

EZRA

Lesson 10, Chapter 5 continued (2)

We'll continue today with the Book of Ezra, but we'll also continue our detour into the books of the prophets who prophesied concerning the Temple and Jerusalem in that era. There are so many valuable principles and lessons that are directly applicable to us when we include the divine oracles delivered by these two prophets that we won't be able to cover them all, but only hit the high points.

At this junction in history (520 B.C.), roughly 35 years after the first Jewish exiles returned to Judah, and during the reign of the 4th king of the Persian Empire, King Darius, the 2 prophets Haggai and Zechariah were encouraging the Jews to get back to work to rebuild God's Temple.

We finished the short 2-chapter Book of Haggai last week and what we ought to take from it is that God's perspective of the Temple rebuilding project was quite different than the Jewish perspective. And as we study the Bible more and more we find that the earthly physical human perspective is usually quite different from the spiritual divine perspective. To begin with, the Jews had stopped rebuilding because several opposition groups, primarily the Samaritans, had threatened the Jews that unless they were heavily involved that they would not allow the Jews to continue with the project. The Jews only got so far as to lay the new foundation when the protests became so intimidating that they quit the work altogether.

Then after 35 years of inactivity, God had had enough and so sent 2 prophets to jar the returned Judahites from their spiritual slumber. We need to understand how long a period of time of ambivalence among the Jewish leadership for rebuilding the Temple that we're talking about here. From our vantage point of 2014, 35 years ago Jimmy Carter was the President of the United States and Ronald Reagan was the movie star turned governor of California. The Iran hostage crisis erupted as the Shah of Iran fled, and the Cold War was years away from ending. CNN was not yet in existence. So the Lord had had great patience with the Jews as

they waited for whatever ill-defined time that seemed right in their eyes to dare to start to lay the cornerstone of the 2nd Temple. What they had wasted no time in building, however, were their own homes. And the wealthy built expensive and lavish homes in and around Jerusalem as symbolized by their use of expensive interior wood paneling.

Then through Haggai the Lord spoke and said He was not happy with this situation. He wanted the Jews to build His Temple now! Opposition or no opposition. And said that the Temple was important to Him for a couple of reasons. First, that building His **beit**, His house, was an indication to Him of the Jews' zealousness for Him. And second because it is at the Temple where fellowship with the Lord happens. No Temple, no fellowship between God and His people. So He severely upbraided the Jews for their spineless and faithless attitudes of sitting around waiting for all the barriers to rebuilding the Temple to somehow fall, most of which amounted to threats and harassment. The Jews already had the written approval of the Persian government, the labor, skills, and material resources to do the job, the required Temple furnishings, a ready-to-go Priesthood and sufficient funds to build (even if the result might not equal the original Temple, built by King Solomon).

As I speak to you today, conditions and circumstances are nearly identical in Jerusalem 2500 years later. The Temple could be built today if only the Jewish leadership had the courage and will to do it. But, just as with the Jews in Ezra's day, the Jews didn't want a confrontation with their enemies (or their friends) over building God's Temple. And just as in Ezra's day the Jewish leaders of Israel have beautiful luxury homes and live a lavish lifestyle. The Jewish Israelis have the money, plans, furnishings, every physical and tangible thing they need for a new Temple. But ironically, because of their reticence to act, the sum of what we learn from several Bible passages seems to indicate that the Temple will instead be rebuilt at the behest and encouragement not of the God of Israel by rather by His nemesis, Satan. The Anti-Christ will likely pave the way for the Temple to finally be rebuilt; but this is so he may step into its innermost chamber and declare himself to be god.

There are a series of prophecies that begin with Daniel that explains this scenario.

Daniel 9:25-27 CJB

²⁵ Know, therefore, and discern that seven weeks [of years] will elapse between the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Yerushalayim until an anointed prince comes. It will remain built for sixty-two weeks [of years], with open spaces and moats; but these will be troubled times.

²⁶ Then, after the sixty-two weeks, Mashiach will be cut off and have nothing. The people of a prince yet to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary, but his end will come with a flood, and desolations are decreed until the war is over.

