**Friends in High Places**

**Ezra 6 (ESV)**

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We’re in the book of Ezra. It’s in the Old Testament. It’s maybe a book that we’re not very familiar with, but the book of Ezra and Nehemiah kind of go together. It’s possibly even one work, but two different men working in a very unique time. This is toward the very end of the Old Testament. Only Esther and Malachi are following in the records. So we’re here in the book of Ezra in chapter 5.

Pastor Ritch opened this series up. We’re talking about this revival of the work that God does, fulfilling every promise every time and calling His people to trust Him anew. In chapter 5, He begins this fresh work through His Word, through the prophets of Haggai and Zechariah. If you haven’t read those recently, the book of Haggai might be a great couple chapters to read. It really gives you a sense of what they were dealing with at the time. But that really prompted them to start a work of God. We’re going to go back and cover the last half of chapter 5 and then chapter 6. What we’ll do is I’ll read verses 1-5 of chapter 5 to refresh us, and then we’ll jump ahead to chapter 6.

***1*** *Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.* ***2*** *Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.*

***3*** *At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?”* ***4*** *They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?”* ***5*** *But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.*

The report is verse 6 through the end of the chapter. We see Darius’ reply in chapter 6.

***1*** *Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored.* ***2*** *And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record.* ***3*** *In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits,* ***4*** *with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.* ***5*** *And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.”*

***6*** *“Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away.* ***7*** *Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.* ***8*** *Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River.* ***9*** *And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail,* ***10*** *that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.* ***11*** *Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.* ***12*** *May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”*

***13*** *Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.* ***14*** *And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia;* ***15*** *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.*

***16*** *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.* ***17*** *They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.* ***18*** *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.*

***19*** *On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover.* ***20*** *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.* ***21*** *It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel.* ***22*** *And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had 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.*

Chess is a complicated game. After just three moves on each side, there are over a hundred million positions. After the next move, possible jumps start to topple over three billion. The number of possible positions ultimately is such a big number that mathematicians were arguing about how it’s not even possible to write it down. It’s so small that each digit takes up a single atom of space. If you made every atom visible in the universe to ink, there wouldn’t be enough ink to write the number. That’s how complex it can be. Typically, a person maybe sees a few moves ahead. If you get good enough, you maybe get the title of Chess Grand Master. In this position, you might be able to see dozens of moves ahead. But even in complicated scenarios with grand masters, they can only see a couple of moves ahead.

This game, chess, is actually based around the Arabic term in the Persian that means king or monarch. That’s the piece on the board you’re working to either protect or trap to win. From that same language, we get that word check, where you catch your opponent in this position and put the king in danger and their game under threat. Sometimes players will kind of trade back and forth, putting each other in check, in danger, escaping until one player finally puts the inescapable checkmate upon the other and secures a win. There is this move in chess called a cross check, where you’re under threat and in danger, then you’re able to actually move and place the other player in check. Even more rare is this cross checkmate where under threat, you make a move and actually win the game. That was done in a match in 1951 between two grand masters. There were even pieces and then in one move, a final end game was executed and created a checkmate.

However complicated chess may seem, it’s nowhere near as complex as the scenarios in real life with battles between political powers. Various leaders in world history have their own versions of politics and military chess, maneuvering, manipulating and striving toward their own desired end game. People often imagine that these leaders actually are just sort of pieces on the board of a supreme invisible chess game that is going on supernaturally. We think about God and Satan. It’s a game in which at times, it seems as if the devil is winning. Now, however life may appear, the Bible’s view of past history, present reality and future destiny is very clear that our future is never in danger of falling outside of God’s perfectly designed end game. No matter how the positions appear on the board, He is always in control. However smart various leaders and kingdoms seem, God alone is ordaining all things toward His glorious aim. For His own reasons, He has chosen an end game that at moments feels endangered. There are a few stories in Scriptures where He peels back the curtain to give us a view. The clear message in these moments is to show us that the end game may take an uncomfortably long time to unfold, but in the end, it’s absolutely worth the wait. God’s end game takes time to unfold, but you can trust that it is absolutely worth the wait.

What is God’s end game? What is He doing? That’s the question that the people in Ezra’s day might have been asking. They might even have begun to wonder, does He even have an end game? Is this it? They’re supposed to be God’s chosen people, yet they had warred against themselves. They had abandoned His direction. They had suffered His judgment, been exiled, conquered by Gentile kings and now they seemed to be a footnote in history and obscure. Everything was happening outside of where they were. But God teaches us through His Word that He never left them alone. The challenges actually were proof that He was in control and was keeping His promises. The defeat was not the final end game. That was Jeremiah’s clear point.

