

Moving Forward

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ezra. This morning we're looking at Ezra chapters 5 and 6.

If you're looking in the Pew Bible, it's page 364. I'm going to start by reading the last verse of chapter 4, chapter 4, verse 24, and the first five verses of chapter 5.

So feel free to follow along. And Ezra, I'm going to read the last verse starting at chapter 4, verse 24, which tells us the situation that introduces chapters 5 and 6.

Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who are in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who is over them. Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, the son of Josedach, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

[1 : 1 8] At the same time, Tat and I, the governor of the province beyond the river, and Sheethar, Bozenai, and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house and finish this structure?

Sure. They also asked them this, What are the names of the men who are building this building? But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the reports had reached Darius, and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

Last month, a new movie was released based on John Bunyan's classic, Pilgrim's Progress. Written in 1678, Pilgrim's Progress is the second best-selling book of all time following the Bible.

It's an allegory of the journey of a man named Christian with his companions faithful and hopeful from the city of destruction to the heavenly city. And along the way, Christian and his companions face several obstacles.

And at a few points, they get stuck. They get stuck in the slough of Despond. They get stuck in Doubting Castle. They get stuck in the Flatterer's Net.

[2 : 3 3] And in each of these situations, they need God to help them and rescue them, to get them unstuck so they can resume their journey. Sometimes along the way of following Jesus, Christians get stuck.

In other words, we stop making progress in our journey with Jesus. What might that look like? Well, many people have set out to grow in their knowledge of God by reading through the entire Bible.

And then they get to Leviticus. And they think, why are all these regulations in there? And sometimes people get bogged down, and they fall behind whatever schedule they're following, and pretty soon they give up reading the Bible entirely.

Others have set out to build a strong marriage, or strengthen a strained marriage, or rebuild a broken marriage, and then they face obstacles, distractions, misunderstandings, stressors, and it's tempting to just settle for coexisting.

Growth and change is hard. It's often tempting to disengage from that process. Or churches. Sometimes churches set out with a great mission of actively engaging their community with the love of Christ and the word of the gospel.

[3 : 51] But then over time, they gradually turn inward and settle for maintaining a comfortable status quo and trying to keep differing factions at bay. When I was in college, I lived in a house with eight other Christians for a summer.

And the house had begun with lofty ambitions of deep Christian community and extensive Christian hospitality. But the initial tenants took on an ambitious renovation project, even though they were only renting the house.

And that consumed their energy for about a year. By the time I moved in, the living room was completely unusable because it had become summer storage for everyone and who knows who.

So much for the vision of community and hospitality when you don't even have a functional living room. Sometimes Christians, individually and corporately, we can get stuck.

We set out with godly goals and then we face obstacles, we face distractions, we face challenges, and we take a detour or we sit down by the side of the road and we fall into complacency, apathy, procrastination, making excuses, holding on to misplaced priorities, and effectively going nowhere.

[5 : 13] Now, it's very rare that someone makes a self-conscious decision to do this. I don't know many people who have said, I'm just going to be lazy and not make any more spiritual progress.

Most often, our complacency, our stuckness, is the result of frustration, discouragement, and fear. And that's exactly the situation that God's people, the Jews in the book of Ezra, found themselves in.

They had embarked on this project of rebuilding the temple as God had commanded them. They faced various forms of opposition, as we saw last week in chapter 4.

And the end of chapter 4 tells us the result. The work stopped. It ceased. Now, I've included a timeline in the bulletin, in the center page, that you can sort of keep track of the events that we're looking at in Ezra and Nehemiah.

And that will sort of help orient you to some of the historical background of the book. But what we've seen so far is that in 538 B.C., the exiles had returned, according to Cyrus' decree.

[6 : 25] They had rebuilt the altar and laid the foundation of the temple, right there in 538, 537, in the first year or two. But then, for about 16 years, no further progress had been made.

The work had been at a standstill. They were stuck. And what we're looking at today is how God gets them unstuck.

And how God can get us unstuck when we have fallen into a similar situation.

So, we're going to see three things today in chapters 5 and 6. First, God's Word wakes us up. Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2.

Second, God's eye sees us through. Chapter 5, verse 3 to chapter 6, verse 15. And third, God's joy fills our hearts. Chapter 6, verse 16 to 22.