²⁷ He will make a strong covenant with leaders for one week [of years]. For half of the week he will put a stop to the sacrifice and the grain offering. On the wing of detestable things the desolator will come and continue until the already decreed destruction is poured out on the desolator.

And while that passage gives us only a shadowy prediction of the End Times, Messiah Yeshua expanded it a bit further.

Matthew 24:14-16 CJB

¹⁴ And this Good News about the Kingdom will be announced throughout the whole world as a witness to all the Goyim. It is then that the end will come.

¹⁵ "So when you see the abomination that causes devastation spoken about through the prophet Dani'el standing in the Holy Place" (let the reader understand the allusion),

¹⁶ "that will be the time for those in Y'hudah to escape to the hills.

And then a few years after Christ's death on the cross, Paul teaches about the End Times and shows that he understood what this means in the same way that most Messianics, Hebrew Roots and Evangelical Believers do today.

2Thessalonians 2:1-4 CJB

^{CJB} 2 Thessalonians 2:1 *But in connection with the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah and our gathering together to meet him, we ask you, brothers,*

² *not to be easily shaken in your thinking or anxious because of a spirit or a spoken message or a letter supposedly from us claiming that the Day of the Lord has already come.*

³ *Don't let anyone deceive you in any way. For the Day will not come until after the Apostasy has come and the man who separates himself from Torah has been revealed, the one destined for doom.*

⁴ *He will oppose himself to everything that people call a god or make an object of worship; he will put himself above them all, so that he will sit in the Temple of God and proclaim that he himself is God.*

There is so much we could talk about from this passage in 2Thessalonians, but I'll avoid the temptation. Let me just comment that the term most often used in English New Testament translations for whom we usually call the Anti-Christ is "the one who is without law", or "the lawless one", or "the man of lawlessness". Listen to me carefully, please: what law is being talked about here? What set of laws is regarded as so important to the Jewish people and to the Scripture writers that the one who sets himself against these laws is condemned as "the lawless one"? Rabbinical laws? Roman laws? The laws of the European Union? Our local community laws? Or is it any old cultural system of laws? Of course not; the only law that means anything to God (and especially a system of laws that the Lord condemns a person for NOT following) is His own law, the Law of Moses. So what chief characteristic makes the Anti-Christ the Anti-Christ? He is completely opposed to God's Laws. This is in contrast to Christ

who said this about His position on the Law of Moses:

Matthew 5:17-19 CJB

¹⁷ "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.

¹⁸ Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.

¹⁹ So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Whoever obeys God's Law and teaches God's Law will be called great.....NOT on earth, for certain.....but in the Kingdom of Heaven. Notice also when people who love God no longer have the Torah (the Law) to obey, but instead it passes away; it's not when Christ dies on the cross or arises from the grave, but rather when heaven and earth passes away. So we have the man, Christ, who upholds the Law and urges us to do the same, as opposed to the man, the Anti-Christ, who is against the Law, and spends all of his time urging us NOT to obey God's Law. And in other NT verses we're told that the spirit of the Anti-Christ (the spirit of being against the Law of Moses, the source of all of God's principles) is already alive and well in this world! You bet it is and it is mainly present, ironically, as a foundational doctrine of (of all things) His Church since about 300 years after Christ lived and died! Don't you find that bizarre? So it is no wonder that the Anti-Christ will have an easy time of establishing his agenda; no doubt Christians (and probably some of Judaism as well) will (at least at first) hail this man of lawlessness who has a view of God's Law similar to the views of most Christians and of some Jews; an anti-Law of Moses view.

And for any new listeners, let me be precise and clear: while the Law of Moses is alive and well and is to be followed as best we are able within the circumstances of our times, the Law is not and never was an instrument of Salvation. Salvation is only from Christ and that only obtained

by our faith towards Him, and God's grace towards us. The Law of Moses was, at its inception, only for the already redeemed, and it has remained so. The Law is not for non-Believers.