**Jeremiah 29:11** For I know the plans I have for you,

This isn’t the end game. I have plans down the road. But in fulfillment of my promise, you are going to be in exile. Now, seventy years, exactly as prophesied by Jeremiah and then Isaiah foretold that there would be one arise. Cyrus did arise and he made a decree, just as God said. You’re going back to the land and starting a new work, a mission to restore worship to God in His land.

Yet, not all of the Jews returned. Some had grown comfortable where they were. They looked at this task and it was a difficult mission. It was going to be intense. There is going to be opposition. We find that to be true. Those that did return to the land had an initial burst of progress, but then even the Jews began to neglect the work. They began to be intimidated by local nearby neighbors and the Samaritans who were against what they were doing. So they had settled sort of in a life of personal pursuits and comfort. I’m just going to try to live my own life. I’m going to just try to take care of my own house, my own property. It will be okay. Work on this temple had stopped. Between chapters 4 and 5, fifteen or so years had elapsed where they had not done any work. God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to come and remind the people to be about the work of God. He stirs it up by His Word. So here they are. There is another prompting of revival. They’re reminded of how they need to return to God and fight against this setback to make a comeback. Yet, we find again in chapter 5 that it always feels uphill.

Do you ever feel like that? You’re trying to return from a setback. You have something going on in your life and maybe you’re trying to recommit yourself to a relationship. You’re trying to express forgiveness. You’re trying to commit to your relationship with a spouse. You’re trying to restore some kind of parenting schedule. You’re trying to fight against a specific sin. You’re fighting for purity for the first time in a powerful way. You’re doing all this. You’re in the Word of God. Something is alive in you. You want to share the Gospel with a neighbor. I’m ready to be bold and somehow to talk with my family. Whatever it is, you’re ready to be about God’s mission and then it just feels uphill. This is so hard! Right when you’re ready to take a move, it feels like you get put in check again. There is this mission that God has given.

Here, they’re rebuilding the temple, but we understand as a church that God’s mission has been unfolding and He is building a temple clearly. He is showing us a temple that is not made with stones and human hands. It’s actually not a place. It’s a people. He is building a temple. He’s on a mission of building His church. He wants us to follow Jesus together and call people to believe in the Gospel of Jesus. His Word would call us to trust in Christ. Right at that moment, yes, I want to follow Jesus. I want to trust and believe in what He has done. He died for me and my sins and rose from the dead. Just like we sang, I can have life in Him. I want to take a step of belonging to Jesus. I want to be baptized. I want to tell people about Him. I want to show that I’m a part of this church family. I want to become like Jesus. I want to do that through disciple being and disciple making. I want to mature as a Christian myself and then I want to multiply this faith in others. You’re about that mission and right when you’re ready to get started, it just feels so uphill. It seems as if there are other people at work and forces that are putting you again in check. The fight to do this just feels so hard. It almost feels like you’re doing it from a losing position. It feels like the mission is just so feeble, like it’s in a dangerous spot of collapse.

What do we do when the mission field is in danger? It feels so fragile. When we’re wondering, what is God doing? Does He even have an end game? How can He win with such mighty enemies? Here are a couple chapters that give us hope. Ezra had recorded history. Ezra is writing sort of in the time of chapter 7 and beyond and he is recording some of the prologue, some of the origin stories, bringing back these stories to remind the people that you can have hope. God’s end game takes time to unfold, but you can trust that it is absolutely worth the wait. However threatening or intimidating or overwhelming your enemies may seem, the might of your greatest enemy is a nonfactor when you have the favor of the almighty God. It’s no contest. You don’t need to be afraid of what is going on around you if you have God with you. That’s what Paul would say in Romans chapter 8.

**Romans 8:31** …If God is for us, who can be against us?

Remember whose side you’re on. If God wants something to happen, no one can stop it. Just like the Jews in Ezra’s day that trusted God’s Word by faith, we have to listen to His Word and remember that God’s end game is not only clear and good, it is unstoppable. It’s so unstoppable in fact, that the very strategies our enemies use to place us in check, God actually uses to accelerate His own grand design. That’s the message Ezra knew his people needed. Exactly what your enemies are doing is bringing about exactly what God wants. In a fresh reminder of God’s sovereign providence was not to excuse them to slack off in this work, but actually inspire them to double their efforts because it helps them know that nothing is without meaning. God is at work and this message from His truth is clear, but it’s not easy to embrace. Saying it and trusting it are two different things. God is at work here. We think, “I’ve heard these promises before. It just feels so impossible right now. It feels so unreal right now. It’s so hard to trust when I feel like I’ve been put in check again.” So accounts like this of God’s care reinforce our trust in God’s might.