[7 : 28] God's Word wakes us up. God's eye sees us through. And God's joy fills our hearts. So, let's look at these three themes in turn. First, God's Word wakes us up.

This is verses 1 and 2 of chapter 5. It says, Haggai and Zechariah prophesied. They delivered God's message to the people. In the name of the God of Israel who is over them.

In other words, Haggai and Zechariah weren't just speaking on their own initiative, on their own accord. They were speaking under God's initiative, under His authority, and with His authority.

And under God's direction. And the result we see in chapter 2 is Zerubbabel, the governor, and Yeshua, the high priest. Sort of the two main leaders. They rose up and they began to rebuild.

And Haggai and Zechariah, verse 2 tells us they didn't just get them going and run. But no, they stayed with the people. They were present and intimately involved beside them, supporting and helping and encouraging them throughout all along the way.

[8 : 30] So after 16 years of inactivity and no progress, God's word woke His people up and got them going again. Now we know more about Haggai and Zechariah because there's a book about each of them in the minor prophets in the Old Testament.

So a little bit about Haggai. We read Haggai chapter 1 earlier today. Haggai came on the scene first. First, his prophecy was in the sixth month of Darius' second year.

That is 520 BC. And Haggai was a straight shooter. He was down to earth. He was in your face. And he was confrontational. He might have been Italian.

I can say that because I'm half Italian. No, he wasn't just living by his cultural, what was comfortable for him. But this is what God had given him.

His gift was a challenging prophetic word. And he's, you know, what did he say? You people say it's not time to build God's house.

[9 : 33] But look at all the money you're spending renovating and decorating your own houses. God's house lies in ruins and your houses have fancy wood paneling. Consider your ways. What are you up to?

Your life is not going well. You're crazy busy all the time. And the reason is because your priorities are all out of whack. Now the people listened.

They listened to Haggai. And they obeyed. And Haggai reassured them. And encouraged them of the Lord's promise. I am with you.

And then seven weeks later, Haggai chapter 2. Haggai gives another message. Another word of encouragement. Be strong and work for I am with you.

My spirit remains among you. So Haggai was an exhorter and an encourager. A straight shooter. Now the next month, Zechariah comes on the scene.

[10 : 33] The eighth month of Darius' second year. So after Haggai's first two messages, Zechariah comes on the scene. Zechariah prophesied over the course of at least two years. And Zechariah had a different style.

Zechariah was a heavenly-minded visionary. His style was different. But the overall direction of his message was the same. God gave Zechariah visions in the night.

Visions of God's judgment and mercy and glory. And his visions were vivid and intriguing and mysterious. One of Zechariah's visions, if you look in Zechariah chapter 3, he had a vision of Joshua the high priest.

Or Joshua the high priest wearing filthy clothes. This would have been sort of an absolutely horrifying vision. The leader of God's people, the one who would represent them before God, the one who was supposed to be the holiest man of them all, was clothed in garments that had been dragged through a sewer.

That's the vision he had. And it represented the spiritual pollution and corruption of the people. And so it was a horrifying vision at first.

[11 : 46] But then he sees the high priest's filthy garments being removed and replaced with pure and clean garments. And then Zechariah tells him God's promise connected to this vision.

God promised, I will bring my servant the branch. And that's a reference to the sort of a king arising out of the line of David. My servant the branch. And I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.

In one day, I will remove all of your pollution and corruption. And then he says, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and fig tree.

A vision of peace and prosperity and wholeness and love. So Zechariah had these amazing and intriguing visions of God's coming judgment and also his coming mercy and forgiveness and restoration.

And Zechariah's visions pointed the people to the greatness of the God they were serving. To the majesty of his unfolding plan which they had only begun to glimpse.

[12 : 57] If Haggai was the one who got in the people's face and who was down to earth and showed them this is the next step you need to take of repentance. Zechariah was the one who showed them the grand vision.

The long-term vision of the path that they were on. Zechariah wanted them to see that what they were doing right then and there was important.

But it was only laying the groundwork for a future manifestation of God's glory to come when the Messiah himself would come. In fact, much of the book of Zechariah is prophecies related to the coming of Jesus that are picked up in the New Testament.

Jesus who would be the promised king, the high priest, the final sacrifice, and the true temple of God where God and humanity would forever meet.