So, in relation to Haggai and the Book of Ezra chapter 5, we find the Lord telling His people, through His Prophet Haggai, that they are to rebuild the Temple immediately and if they will obey and do this, then the blessings that He has purposely held back from them, He will now let flow abundantly. Instead of fields yielding meager harvests due to drought or hail, they will produce to their maximum because God will stop the drought and hail. When do the blessings begin again? Haggai 2:18 says blessings will begin on the very day the Temple foundation is laid.

Let's see, now, what the Lord has to say through Haggai's cohort, Zechariah.

READ ZECHARIAH CHAPTER 1 all

We'll not study all of Zechariah, just chapter 1 since the remainder of Zechariah isn't really directly pertinent to Ezra.

Zechariah begins with an oracle from God that Zechariah receives in the 8th month of the 2nd year of Darius. Thus Haggai receives the first 2 oracles from God (on the 6th and 7th months), then in the 8th month Zechariah receives the one that we just read in the first 6 verses of chapter 1. Following that Haggai receives two more oracles.

Technically speaking, Zechariah receives but one oracle, and then 3 months later in the 11th month he receives a series of 7 night visions, all in a single night; one right after the other. This awesome sequence of 7 night visions begins in chapter 1 verse 7. Even though we're only going to study Zechariah chapter 1 for the time being, it is important to note that the 7 night

visions given in rapid succession are therefore interconnected and interrelated. Together they form a progressive revelation of the future fate of the people of Israel and the Kingdom of God on earth.

First a little about Zechariah. He is said to be the son of **Berekhyah**, son of **Iddo**. Thus **Iddo** is Zechariah's grandfather. This is significant because **Iddo** is of the Levite line of Priests. Zechariah had the right to be a priest if he had chosen to carry out that occupation. There is nothing to indicate that he did; instead the Lord employed him as a prophet. Outside of this almost nothing else is known about him.

That the 8th month was chosen to introduce Zechariah's oracle is significant because in the Bible the number 8 is associated with deliverance and redemption. A firstborn male is to be redeemed on the 8th day after his birth. The survivors of the Great Flood numbered 8. And, not to be overlooked, and so very pertinent to those who anxiously await Messiah's return, the final Biblical feast of the year, Sukkot, is an 8 day feast. And Sukkot has the Messianic symbolism of world history as we know it coming to an end, and mankind (that will consist at first of no one but Believers) entering into the Millennial Kingdom of Christ. Thus it is not surprising that deliverance and redemption are the subjects of Zechariah's oracle of verses 1 – 6.

Verse 2 says that the Lord was extremely angry with the ancestors of these present Jews whom He is addressing because they turned away from Him. Therefore, "return to Me" is the message. And IF these Jews will return to God, THEN He will return to them. Returning to them means redemption. Thus the formula is: repent (a person returns to God), and in response there will be redemption (God returns to the person). It is important that we pause and remember what the context of this oracle is in relation to: it is all about God demanding that Israel stop procrastinating and stop wringing their hands over the enemy who doesn't want the Temple built, and instead to have faith that God will be with them in their efforts to see to its completion. Yehoveh sees their procrastination as being the indicative behavior of having turned away from Him.

How can this situation be remedied? By building the Temple. Building the Temple indicates to God the Jews' repentance and return to Him. Repentance must first be heartfelt, but without accompanying action God says He won't accept it. Believers and Seekers are you hearing

this? A notion that we can “repent in our hearts”, and have good inward intentions, but then make no behavioral changes in our lives is no repentance at all as far as the Lord is concerned. We have found the Israelites since Mt. Sinai arguing that simply BEING redeemed is sufficient; and so their behavior is entirely secondary. God says, “Not so fast”. The outward sign of your inner repentance IS your behavior.

Does your behavior betray the reality of your condition before God? I've known too many Believers who say that we can't judge them for their wrong behavior because we can't see their hearts. But to that God says, no, your hearts are reflected **by** your behavior. Oh, I'm a Christian but I live with my boyfriend. I'm a Christian but I'm gay. I'm a Christian but I make my living by selling illegal drugs. I believe in Jesus but I don't pray, I don't read or study the Bible, I don't ever go to synagogue or church, and I really don't much like those holier-than-thou God-people.