We trust that the time that we have to wait for God’s end game to come about is worth the wait, but we need help to keep us going in the meantime. We need help to reinforce us as we await that future day. Sometimes that help comes in the form of some reminders of what He has done in the past to help shape what we should expect to experience. When we think about following God, what should we expect? These expectations are going to help us to endure while we wait for the end game to reach its final moments. So there are three experiences that we’ll look at that we should expect if we’re going to follow God. There are going to be moments of opposition. There are going to be moments of provision. There are going to be moments of celebration. These experiences are things that we can look forward to and recognize this is going to happen and they’re going to help us as we await God’s work in this world.

**#1 Looming Opposition (5:3-17)**

Opposition is something that is against you. It’s something pushing against what you are trying to achieve.

We had VBS. It was an awesome opportunity for the Gospel to be proclaimed. Students were hearing and volunteers were serving. We had Summer Camp a few weeks ago and there were hundreds of students and volunteers there hearing the Gospel and being about the mission of God. They were trying to mature in what it means to follow Jesus. They were trying to multiply in sharing and calling others to follow Jesus. We had these sweet opportunities. There are games that happen at both of those. Sometimes there is this game where there is a big giant ball. You have two teams and they run. They’re trying to push the ball over the opposing team’s line. You kind of run with a great zeal. You start pushing and then all of a sudden, you’re going backwards. What is happening? This is opposition. We’re not alone over here. You can’t see what’s going on, but you’re going backwards. You’re pushing with all your might. That’s the picture of opposition.

Do ever feel like that in life? It’s not a cakewalk. “I’m ready to follow God,” then boom! You’re going backwards. What? “I’m going to do better today.” Boom! I’m going backwards. Here’s the opposition that shows up in these people that try to follow God. Opposition arises. I think Ezra is bringing it up again to help his people and to help us to not be surprised and to expect it. Get ready to need God’s help. If you’re going to follow God, then you need to first get ready to need His help. Expect opposition. Get ready to need His help. He will put you in a position where you need help.

There are a few thoughts about opposition to kind of help us get ready for what’s to come. First, don’t forget when opposition shows up. It arrives right on cue. It’s that term from the stage acting days for right at the moment when someone is supposed to show up on stage. When God is about to speak, when He does a mighty work and everybody is like, “let’s do what God wants,” right there is sort of the cue for opposition to arise. You see it in four simple words in verse 3.

***3*** *At the same time*

Right when they’re all getting ready to go, at the same time, here comes the opposition. It’s right on cue. It’s been pretty calm and nothing has happened for fifteen years. They’ve been settled back. Now they’re just trying to get started and all of a sudden, boom! There is opposition. When God is starting to do something, it draws the attention of the enemy. When you respond to God’s Word and renew a commitment or you’re going to confess some kind of sin or you’re going to try to turn back to God or you’re going to try to actually share the Gospel in a bold way, you can expect that opposition will come on cue. Not only that, it can come from anywhere. It takes a subtle form here of some foreign official and his entourage in verse 3.

*Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River*

This is probably the River Euphrates. So here he is. He’s a superior governor. He’s maybe a satrap over this area.

*and Shethar-bozenai*

Maybe a secretary.

*and their associates*

You can almost see the letterhead.

*came to them and spoke to them thus:*

Here they come and they have a message for the Jews. This foreign official hasn’t been interested in what they’ve been doing, but now he just shows up and there appears to be an investigation. Maybe it’s an investigation of possible treason or treachery.

Now, this chapter is pretty subtle. It’s hard to read. I think I’m doing my best. I’ll try to give the case for why I think that there is some concern about what they do. It’s not as fierce an opposition as what we see in the previous chapters, but it would bring back some traumatic memories. It would carry the same veiled threat and I believe it could be susceptible to sort of the same sinister inspiring demonic force. It’s possible this visit by the governor had maybe even been provoked or prompted by renewed complaints from the Samaritans that had done so in the past. But the chapter is more subtle and I think that looming is maybe the best term for this opposition. So with looming opposition, you see this guy Tattenai.

