. There is truly nothing new under the sun.

[6 : 13] So by the end of chapter 4, the people of God are forced, as soon as the law is passed, to stop building the temple of God. And the work is brought to a standstill for 16 years.

So what happens next? God's servants proclaim God's word. Chapter 5, verse 1. Haggai and Zechariah appear on the scene to exhort God's people to continue rebuilding the temple.

God's word proclaimed always precedes God's work performed. Then as now, the preaching of the word of God is essential to the progress of the work of God. We ignore that principle at our peril.

It's interesting also to see that God's prophets supported the people in their work. They take a practical involvement in the work with the people and don't sit in some remote ivory tower.

Thirdly, we see that God's grace protects God's people. Chapter 5, verse 5. But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received. This is key to what happens next.

[7 : 33] Rehum and Shimshai had compelled the people by force to stop rebuilding the temple at the end of chapter 4. But here, due legal process has been restored, and it appears that a properly regulated appeal procedure is followed. This is a provision of God's common grace, and we need to view every benefit that accrues to Christians' freedoms under the law in that light.

Paul made good use of those freedoms on several occasions in the book of Acts, and so should we. Religious liberty is a precious thing and is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Savior.

Its purpose is the full and widespread proclamation of the gospel, because God desires men and women to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. That's why we are urged to pray for those in authority, that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

And fourthly, God's people engage in the political process. Verse 11 onwards. It's maybe not immediately apparent, but the Jews could easily have either challenged Tatanai to summon his forces to a battle or they could have ignored him and just carried on regardless and not had any engagement with him whatsoever.

Or they could have agreed to stop the rebuilding and given in to the intimidation from Tatanai just for a quiet life. But instead of these things, they held their ground and explained their position courteously, courageously, carefully, and cogently.

[9 : 27] And we should learn from their example. Now, be under no illusion. The current proposals to redefine marriage are a distortion of the precious God-ordained institution of marriage.

Its consequences pose a real threat to liberty of conscience and freedom of speech. But the witness of believers in our nation will undoubtedly be impacted, will be impacted upon adversely if this law goes through.

Some Christian charities and mission agencies may have their charitable status challenged. Public preaching on the subject of sexual ethics could give rise to vexatious complaints.

Teachers could face pressure to use resources with children that promote the homosexual lifestyle. Churches may be barred from using council premises like schools and community centres for their services and outreach events if they refuse to endorse same-sex marriage.

We too need to make our case to the government courteously, courageously, carefully, and cogently. And the next God's people appraised the king of the law.

[10 : 47] Verse 13 and following. One of the fascinating things about the letter Tatanai gives to King Darius is that the elders of Israel use legal argument to protect religious liberty.

They refer King Darius back to the law passed by King Cyrus, which enabled the temple to be rebuilt. So that showed to Darius that they were doing nothing unlawful and that they had every legal entitlement to carry on God's work.

King Darius orders careful research to be carried out to ascertain whether the legal case is established. The Lord was in all this detail. The Christian Institute makes use of careful research and legal arguments to show politicians and the law courts that Christians have the liberty to express biblical truths about marriage in the public arena or to proclaim the gospel in public.

These same principles apply to the public consultation on the government's plans to redefine marriage. The government has no mandate to redefine marriage.

They did not promise to bring it into being in their manifesto and the evidence from other countries shows that same-sex marriage is a harmful thing all across society.

[12 : 11] And ultimately, of course, it contravenes the permanent definition confirmed by the Lord Jesus himself. And so finally, God's hand alters the king's attitude.

Chapter 6, verse 22. The Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

Would that not be the most wonderful thing? That God would change the attitude of our politicians in this matter? What sustained rejoicing among God's people there would be if that happened?

Do we really believe that he could bring it about? Let's remember the words of Jesus. Nothing shall be impossible for him who believes. Notice in verse 10 that Darius asks that God's people pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.

Darius knew the importance of praying for those in authority. Do we? It's nice to continue to pray that our politicians' hearts, which are in the Lord's hands, that the Lord's hand would be turned by the Lord to do what is right and that marriage would not be redefined.

[13 : 36] Let's pray that our political leaders would assist the people of God in building the house of God. And we are his house if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Hebrews 3, 6. So, how are Christians to relate to those who govern us? By engaging with them courteously, courageously, carefully, and cogently.

Does God really work through us? And if so, how? Yes, he does. He did it in Ezra's day. He has done it many times since. And he can do it again in our day too.

He always uses means. And if this passage is anything to go by, he uses the law, the skillful arguments of God's people, and the king's conscience.

Can our influence on those who govern us really make a difference to God's work in the world? Yes, it can. It was a means by which God's temple was rebuilt and the next stage in redemptive history was accomplished.

[14 : 46] In our own day and generation, as we speak out on the unchangeable nature of marriage as an institution and the need to preserve freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, we can look to the Lord Jesus Christ to build his church, knowing that the gates or schemes of hell will not prevail against it and extend his kingdom here on earth, which kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom and shall stretch from shore to shore.

Shall we pray together? Our gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, how we thank you for that wonderful truth that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord.

Like streams of water, he turns it wherever he pleases. And we would pray for Alex Salmond and all those in authority over us. We pray for David Cameron and all those in authority at Westminster, that you would change their hearts, change their attitudes before it is too late.

We pray that we would speak out, that we would respond to this consultation, and that we would make our concerns known. And we would pray that you would be pleased to use our efforts for the extension of your kingdom, for the preservation of religious liberty in our land, in order that the freedom to proclaim the whole counsel of God might continue in our nation.

For Jesus' glory's sake, we ask it. Amen. Amen. On your behalf, I'd like to thank Mr. Kenny for agreeing to be here with us this morning and giving us an understanding of what the Christian Institute is about and how we should direct our prayers with regard to the forthcoming legislation.

[16 : 45] Let us then conclude our worship singing to God's prayers in Psalm 116. Sing Psalm's version on page 154. I love the Lord because he heard my voice.

He listened when I cried to him for aid. I'll call on him as long as I shall live, and because he turned to hear me when I prayed.

We shall sing to the end of the verse marked nine. And that's four stanzas to God's praise. We shall stand to sing. Amen. I love the Lord because he heard my voice.

He listened when I cried to him for aid. I'll call on him as long as I shall live, because he turned to hear me when I prayed.

I'll call on him as long as I shall live, because he heard my voice. I'll call on him as long as I shall live, because he heard my voice. He heard my voice. And that's all I shall live, and that's all I shall live, and that's all I shall live.

[18 : 16] Upon me came the anguish of the grave, with grief and trouble I was overtired.

When I was overcome. Then on the name of God I called, Lord, save.

The Lord our God is kind and full of grace, both righteous and compassionate is he.

The Lord protects all those of childlike faith.

When I was in great need, he rescued me.

[19 : 28] Restful, my soul, God has been good to you.

For you, O Lord, have saved my soul from death, my feet from stumbling, and my eyes from tears, that I may live for you while I have breath.

And now may grace, mercy, and peace, in name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, rest on you and abide in you, now and always.

Amen. Would you please allow Mr. Kenny to go.