Here is the way that the leader of the 1st Church in Jerusalem, James the half-brother of Yeshua, put it:

James 2:14-19 CJB

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him?

15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food,

16 and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do?

17 Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.

18 But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of

yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!

¹⁹ You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it too- the thought makes them shudder with fear!

But even more onerous is what Yeshua said would happen to those who claim to be Believers but their actions say something else about them entirely.

Matthew 7:16-24 CJB

¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruit. Can people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?

¹⁷ Likewise, every healthy tree produces good fruit, but a poor tree produces bad fruit.

¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, or a poor tree good fruit.

¹⁹ Any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire!

²⁰ So you will recognize them by their fruit.

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants.

²² On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'

²³ Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'

²⁴ "So, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on bedrock.

Notice that the SAME epithet that we saw that the Scriptures attached to the Anti-Christ (the lawless one) is here attached to those who claim to be Christians , but are opposed to God's Law (workers of lawlessness).

Behavior matters. Action reflects what we believe. Thus the behavior of letting the Temple building project lay dormant for 35 years reflected the truth that the Jewish people have turned away from God. And remember: these were the very same Jews who came rushing back to Jerusalem from Babylon full of enthusiasm and zealousness to rebuild the Temple and to renew the Biblical Torah lifestyle. But because of opposition primarily from those who claimed that they worshipped the same God (the Samaritans), it all came to a screeching halt.

In a 1990 PBS interview Billy Graham said that after years of follow up study of the results, the conclusion is that less than 6% of the millions who came forward at His Crusades to claim Christ displayed any evidence of change of behavior or continuing on in the faith. Emotions are emotions, and we all have them; they can deceive us and they can fade quickly. One impulsive act of rushing to the Pastor or Elder after a heart-rending sermon and tearfully praying the sinners pray, but then going on to live your life as though nothing happened, probably means nothing happened. Thus in Zechariah verse 4 the Lord says that the earlier prophets (like Isaiah and Jeremiah) warned this people's ancestors to turn from their evil ways and deeds. But.....they didn't pay attention and their behavior continued on as before. The results were catastrophic and then in hindsight they replied: "The Lord has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as He intended to".

We must never kid ourselves; our deeds, our ways, our behavior ARE the reflection of who we truly are. And over and over again we see that God judges based on that. We just don't like to hear it because that means we must make real changes in our lives if our Salvation is to mean anything at all.

So after a call to repentance, and a reminder of how Yehoveh dealt harshly with the Hebrews who came before this current group of exiles who have returned to Judah, the first in the series of 7 night visions concerning the future of God's people commences. And **all** 7 of the visions occur during the night of the 24th day of the 11 month. So between the end of verse 6 and the beginning of verse 7 three months or so have passed since Zechariah received the oracle that we just discussed. But more relevant is that these 7 visions were given exactly 5 months to the day after the Jews repented and returned to God and demonstrated it in their action of re-starting Temple construction despite the discomfort it brought them due to the threats of the Samaritans. And of course the fact that there were 7 visions (7 being the ideal number) means that what is told in the visions is complete, and what is told is of God.

We'll study this first vision only, since it is the one that symbolically relates to events that happen nearest to the time of the Book of Ezra. The vision showed 4 horses with their riders (even though the riders aren't specifically mentioned, we know there were riders because the idea was for the Lord's angels to go scout out the earth on these horses). The vision was interpreted by another angel in the vision. There were 2 red colored horses, one white one, and another with a chestnut coloration. One angel is called the **Malach Yehoveh**, that is, the Angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord is standing near some myrtle trees and these myrtle trees are located in a **metsullah**, a depression in the earth. It could be a valley or a ravine; it could even be a deep place under the water. Myrtles grow best in wet conditions so they are usually found next to rivers and ponds. We could spend countless hours trying to attach symbolism to the myrtles and to the depression in which they were growing, exceeded only by the speculation about the color of the horses. But the truth is that it is not at all clear (thus the reason for the many opinions on the matter). So we're just not going to venture there as it would serve no good purpose today.