He comes in the first two years of Darius. This Darius actually is not the Darius that you’re familiar with from Daniel. It’s a different Darius. There are different names that are repeated a number of times. It’s hard to keep all the kings straight, but just like you have all the pharaohs, you have a couple Darius’ and Xerxes. This is a different Darius, but he had taken charge. In the first couple years of his reign, there had been some uprising, some unrest. So I think Tattenai and his associates are taking advantage of the situation to say, “Let’s see if we can’t curry some favor, here.” So this official shows up. They hadn’t been factors, but all of a sudden, they’re here. They arrive right on cue. They’re a much bigger deal, as it were, than the lower sort of minor governor and people of the Jews. So they’re a big deal. This opposition shows up with an agenda. You can see why it happens in verses 3 and 4. They ask them a couple questions.

*“Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?”*

Structure is a term for a big building. It seems intimidating.

***4*** *They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?”*

These are intimidating questions. They seem like there is a bit of an agenda. They’re concerned. I think it’s subtle, but they have a concern of possible treachery or treason. They’re suspicious about what is going on. They’re not the kind of zoning inspectors that you want showing up when you’re dealing with this building project. It’s not a good sign. So here they are. They’re asking questions, but there is an even more critical lesson in verse 5. This is the important lesson. The mightiest of oppositions still has its limits. Opposition doesn’t operate in a vacuum. It only goes as far as God allows.

***5*** *But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius*

It could have been brought to a halt. They could have been afraid. They could have hesitated. But they said, no, we’re going to keep going. We’re going to press on.   
We’re not told exactly how all of the providences work. We’re just given this picture of God’s eye. It’s somewhat mysterious, somewhat distant, but it’s sort of the watchful providential eye of God. He is overseeing what is happening. In fact, kings had their spies. The Persians had what they would call the king’s eye or the king’s ear. But no intelligence system is better, no espionage network is better than an omniscient God. He’s watching and overseeing these things. They’re going to trust Him by faith and they are believing, I think by faith, some of the promises that God had made. We know

**Psalm 34:15** The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous

**Job 36:7** He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous,

God is watching. Nothing happens that He does not know or allow. He is aware of all things. You read the beauty of it in Psalm 139. It’s the kind of truth that can either be a terror or a comfort, depending upon your relationship with God. It’s almost like when you imagine if there are authorities or officers on patrol and they’re watching. For some, it might be scary. But for others, it’s a comfort. Here we’re told and we’re reminded that when Jesus speaks to us about God’s watchful care, it’s not something to be afraid of. It’s something to take comfort in. God is watching. Even when we can’t see Him, He sees us. He oversees everything that is happening, including this whole report, in such a profound way. I think in the subtlety of what they communicate that they show another idea about opposition. It often presents its own version of reality.

Here it’s a tough thing because this message that you read in verses 6-17 is actually in Aramaic. We have sort of a window into some ancient documents. It’s not Hebrew, like the other sections of the Old Testament. We’re seeing this correspondence between these politicians. You have to try to pick up what you can. It’s hard to pick up, but I think there is some subtlety that does stand out as you read. I think as you do, there are a few misunderstandings or you might even say delusions that are revealed through Tattenai’s message.

He has his own version of reality. You can see this first in how I think he doesn’t realize how he comes across. I don’t think they realize how they come across to the king. I think if they did, they wouldn’t have sent the letter. Chapter 6 sort of shows us. If they knew that was going to happen, I think they would have just held back. I don’t think they realize how they came across. I think they imagine their report is going to be received one way and that’s not how it’s received. They write this letter to the king. It’s organized and official. It’s in Aramaic. They cry out to the king in verse 7.

***7*** *They sent him a report, in which was written as follows: “To Darius the king, all peace.*

I think they realize there has been unrest. We want peace for the king. We just kind of have an fyi. In fact, that’s what they say down there below. You can see the fyi. Just for your information, I just want you to know.

***8*** *Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah,*

We happened to just be in the neighborhood. We went

*to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands.*

We happened to be there and there is this big building project. I don’t know if you knew about that. There are some very big stones. The term there is actually rolling stones. These are great stones that they can only move by rolling them on timber or something to get them in the spot. They are huge stones. They’re kind of emphasizing that this is kind of a big project. Timber, it’s not quite sure if this is a tier above or if it’s the roofing, if it’s like an inner lining or if it’s to try to help with earthquakes. Whatever it is, he‘s just describing that this is kind of a significant building project.

***9*** *Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: ‘Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’* ***10*** *We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders.*

“We just thought you would want to know this.” I’m not exactly sure, but I think it’s probably one of those kinds of situations. You know how it happens with kids sometimes. They’ll walk up to you and say, “Hey, I just thought you should know, just fyi, the other kids are taking some cookies, or whatever. I just thought you would want to know. I’ll be here. I’ll help you get the cookies and then if you have any thoughts about what to do with them afterwards. I’m just trying to help out. (Laughter!) I think that there is something of that going on. They have a lack of awareness in how they’re coming across. I think that’s made clear by Darius’ response. It’s almost like trying to read through an email chain. You’re reading some passive aggressive or ancient sarcasm. How clear is it? I don’t know. You’ll have to decide as you read the Scriptures. But I think they are deluded about how they come across and ultimately about who is really in charge.

