

Rebuilding under pressure

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[0 : 00] So the reading is in three parts. It's Ezra chapter 1 verses 1 to 8, then chapter 4 verses 1 to 5, and 4 verse 24.

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to make a proclamation throughout the realm and also to put it in writing.

This is what Cyrus, king of Persia, says. The Lord, the God of heaven and earth, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.

Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.

And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.

[1 : 10] Then 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.

All their neighbours assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts in addition to all the freewill offerings.

Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his God. And then chapter 4, 1-5.

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, Let us help you build, because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon, king of Syria, who brought us here.

But Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.

[2 : 38] Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed 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.

Then chapter 4, verse 24. Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. Well, it's lovely to see you all, and particularly all the family and friends of Gus and Natasha as well.

God, it's slightly too low, Andrew. It's far too low. Let's ask God to speak to us through this unusual word. Let's ask him to speak now.

Father, when you speak, things happen. When you spoke, the world came into being. When you spoke, people repented and turned back to you. We pray this morning that we'd hear your voice speaking to us and that we would have our hearts stirred and we would respond to today.

Hear our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is a new series for us as a church as we look at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Most commentators would say these two books are one book, and we're going to be looking at them together over the next couple of months.

[4 : 11] And so today, I'm kicking off and giving you a bit of a background and also focusing in on the important work that God is calling us to do, which is to rebuild and to recognize that when you start rebuilding, I don't know if any of you have done any kind of do-it-yourself recently?

Anybody in the congregation? One or two? Anybody having trouble getting materials? One or two? There is problems. When we try to rebuild, often we face difficulties and problems, and we'll be

finding out that that happened to the people of Israel too.

So let me just give you a bit of background. The people of Israel are languishing in exile. They've been taken away from their nation, and they've been taken all the way across to what was Babylon, which is about 1,700 miles from the holy city, Jerusalem.

And they're there kind of as slaves. It's a pretty bad situation. They have no power, no authority, and there they are, killing time.

Does it sound, I mean, it's not quite the same as our situation with lockdown, but many of us have faced a situation where where we wanted to go, we couldn't go there. We were kind of locked down for a period, and we felt a bit helpless under the rules and regulations within this country, and that's affected the whole world too.

[5 : 32] It's strange to hear some people sort of marooned in another country and not being able to get back to see friends and family. So there's some parallels and some things we can link with, I think, in this text.

Now, for God's people, it seemed utterly impossible they'd ever be able to get back to their home in Israel, to Jerusalem, to the temple where they perceived and God dwelt amongst them.

So for them, it was a very, very sad time. In fact, when they thought about Jerusalem, when they thought about the temple, they would weep because they could remember what it used to be like. And now they were with this foreign nation in Babylon, persecuted and slaves.

And in this sermon series we're going to be looking at in Ezra and Nehemiah, we're going to see that God starts a work of rebuilding. And he does it in three stages.

And I want you to notice the broad spread of what's happening. The first thing that they do, so going on to the next slide there, is that God says, you're going to rebuild the temple. The first thing, the first act, is to rebuild the place of worship.

[6 : 41] That's where everything needs to begin, in the place of worship. For us, as we seek to rebuild after all that we've gone through, this is the priority for us, to worship God.

Very often we put everything before that. Arrangements, family, friends, work, everything else goes first. And then we squeeze God in at the end. But this was the call of God.

You're to rebuild the temple, the place where you gather to worship. The second step was to rebuild the people. They listened to the word of God for the first time for many years. And they heard what God had said and realized they needed to repent and turn away from the way they've got into the habit of living.

And finally, they were to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem to offer it as a place of protection for all those who would seek to find protection within it. So they're the three phases of the rebuilding for the people of Israel as they come out of Babylon.

Now, I want to read to you the very first verse, which you may have missed as it was read, and it's hard to kind of tune yourself in to this King Cyrus and so on. Let me read it to you, and then I'll highlight what it means and how profound this verse is.

[7 : 55] It says this in verse 1. In the very first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, this is a new nation. Babylon has been overthrown, and Persia is now ruling.

Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord to Jeremiah, a prophet of Israel. So a foreign king is going to say something to fulfill what God has said many years before through the prophet Jeremiah.

He says, the Lord moved in the heart of Cyrus. This would be a little bit like saying, the Lord moved in the heart of the Taliban. It would be that crazy to think that God might do that.

But God is moving in this foreign king, king's heart, and he makes a proclamation to the entire realm. Persia, the Persian Mede Empire is now ruling, and they control the world.

And God Almighty is speaking into the heart of this king. Now, Daniel reveals to us, in Daniel 5, another book in the Bible, it reveals the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire that had taken Israel into exile and put in place this Persian Mede Empire in their place.

[9 : 09] And now God is moving in the heart of this king of Persia known as Cyrus. And Jeremiah, the prophet who prophesied that something was going to happen that was going to change everything, said this.