The rider of one of the red horses is standing near the Angel of the Lord, presumably to report the findings of him and his compatriots. Their purpose is expressed in verse 11: ".....we have been wandering the earth, and the whole world is quiet and at peace". Thus their job was to evaluate the condition of humanity on earth during this moment in the history of the Persian Empire, and what they found was that there was no war to speak of. And indeed, various Persian records indicate that the first year and a half of Darius' reign was spent putting down rebellions and reorganizing his empire. When Darius took over there was a rebellion going on especially in Babylonia, which he was able to put down. For a few years before Darius, under Cambyses, there were rebellions springing up everywhere in the Persian Empire. But in the 2nd year of Darius's reign, things were quiet and generally peaceful. And indeed that is what the 4 horsemen who had ridden the length and breadth of the known world reported.

And we get another piece of evidence that this first night vision is regarding the immediate timeframe of Haggai's prophecies and the issue of rebuilding the Temple because Zechariah 1:12 says: "Lord of Hosts, how long will you keep withholding mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah? You've been angry with them for the past 70 years". This is of course referring the exile to Babylon. In response to this question, the Lord of Hosts is said to have responded with **tov debarim** (good words) and **nichum** (compassion). This would have brought tears of joy to Zechariah's eyes, because what we are witnessing is the Lord's anger against Judah not only coming to an end, but now His people shall receive His goodness, mercy, and comfort. What is the single word that all of this is describing? Redemption. Redemption is nothing more nor less than the Lord turning from His righteous anger upon us for our rebellion and sin, and instead now offering us His mercy and comfort. What was the human behavior that caused God to turn from anger to mercy? The people of Judah repented from refusing to build God's house due to their own selfishness and fears, and got to work in obedience to God's oracles through Haggai.

So says the Lord in verse 14 now He is jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. And as passionate as He now is for Jerusalem and Zion (Zion generally means the redeemed people and/or land) He is equally now angry at the gentile nations who treated His people more harshly than He felt they should have been during their 70 year exile. I think it is quite interesting to hear God say that while he was angry with His people the Jews, it was only a little anger; so the nations where His people were sent (the nations that formed the Babylonian then Persian Empires) should only have made His people suffer a proportionately small amount. But instead they made them suffer too much and so now God's wrath is upon them.

Therefore what this leads to is even greater mercy upon the Jews, because they suffered more at the hands of the Babylonians and Persians than He had intended them to. And how shall God's great mercy and compassion be manifest to His unjustly overly-punished people? By their restoring the House of God (the Temple), and rebuilding Jerusalem.

In fact, says, the Lord the cities of Judah will flourish and prosper with the return of His people. Now, let's close with this question one more time, because it is perhaps the most important point of today's lesson. Why is rebuilding the Temple seen as a great mercy from God for the people of Judah? I thought rebuilding the Temple was to please God? The reason is that the Temple is the place where God has fellowship with His people. The Temple is the place that restoration and atonement happen for the people. The Temple is where shalom is distributed to all people who love the Lord.

When there is no Temple, it is a sort of divine punishment. Without a Temple there is no fellowship with God, because there is no atonement because the place of the presence of God is gone. So what is to be done?

Paul says it this way: ^{CJB} **1 Corinthians 3:16** *Don't you know that you people are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*

In other words, Believers are for the time being acting as God's Temple. We are where fellowship with God occurs, because God is with us in His Spirit. The same precise principle we are reading about in Haggai and Zechariah regarding the Temple in Jerusalem as the place of fellowship with the Lord remains; only now we are the Temples, on an individual by individual basis, because any fellowship that occurs between us and the Lord has to happen at the Temple. It is an immutable God-principle. Without accepting the saving grace provided by Christ these bodies of ours are but corruptible tents. But with the saving grace of Messiah, these same bodies become as Holy Temples, serving as the meeting place for fellowship between God and man.

We'll get back into Ezra chapter 5 next time.