When you read verses 11 through 17, there is almost like a copy and paste here of the response. It reminds me of when I read some secular newspapers describing what Christians believe. Sometimes they’ll just sort of paste a quote from somebody as if it’s completely bizarre. Like, I don’t even know what to do with that person and what they said. It’s as if they cite the reasons that they gave. They don’t reference anything about it. It’s just sort of like, this is what they say. The Jews’ response though is so perceptive. They clearly understand who is really in charge. Their focus is not all this horizontal stuff. Their focus is the vertical. When they communicate, they are courageous and masterful.

***11*** *And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth,*

We’re trying to serve God. It’s not some local deity that we’re trying to kind of rally for a political end. No, this is the God of heaven and earth. We are serving Him.

*and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.* ***12*** *But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven,*

They’re not hiding their sin. They’re not hiding the mistakes that they made. “We made a big mess of things. That’s why this is all the way that it is. This is because of us and God.” The vertical is the issue. They cite it and they understand why this is all happening. They remember

*he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.* ***13*** *However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt.*

So we actually have legal backing that Cyrus had made that decree. I know we’re kind of a footnote and nobody cares about us over here, but it actually was a legitimate deal.

***14*** *And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor;* ***15*** *and he said to him, “Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.”*

This is a real deal.

***16*** *Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.’*

They’re like, “We’re kind of surprised because we were told to do this. We haven’t finished. We were kind of expecting a message saying why aren’t you done yet? Not, what are you doing?” The opposition is that they don’t realize who is really in charge. The theology seems irrelevant. They are interested about earthly influence and favor in the eyes of Darius, but I think they’re missing the part about the more important eyes of Yahweh. Not only this, I think they miss what is actually right. It seems like they just don’t understand that that’s actually what had happened. In verse 17, it appears that Tattenai and associates had asked the king

***17*** *Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem.*

Go check the archives. Go look at the server. See if you can find anything. Roll through the file cabinets and let’s tidy up this matter, shall we?

*And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.”*

They’re expecting something and it seems as if the alleged decree was in air quotes and they’re being cynical. I don’t want to overplay what’s going on, but I think the subtlety is there, especially when you read chapter 6. But in that moment, the Jews had taken a bold stand. We want to try to follow God. This is kind of hard. We have looming opposition. We already know what it has felt like in the past. There is this time of suspense. There is painful uncertainty where you kind of wonder, is he going to care to look? Is he going to succeed in finding it? Is he going to hold to it? This is a different king, a different ruler. What’s going to happen?

The whole idea here of Ezra though is that you can expect opposition. You can expect it and you need to get ready to need God’s help. That’s how He works. He constantly puts His people in a position to need His help. Just like an athletic trainer puts the weight trainer to exercise to a point of failure and they need to be spotted to help their muscles grow. God says, “I want you to grow in your muscles of faith in trusting me, so I’m going to let you have some hard situations.” You can look through the Old Testament. You can see these powerful moments where God does just that with Abraham or with people like Job or when He leads the Jews out of Egypt to a dead end. He leads them into the wilderness. You see Him allowing enemies to arise in the time of judges. He chooses timid Gideon and then He reduces support over and over just to make sure he knows that he needs God’s help because He wants to make sure that the hero of the story is clear. The hero is God. We need to be ready to need God’s help.

Sometimes the opposition doesn’t even come from the outside. It comes from the inside. There are religious leaders of Jesus’ day who were opposed to Him. In fact, even at moments, Peter himself opposed Jesus. He said, “No, this whole cross thing as your mission, no, that’s not the right thing.” Opposition can come from anywhere. Jesus brought His disciples into moments like a boat in a storm or a mountainside with thousands of people with nothing to eat and put them in positions to say, you need God’s help. In fact, men like David or Peter were great when they needed God’s help. In the moments where they got comfortable and confident and said, “I’m going to fight for God or I don’t even need to go and fight,” that’s when they were the most vulnerable. Sometimes we think, me and God, we’re a good team. But the best team is God and no one. We should expect opposition because God knows it’s best for us to put us in a position of need. He shows His power to show that He is the hero.