So God used these two preachers, Haggai and Zechariah, different as they were, to wake up his people from spiritual slumber.

[14 : 01] And to stir them out of their lame excuses and misplaced priorities. And to give them a vision of the glory of God. His word set them in motion and equipped them for the work he had for them to do.

And God still awakens and equips and sustains and encourages his people through his powerful word. Have you experienced God's word waking you up?

Setting you in motion? Sometimes God sends a straight talker like Haggai to call us to repentance. Consider your ways.

You're running after houses and cars and careers and sports teams and vacations and video games and your body image. You're running around like a chicken with your head cut off, but you're not seeking after the Lord.

And your priorities are out of line and that's part of the reason why you're not flourishing. Come and seek God. And put him first once again.

[15 : 18] But God also sends heavenly-minded visionaries like Zechariah. Who lift us out of our petty day-to-day concerns. And fix our eyes on the beauty and holiness of God.

The apostle Paul says in the New Testament, Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

And he prays in Ephesians, May you have power together with all the Lord's people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

To know this love that surpasses knowledge. That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. You see, when we stand in awe of God's greatness and when we revel in his goodness, the whole world looks different.

When we see the God that Zechariah was showing us. That's the first thing God does to get his people unstuck as he wakes them up with his word.

[16 : 26] But second, he not only wakes them up with his word, he also, God's eye, sees us through. This is chapter 5, verse 3 to chapter 6, verse 15.

The Old Testament commentator Derek Kidner wrote this, Like every spiritual advance from Abraham to the book of Acts, this venture to rebuild the temple began with a word from the Lord.

And in common with the rest, it was quickly tested and threatened. But what God's word had set in motion, his watchful eye would see through. What God's word had set in motion, his watchful eye would see through.

That's what we see in this middle section. The prophets stimulate the people to action. But verse 3, at the same time, the governor comes around and starts asking some questions. Who gave you permission to build this temple?

Where is your building permit? And what are all y'all's names? Now, when the governor shows up and starts asking those questions, you might start feeling a little intimidated.

[17 : 35] Okay, what's going to happen to us? Now, the government officials were most likely concerned by this sudden flurry of activity in Jerusalem because the first two years of Darius' reign were marked by revolts throughout the Persian Empire.

And so the governors wanted to make sure that they stayed on top of what was happening. Their inquiry likely had a legitimate purpose. It was not necessarily fueled by any personal hostility, but still for the Jewish elders, it would have been unsettling and intimidating.

But verse 5 gives a wonderful word of assurance. The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and the government officials did not stop them until the report should reach Darius, and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

In other words, the officials did not issue a stop work order. Immediately, they let the work go on until the inquiry was resolved. And Ezra reminds us that this was the Lord's doing.

God prevented the Persian officials from immediately stopping his people, and he prevented his people, who are sometimes fearful, from immediately giving in to their fears and stopping again.

[18 : 48] Now, I think if we're honest, most of us don't pay much attention to what we might call God's preventative providences.

In other words, all the bad things that could happen in this fallen world, but God doesn't let them happen. Here, we see God preserved the people.

He didn't let the government officials force them to stop. And so, he didn't let them give in to their fears, and he permitted them to go on.

You see, every day God's watchful eye is upon us. And he preserves us, often in ways that we don't even see and hardly ever recognize, by holding back things that could overwhelm us from the outside, and holding us back on the inside from giving in to our worst motives.

Isn't that encouraging? The eye of our God is upon us. And he protects us from things that he knows we are not ready for, that would completely overwhelm and crush us spiritually, so that he can sustain us in the work that he's given us to do.

[20 : 08] So, God's watchful eye was upon his people. He kept them going as they awaited a response from the king. Now, the rest of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 6 is the governor's letter to the king and the king's response to the governor.

I'm not going to read this all because it's long, but I'll summarize it. Verses 6 to 17 of chapter 5 are a copy of the letter from Governor Tatnai to King Darius. Just a side note, this whole section from chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18 is written in Aramaic.

Most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, the language of the people of Israel. But this is written in Aramaic because that was the trade language of the Persian Empire. So, that was the language that government documents would have been written in.

And most of this section is records of government documents. 52 out of the 67 verses are simply copies of letters or records of government communication.

So, again, that's another indication of the reliability, historical reliability of Ezra's account that these official documents were preserved in their original language. But governor's letter, verse 6 to 17, basically what he says is, these people are building their temple.