And you don't have this in your text. So let me just read this from Jeremiah 29, verse 10. This is what the Lord says. This was a prophecy before all these things happened.

When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will make you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to the place of Jerusalem.

So what Jeremiah is saying, you're going to have to wait 70 years in exile, but then I'm going to bring you back. And now Cyrus, this foreign king, is being used of God to bring the people back to the place of worship.

Now, Cyrus isn't just moved in his heart. He doesn't just have a warm, fuzzy feeling. He actually does something. He makes a proclamation. And this is the proclamation he made. Now, imagine if you were stuck in this Persian empire and God spoke through a foreign king, a pagan king, with these words.

[10 : 20] How would you feel? This is what Cyrus, king of Persia, says. The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He recognizes that it's the Lord who's given him those kingdoms.

And he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any one of his people among you is to be let go to Jerusalem in Judah and to build the temple of the Lord.

And the people in any place where survivors may now be living are to provide you with silver and gold, goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.

This is like, you know, you've got the tickets. Your lottery has just been delivered. This is the totally unexpected thing that has come your way. Suddenly, you're allowed to leave a foreign nation, go back to your own nation, and you are going to be given gifts and money to be able to rebuild.

Can you imagine how wonderful that must have been for the people of Israel? Absolutely glorious. I wonder if we've really caught it. Cyrus is letting God's exiled people go to worship God.

[11 : 32] Does it remind you of Pharaoh when he said to the people of Israel who had been enslaved in Egypt, he said, let my people go. He said, go, just go. Go back to your nation.

I can't have you here anymore. So it's like a second exodus occurring. And he's giving the full weight of his authority to make this happen.

And not only that, but Cyrus is calling upon the nations where the Jews have now settled in their various places, and he's saying, you're to give gold and silver. You're to give all the money necessary for this to happen.

A free will offering is also given by the Jewish people. And in verse 7, we discover that King Cyrus digs out all the articles from the temple, and 5,400 articles of gold and silver are delivered in order to rebuild the temple.

What seemed utterly impossible is made possible by God. Now, I wonder what you think is utterly impossible at the moment, where you're sort of feeling totally, I don't know how we're going to rebuild.

[12 : 36] What seems impossible? Maybe it's getting through this pandemic, which seems to still be around us. Maybe it's something else. Perhaps there's an issue in your family, with relationships. Where is it where you feel something is utterly impossible?

Well, wait upon the Lord. Call upon him. See what voice he brings and what statement he calls. And he can move people's hearts, even the most unlikely heart, the heart of this king, King Cyrus.

How wonderful. And the invitation is open to us too at the moment. Perhaps God's calling us to rebuild. I think it's a time where we are looking to rebuild.

Companies are rebuilding. And they're trying to. Our transport system is being a bit rebuilt. And I think God is calling us as a church to look at rebuilding.

Rebuilding in worship. Rebuilding in mission. And rebuilding in our community as a fellowship. I wonder what he might be calling you to do.

[13 : 42] What one thing he might be calling you to do in that rebuilding exercise. Then going on to the next slide. It all starts with worship.

Remember, the temple was the first thing that was rebuilt. And it's the same with us. We're to give a priority to worship. To gathering together.

And to lifting up the name of the Lord. To listen to his word. And to respond to him. Now it's been good to do that online. But it's fantastic to do that as we gather together.

As we have done today. So well done everyone for coming out today. To determine in your heart that you want to glorify God. You want to edify and build up your brothers and sisters.

And you want to listen to what the Lord is saying to you today. And that's going to require us to be built together. In worship and in service. And it's wonderful to see all those folk willing to look after

our children.

[14:42] And to train them up in the knowledge and love of God. It's going to involve all of us having a part to play. I wonder what your part is to play here in this church.

Let's follow the advice of the writer to the Hebrews. When he says let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Maybe the Lord's calling you to spur others on to love and good deeds.

What could you do this week to show your love of God? How could you act this week? As some.

And then it says but let us not give up meeting together. As some are in the habit of doing.

It's bad to get into bad habits isn't it? Do you ever find that? Maybe during this pandemic anybody found they've got into a few bad habits? I'm sure many of us have. Well this is a time to rebuild. To get into good habits.

And to put those bad habits aside. And to encourage one another as the day when Jesus will come again is approaching. So let's give a priority.

[15:39] Just like the temple was the priority in the rebuilding back in Ezra's day. Let's give a priority for our gathered worship as we are doing this morning. And then going on.

The rather shocking thing that happens in chapter four is the opposition comes. And it's a bit sad really that there they are trying to rebuild the temple.

They've got all the money being given to them to rebuild the temple. And then you get a whole stack of opposition. Have any of you found that when you're trying to construct something people kind of point out all the problems?

And where you're going wrong? And perhaps you should do it this way? And it can become really depressing. And I think for us as well as we look to start rebuilding. You know you may say well I'm not really sure about that.