Opposition sometimes comes from within. We don’t fight like the world, who is fighting and pushing the opposition, because we recognize sometimes the very opposition that God is allowing is what He is going to use to bring about His design. In fact, just like Saul was coming and opposing the church and persecuting, God turns him around and then sends him out on the same mission. We realize we’re a church with people who were opposing the very mission of God. So we don’t fight with evil the way that the world does. We’re not overcome by evil, but we overcome evil with good, knowing that the very people who are opposing are the people that we would long to win, to show the compelling love of God. This is the kind of love that Jesus showed in the face of the opposition even to the point of death. If you’re trying to be about the mission of God to mature as a Christ follower yourself or to multiply to make other followers of Christ, then you get ready to need God’s help and expect it to be hard. The opposition will loom and it will arrive right on cue from anywhere with an agenda against that growth with its own version of reality. Just never forget that it has its limits. God is in control. Now, look at how He responds to that. Second, you can expect

**#2 Clear Provision (6:1-15)**

When you need God’s help, you can expect Him to give exactly what you need. He will supply what you need. That’s going to help you trust Him to move forward. It reminds me of that message back in Great Britain in World War 2. There were those posters that were printed to kind of help people not panic. Keep Calm and Carry On. We get into church. We start to panic and all this stuff. You can watch the news and do this and do this. Keep calm and carry on. Mature and multiply. Follow Jesus. He is calling you to grow in sanctification. He is calling you to address a sin in your life, to repent, to turn. He’s calling you to share the Gospel with someone, to be bold, to ask them a hard question, to ask them, “Is there something keeping you from following Jesus?” He’s calling you to have these conversations and we start to panic. We remember that God will supply what we need. He will provide. Keep calm and carry on. Do not be thrown off the mission. Here are the Jews. They’re able to do that. We find out it’s actually a pretty good strategy when we read chapter 6. Look at how God provides. We don’t have time to really get into it, but I think it’s just such a powerful chapter. It doesn’t have to be fancy. You can see God provides in understated ways. Darius responds.

***1*** *Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored.*

Go look at the server. Roll through the files. See if you can find anything. So they go and they look. The first search is in Babylon, which was the capital. They maybe expect something. But it ends up that they actually make a discovery in Ecbatana.

***2*** *And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media,*

I was trying to understand this. It looks on a map like this is nearly 250 miles away. This is far away. What was going on? Well, the Jews had actually said the first year of Cyrus. You look and actually there was sort of a summer residence. There was a vacation home. Maybe double check that vacation home for the Persian kings. They would do it out there over in Ecbatana. So they go and it’s as if they’re going and they find some sort of rolodex and they’re like “Wait a second. Here’s a memo.” It’s so subtle and so understated. It’s a scroll that they find.

*a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record.*

Here is a memo. It’s almost as if they’re saying, tell me about it. So here, they read the memo. In fact, he finds out that it’s just as the Jews had said. This is from Cyrus.

***3*** *In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits,* ***4*** *with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.* ***5*** *And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.”*

Darius has kind of been upholding the power of Cyrus and what he had done and his policies. He’s not trying to create a big ruckus, so he’s like, that sounds like a reasonable request. In fact, I think this Darius, even though he may not be the same one, I think that he has some awareness of some of the history. It’s likely that Daniel and some of the people that he had influenced and maybe the other scribes had been able to share some things, because it seems Darius is in on some details that he wouldn’t know otherwise. But he sees this memo and so he writes a response. It’s pretty profound.

So God provides in a very understated way this little scroll that is found. It’s probably just a portion of that scroll. This is the Aramaic and sort of a more formal record. It’s not like the record that was given in Ezra chapter 1, which is more like the oral one that was spoken to the people. Here is the official record. He gives enough for Tattenai to see what is going on and then he is going to provide in a way that exceeds their wildest expectations. He is going to provide in a way that goes further than we would expect. So even though it’s understated, it’s going to go profoundly farther than we would expect. This passage is pretty special. In verses 6-7, a swift order is made.

***6*** *“Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away.*

It’s almost as if you can see the red ink. Request to investigate. Denied! Keep away. Back down. Mind your own business and government. In fact, he says

***7*** *Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.*

He doesn’t stop there. He says, “You know. I think I’m going to make a decree of my own.” So some support is commanded and the kind of assistance is both financial and material. It’s quite entertaining!

***8*** *Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God.*

Tattenai is like, “Whoa! Wait a second! I didn’t volunteer for anything. I was volunteering to investigate and sort of shut down. I didn’t ask for a hammer.”

*The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River.*

This is going to come not from the national, but the local income. I want you guys to take care of that. You’re not going to prevent the temple construction; you’re going to promote it, including in your own budget. Then there is also the material need.