[21 : 23] We asked them if they had a building permit and they said they had one from King Cyrus. Can you check and see if that's true? Now, an inquiry like this could have received a relatively quick reply because one of Cyrus and Darius' main projects as Persian kings was road improvements.

And a postal service. So, the Persian royal road eventually stretched 1,700 miles from the capital of Susa in the east to Sardis in the west.

And there were post stations where the horses could be changed every 15 miles. And according to Herodotus, a letter could be delivered from one end of the empire to the other within one week.

Now, that's pretty amazing express mail for the ancient world. By the royal couriers. So, likely, it was possible for a letter to be sent like this and to receive a letter back within a reasonable period of time.

In chapter 6, verses 1 and 2 tells us that that's what happened. Then Darius the king made a decree, searched the archives. Verse 2, in Ekbatana, the citadel in the province of Media, a scroll was found.

[22 : 36] Now, Ekbatana was the summer residence of the kings of Persia. It was up in the mountains. They'd go up there because it was nice and cool in the summer. And then they'd come back to their capital in the winter.

So, they had sort of a couple, two or three different places where they spent the year. And so, the record was found in the summer archives. The record of the building permit from Cyrus and the administrative memo was found, including details about the dimensions and building materials.

Now, if you read closely, chapter 6, verse 3, you might notice that the height and length of the building are specified, but not the width. That's a bit unusual, but the general practice in the region was to build temples, rebuild temples on the foundations of ones that had been previously destroyed.

So, most likely, the dimensions were not a matter of dispute. And so, that's perhaps we only, perhaps the length dropped out of the edict or something happened to that.

But likely, that was well understood. So, verses 3 to 5 summarize Cyrus' decree, in other words, the building permit. And then 6 to 12 summarize Darius' directive and conclusion.

[23 : 51] And Darius basically says three things. In verses 6 to 7, he says, keep away, leave them alone. In other words, don't interfere with their project.

Then verses 8 to 10, he says, moreover, pay their costs in full and without delay from your provincial revenues. Now, Darius is very clear.

It doesn't come from the capital. It comes from your provincial taxes. So, you know, it's on you to raise that money. And the people probably were taxed for that.

But he says, give them whatever is needed day by day without fail. Verse 10, he expresses his hope that they may pray for the king and his family.

So, Darius' hope, like Cyrus, was that his subject would offer sacrifices and prayers in the various temples that he rebuilt throughout his empire. That they, that basically, that all the gods, wherever they were, and all the empire would be on his side.

[24 : 55] That's Darius' motive. And he did the same thing. We have records that he did the same thing in Greece and in Egypt. Verses 11 to 12, Darius basically threatens anyone who doesn't comply with death and instructs his decree to be carried out with all diligence.

So, what do we see here? In the end, the returned exiles end up in a better situation than they were at the beginning. So, God turned this intimidating inspection into a favorable outcome.

And isn't that often how God works? God brings us through trials that at first seem intimidating and unwelcome and we don't want them.

But on the other side of those trials, he makes us stronger and more courageous in the end. And in the midst of our trials, God wants us to know his watchful eye is upon us.

If he stirred us into action by his authoritative word, he will preserve us all the way through with his watchful eye. Again, Derek Kidner put it this way.

[26 : 16] This venture of faith begun in hard times and continued in a day of small things and of ominous investigations ended in triumph. Verse 14 or verse 13, Then according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tatani the governor of the province, Shethar Bozani and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.

And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes, king of Persia.

Artaxerxes is looking forward to what will happen in chapter 7. We'll see him appear there. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. So, the temple is not only resumed, it is completed.

And notice the various means that God uses to accomplish his purposes here. He uses the diligent work of the Jewish elders and people.

He uses the prophetic preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. He accomplishes this, verse 14 says, By his own sovereign decree and through the decrees of the Persian kings.

[27 : 39] Now, isn't that interesting? God uses all those things to accomplish his own purposes. So, it's not an either or.

Some people say, well, was God accomplishing this in his own sovereignty? Or were people acting within their own human responsibility? Yes and yes.

Yes. And those can be happening at the same time. So, both and. God accomplishes his own purposes through human agents.