I search as a name really. You might get a better name than that Andrew. You see the kind of thing? We get silly kind of stuff coming out. And it's not helpful to encourage other people.

[16:40] We want to encourage them. We don't want to be part of the opposition do we? And here we find that despite all this energy and effort. All these people moving 1700 miles. Taking all the items for the rebuilding.

There was opposition coming. And I want you to notice where the opposition came and where it was targeted. In verses one and two. The opposition is first of all targeted at the leadership.

So you have these people saying we want to help. But in fact they're enemies of God. They're not trying to help. They're trying to disrupt the rebuilding. So if you go back. One. They're trying to disrupt that rebuilding.

So just be aware of that. That our leadership are likely to get some opposition as we look to rebuild. So look to encourage your deacons and elders and hardworking pastors.

Do encourage them. Because they will be difficulties as we start rebuilding. It is difficult isn't it rebuilding? It's tough. And then secondly what will happen is that.

[17:36] As happened in those days. People will sow discouragement. And fear. So if you start hearing people saying discouraging words and fearful words. You know try not to listen in to those.

That's normal during a rebuilding. But just be aware that opposition often comes. And then in Haggai tells us a little bit more about some of the things that were happening at this time.

And in Haggai 1, 2 and 3. What it says there. The prophet says. God's been listening. And he's listening. And he's saying. I hear that people are saying it's not the right time for rebuilding.

Yeah. It's too soon. Too soon to rebuild. And then God says to the people who are saying this. He said. But I've noticed you've been doing a lot of work on your own house. Haven't you? I've seen the extension.

I've seen the decorating going on. Can you see the point? So what Haggai says is. Those who often sound like they're saying wise words. It's too soon. We shouldn't do this.

[18:36] You know. We ought to wait. Often what they're doing is making sure that they're okay. But they're not investing in the kingdom of God and his purposes. So let's watch out for that in our own hearts.

We want to be wise. But be careful with fine sounding words. And then finally we discover in verse 5. That there are councillors trying to frustrate what's going on.

Deliberately trying to stop the building going on. And the rather sad thing as you read on in the text. Is that frustration that occurs right through two different kings reigns.

Lasts for 10 years. And it delays the rebuilding for 10 years. So opposition really does have an impact. So we've got to be ready for it in our workplaces.

As we look to rebuild it within our families. And yes definitely within the church. On to the next slide. How do we respond to the opposition? How do we respond when we're trying to rebuild.

[19 : 35] Trying to get things going again within our families. Within the church. Within our community. We need to recognise who the true enemy of the disruption is.

And the Bible says that we don't fight against physical people. We fight against principalities and powers of this dark world. Ultimately against Satan who seeks to destroy.

And so we need to recognise the enemy. And not think it's that person. We need to recognise that there are spiritual forces at work. And a wonderful thing is. Even when we face opposition. God uses it for our good. Which is amazing really. That he can take something bad. And make it good. And if you look at Romans chapter 5 verse 3.

It says this. We know that sufferings and trials produce perseverance. Perseverance produces character. Character hope. And hope does not disappoint us.

[20 : 34] So even when we face struggles in the rebuilding. You'll discover. That it actually still works to God's purposes. His word will be fulfilled. His purposes will come about.

And then rebuilding begins with worship. Which we've mentioned. I think I probably need to say that again. And rebuilding involves us together. Working together. Taking our part. Making our contribution. So what could that be for you. As you look to rebuild. In this next season. Let's turn to God in prayer. And ask him to help us.

As we come. And seek to serve him. And to worship him. Let's pray. Dear Lord Jesus. We want to thank you. That you left your home in heaven. And came to this broken, hurting and dangerous world. To do a work of rebuilding. Of transformation. Of renewal. We thank you.

[21 : 34] That you came not to be served. But to serve. And to lay down your life for us. Thank you. That zeal for your house. Absorbed you.

And you said you wanted your house. To be a house of prayer and worship. May we too have zeal. For gathered worship. As we are this morning. We marvel that despite. Being sent by your father. You face such awful persecution Jesus. Yet you continue to stand firm. To your call. And in so doing. You won a great salvation for us.

And made a way. For us. To have that ultimate exodus. That is to come. To the new heaven. And the new earth. We invite you to move in our hearts.

As you did in King Cyrus. And to stir us. To join again. With our brothers and sisters. In your mission. To rebuild a hurting broken world. Help us to start. With meeting together.

[22 : 29] In worship. And as your hands and feet. In this world. Pour out your gifts upon us. As you call us to serve. In new ministries. Make us bold. To respond to your call.

Equip us for the rebuilding. And help us to persevere. When opposition comes. Lord Jesus. Thank you for the privilege. You give us. To be involved in your work. May the beauty of the Lord. Be upon each one of us. Establish the work of your hands. Dear Lord. And all God's people said. Amen.