***9*** *And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—*

It seems detailed enough, as if there was a Jew who had said they might need some of this. It just seems as if he has someone informing him about what they might expect.

*let that be given to them day by day without fail,* ***10*** *that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.*

God is providing in a way that is beyond what anyone would expect. Here is Darius and he says not only leave them alone, but actually, I want you to finance this whole thing financially and materially. He is very specific. It’s a detailed list. Not only that, but he also gives some stipulations. He says this should be complete and in full. He says this should be immediate and without delay. It should be comprehensive. They should give whatever is needed as a requirement and it should be ongoing. He says for it to be given to them day by day without fail. This is pretty inescapable. But you know what, he’s not done. He issues a graphic penalty.

***11*** *Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict,*

He thinks there might be a temptation to do so.

*a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.*

He’s not messing around! This is a serious penalty that he issues. It’s basically being hung or being crucified by a beam hung from your own house. Then sovereign protection is sought here.

***12*** *May the God who has caused his name to dwell there*

He seems aware of some of that history.

*overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem.*

He wants this all to happen.

*I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”*

It’s almost as if he smiles and looks back at the note from Tattenai. Diligence was the word that Tattenai used to kind of prompt this whole thing. God provides in such understated ways. He provides in some ways that exceed our wildest expectations and he makes clear that He is providing as part of a bigger picture. You see that in Ezra describing in the next verse

***13*** *Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.*

It all happened exactly as God intended. Instead of hindering the work, they were helping. Does this sound familiar? Are there any other times in the Bible where a king’s search of the royal records vindicates a Jew to the great dismay of his gentile enemy? Until ultimately, he is impaled and hung on a beam in his own courtyard as a result of an attempted attack on God’s people? Do any stories like that ring a bell? There was a great backfire of a man who would have hindered the progress, but then he was used actually to help the progress. If you’re not familiar with the book of Esther, it’s time to dive in because I think it’s after chapter 6 that there is about sixty years before chapter 7 starts. That’s when Ezra actually is writing from. All of this is the origin story. After chapter 6 is when the book of Esther takes place. This is what Ezra is looking back and sort of leading into. I think the people would have remembered and understood that this man Haman thought he would manipulate the king into bestowing great honor upon himself and all the honor went to his rival, Mordecai. God was bringing about a protection for His people, caring about His promises. His name is nowhere in the book, but His fingerprints are everywhere. We see Psalm 2 at work where the Psalmist says

**Psalm 2:1-4** Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs;

God is working a bigger picture through all these things. The spiritual means is referenced that God is prospering the work that they’re doing through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah. His Word is at work and ultimately He is showing that He is the source.

***14*** *And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. 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 a king that would come later. I think Ezra is looping them all in together. There are these kings who keep kind of advancing stuff, but really, it’s God. He understands who is in charge and the bigger picture that God is accomplishing. He accomplishes it right on time. We see where it ends.

***15*** *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.*

It’s sort of just past a couple years of that seventieth year where the people have come back and they have finished the construction of this house. God provides exactly what is needed. You can trust Him to supply what is needed. That picture of Esther is so beautiful.

**Proverbs 21:1** The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

God is able to bring about whatever He desires. Yet, He is working in a mysterious providential way. But He is in control. You can see how He does this in such a powerful way. Even as we see the opposition of enemies, we’re able to take comfort in great promises like we’re told

**1 John 4:4** …he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

You can trust God to provide what you need and trust Him to actually use even hardships to fulfill His promises. The ultimate backfire as the Pharisees came against Jesus and as Judas came against Jesus and Satan even entered him and all of the enemy forces opposing Jesus is that it was bringing about the perfect fulfillment of God’s salvation. God is able to bring it about.

The hymn writer William Cowper wrote this poem. He wrote it in a time of great despair, after he had actually attempted to harm his own life. He wrote this and it was put together in a compilation called *Light Shining Out of the Darkness*, which was put together with a verse.

**John 13:7** Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.”

God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform.

He plants His footsteps in the sea

And rides upon the storm.

You fearful saints, fresh courage take;

The clouds you so much dread

Are big with mercy and shall break

And blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,

But trust Him for His grace;

Behind a frowning providence

He hides a smiling face.