We see the same pattern in the New Testament. For example, if you look at the book of Philippians, Paul begins with the wonderful word of assurance. He who began a good work in you or among you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

What God has begun, he will carry to completion. Wonderful reassurance from God. His watchful eyes upon us. What he's begun in Christ Jesus, he will bring to completion.

[28 : 42] But Paul doesn't say, so just sit back and let God do what he's already going to do and it doesn't matter what you do anyway. No, he says, let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Strive side by side for the faith of the gospel. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. But then he reminds him again because it's God who's at work in you.

To will and to work for his good pleasure. See, everything that God calls us to do, he will also equip us to carry out.

By his spirit at work within us. Isn't that encouraging, church? God's watchful eye is upon us.

His spirit remains within us. Jesus has promised that he would send us his spirit. So he encourages us to persevere and not give up.

[29 : 43] That brings us to our third and final point. God's word wakes us up. God's eye sees us through. And finally, God's joy fills our hearts.

Let's read starting at verse 16 to the end of the chapter. And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the returned exiles celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

They offered at the dedication of this house of God a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions for the service of God at Jerusalem as it is written in the book of Moses. On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover for the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together.

All of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles for their fellow priests and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel.

[30 : 55] And they kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy for the Lord had made them joyful. And it turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

You might say, why does it say the king of Assyria, not the king of Persia? Because Persia had taken over Babylon, had taken over Assyria. And the king of Assyria had been sort of this menacing figure who had come against the people of Israel over and over and over again.

And so Ezra's sort of reminding them that the king of the same place, God has now turned his heart to be favorable. So God is in charge of even the king of Assyria, Darius.

But what do we see in this section? This last section. It begins and it ends with joy. They celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

And they kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy. For the Lord had made them joyful. Now, remember, these returned exiles hadn't yet reached the end of the road.

[32 : 06] Rebuilding the temple was only the first step in the process. We've come to the end here of the first major section of Ezra, but the next major section, chapters 7 to 10, we'll see the task of rebuilding the community under God's word.

And then in Nehemiah, we'll see the task of rebuilding not just the temple and the community, but the city and its walls and its culture. So there is still plenty more work ahead of God's people.

And they're feasting here paled in comparison to the past. When Solomon dedicated his temple, he sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep, according to 2 Chronicles 7, 5.

Here they offered 100 bulls, 200 rams, and 400 lambs. A modest feast with a motley crew compared to what their ancestors had experienced.

Though the temple was rebuilt, the ark had been lost, and the king was gone, and there was no glory cloud of God's manifest presence as there had been in the past, not all had yet been restored.

[33 : 18] But still, they had joy. They hadn't reached the end of the road. In fact, they weren't even near the end of the road. They hadn't even ascended to the heights that they had ascended to in the past, but this was one more milestone along the path that God had laid out for them.

One more Ebenezer. One more stone of help that the people could look upon and see the ever-present kindness and faithfulness and provision of God.

See, there's three things that people do in this section. They dedicate the temple, verse 17. They purify the Levites in verse 20, and they celebrate the Passover in verse 21. It's the exact same sequence that they followed when they came out of Egypt in Numbers chapter 7, 8, and 9.

Numbers 7, they dedicate the tabernacle, and they offer the same sacrifice, a male goat, for each of the tribes of Israel as a sin offering. Numbers 8, they purify the Levites.

They set apart the leaders. Numbers 9, they celebrate the Passover, the feast of covenant renewal. You see, it's the same God who brought them out of Egypt a long time ago.

[34 : 41] He's doing the same thing all over again. He's the same God yesterday, today, and forever, and they can count on Him. And you know, it's actually here that the 70 years of exile finally come to an end.

If you notice, 586 B.C., the temple had been destroyed. They were exiled to Babylon. 70 years later, 516, the temple is completed. The sign that God has come to dwell among them once again.

It was a sign that God hadn't left His people. He hadn't forsaken His promise, and He wouldn't leave them now. And so, there was joy. Yes, there was still a long road ahead.

Yes, they might be discouraged if they just compared their present condition to some time in the past, but still, they could stop and look back and praise God for what He has done. Can you do that?

Can you look back in your own life and praise God for what He has done? John Newton, the author of the hymn Amazing Grace, once said, I'm not what I should be, I'm not what I could be, but praise God, I'm not who I once was.

[35 : 59] Can you look back to when you first saw Jesus for who He really is and when God's light shined in your heart? Can you look back to a time in your Christian life when some sin or temptation felt utterly overwhelming and life dominating, but by God's grace, you've made some progress?

Maybe you're still fighting the same thing, but it's not quite as, it doesn't have quite the hold on you that it did five years ago. Or can you look back on a dark time when God's ways seemed completely inscrutable, completely incomprehensible to you, and even now you may not know why God brought you through that severely hard season, but now you can see, you can at least see that He's still with you on the other end of it.

He walked with you through it all the way. Even when you didn't feel Him and didn't see Him, He was there. Can you look back and praise God with joy for what He has done in your own life, in your own heart?

You know, we can do this as well, we can also consider this as well as a church. You know, there's much work ahead of us as a church. Right?

This building project we've committed to as the members of the church is not a small undertaking for a church of our size, and we still have a ways to go in order to reach our goals.

[37 : 43] A project like this will inevitably be disruptive and inconvenient for a time, and this is a project that calls for all of us to pray and to give sacrificially and do what we can as God enables us.

And of course, even more important than seeing a physical building to facilitate our ministry and outreach is continuing to see our church grow spiritually at every step along the way in holiness, in unity, in love, in patience, in kindness, in humility, in loving other churches and working together with them to love and serve our city and carrying out our mission to share the good news of Jesus with the world.

But brothers and sisters, even if there's much work ahead of us, even if some of it may seem daunting, can we look back and praise God with joy for what He's already done?

Almost 50 years ago, this church was planted. It was planted by a pastor from East Hartford and two students from Yale Divinity School with the goal of reaching university students and families in New Haven.

They started small. We don't even have many records from that time. They first met in a motel and later in a dance studio. Things went well for a while, but then the church nearly collapsed in the 1990s.

[39 : 10] And for five years, it went through a phase that the people who were there at the time would call the wilderness years when they had no pastor and about 20 or 30 people.

20 years ago, 1999, the church had 20 people, no pastor. It had been that way for five years and many people were ready to close the doors for good and trust that God could carry on His work in other ways.

But people prayed, people confessed their sins to each other and reconciled with each other where there had been previous conflict and dissension and God brought a new pastor and began to revitalize the church.

And then 14 years ago in 2005, we had 150 people, we were renting space and our landlords told us we had six months to find somewhere else to meet. And we looked all over downtown and this was the one place that we found that would meet our needs where we could meet on Sunday mornings within walking distance of the downtown area.

And it seemed daunting. Would the Roman Catholic Church really sell to us when the phone company certainly could have outbid us? Could we really raise the cost of the building 1.25 million?

[40 : 27] Ooh! Our annual budget was nowhere near that. Not even half of it. Not even a third of it. But God's people gave. And we paid half the cost up front.

We paid off the rest of the mortgage in three years by God's grace. And this space that God provided has been a wonderful location for our church's ministry, to the university community, to families, to internationals, and to the poor in New Haven.

And over the past several years, God has built us into an increasingly multi-ethnic and intergenerational church. You see, God has been good and kind and faithful to us in the past in more ways than we can imagine or even know about.

Far more than we deserve. God certainly could have carried on His work in New Haven in other ways and He is working through other churches. But God has a purpose for us to be here.

And we can trust Him to carry us on into the future. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

[41 : 45] Rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I will say, rejoice. Let's pray. God, we thank You that when we fall into complacency, when we fall into misplaced priorities, when we fall into apathy and a lack of spiritual progress, we thank You that You do not leave us alone.

We thank You that You do not leave us to restart ourselves. We thank You that You have given us Your Word to wake us up. We thank You for Your watchful eye. Lord, Your provision compassion, even behind the scenes in ways that many times we don't even see and perhaps can only recognize much later on.

we thank You for Your watchful eye that sees us through and we thank You for Your joy that fills our hearts that we can praise You for what You have done.

Praise You for what You've done in us individually. We praise You for what You've done among us as a church. We pray that You would continue the good spiritual work that You have done and are continuing to do.

We pray that as Haggai encouraged the people that we would be strong and that we would know that You are with us. That we would take up the calling that You have given to us to be Your people, to be Your representatives in this city, in this region for the glory of our King Jesus.

[43 : 35] I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.