I wish we had time to look and think about all the examples of the ways that God brings that about. But you can trust Him to supply what is needed. Then in the end, there is

**#3 True Celebration (6:16-22)**

This is just taking time to worship the God who provides. When the athletes have their championship game and they come and they win, the interviewer shows up and they say congratulations. Immediately after, they say, “Are you going to do it again? What are you going to do next year? What are you going to do next season?” There are zero moments in between to savor the victory and to appreciate what just happened. Sometimes we’re like that with God. We need Him. He provides and then we’re on to the next thing, even to the smallest things. “God, I desperately need a parking space. Oh wait. Never mind. There’s one. Okay. Let’s go shopping.” (Laughter!) There is no moment to say God just provided. God just answered. Those are these little moments of intimacy, but also there are big moments, like salvation offered, rescue. I was able to actually take a step and I was able to say no to a certain sin by the grace of God. I was able to embrace that I’ve been forgiven for a certain sin just because of Jesus. I was able to share the power of the Gospel boldly with someone for the first time. Wow! God is at work. We can take moments of worship and celebration.

Who enjoys that kind of worship where people have taken some kind of commitment to God? You see in verse 16 that the people who enjoy the celebration are those who came back. Not only those who came back, but those who separated themselves from the uncleanness of the land. They have made a commitment that we are about what God is doing. In fact, the Aramaic ends there in verse 19 and it switches to the Hebrew. We see this precious transition that they’re able to come and dedicate the house. They’re able to worship and they worship by commitment. They also worship the way that God designs. They worship by sacrifices, by offering these sacrifices and trusting in God’s provision for their sin. We’ve sinned greatly! In fact, it’s all still a mess. Not every tribe came back. It’s only a few that came back. We’re here and we’re kind of just putting this together. It’s nowhere near what it used to be and yet, we’re still going to trust that God provides.

***16*** *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.* ***17*** *They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.*

We’re still a people. God still has a plan. He’s still doing what He is going to do. They are believing by faith and worshiping as God designed. They’re not afraid to make the reality of sin and sacrifice at the center. True celebration doesn’t say, “Okay. Now we’re not going to talk about sin. We’re not going to have a somber moment.” No, true celebration is like here is everything. It’s all the terribleness of who I am and God forgives me? I’m not hiding any of that. I’m not pretending I’m not a sinner. I’m totally a sinner. Then Jesus forgives and welcomes the celebration of the Father welcoming the prodigal son home. He understands he’s ashamed of it, but it’s welcome home. It’s the preciousness of saying I’m a sinner. I need sacrifice. They come and they worship.

***18*** *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.* ***19*** *On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover.*

Ultimately it points forward to this moment of Passover that is only kept a few times in the Old Testament. We see that the Passover keeps coming at these moments where they rededicate themselves to the covenant of God. We’re really going to worship God. If you are a Jew there in the moment, you would have heard this switch to Hebrew and it would have been like your heart language and you’re hearing it. You would say, Oh, yeah, the Passover.”

***20*** *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.* ***21*** *It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel.*

They were celebrating the way it’s supposed to be. “This is the festival that we can’t keep in foreign lands and now it’s like, we’re home. We’re eating that together and we’re celebrating. We’re separated from the uncleanness.” They have this feast and then we finally get to the name, the name of Yahweh. It’s that God, the God who saves. He is our God. We’re purified, unified, sanctified even in the solemn memory of sin, around the joy of this God who somehow saves. It’s likely during this time that the psalms of 146-148 are written. Psalm 146 is so important.

**Psalm 146:3** Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

They would have said, “It’s so great. All these kings are doing great stuff.” We have it in our own country. Here is great stuff in politics. At the end of the day, there is one hero and it’s God. Don’t get too wrapped up. Don’t put your trust in princes. There is one. His name is Yahweh. Ultimately He is Jesus. Yeshua means Yahweh saves. This is the God that we celebrate and worship. Just as God had written from Moses all the way through when the Passover is celebrated ultimately with the disciples in that upper room, when Jesus breaks the bread and then reveals that He Himself is the Passover lamb. We come together and recognize our sin and the forgiveness that we receive because of His death on the cross and the life because of His resurrection. We actually can have true joy, true celebration which comes from God.

***22*** *And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had 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.*

God is the one who had turned everything about to get them the help that they needed. The joy comes because they know who the hero is. Ultimately, we kind of consider this idea of chess. There is a legend that is a true story as far as I can confirm it. There is this painting hanging in the Louvre museum. It is up there alongside the art like the Mona Lisa. It was called *Checkmate*. It’s a picture of two men playing chess. One represented Satan. He looked pretty happy, like he was winning. The other one looks sort of forlorn. It looked like he was losing. The story goes that there was a grand master in chess who walked up and actually stared at the chess board for a while in the painting. He said according to the arrangement of these pieces, this man actually has another move. In fact, he said this can lead to him being the winner of the game. “I don’t think this piece is titled right.” There are all kinds of obstacles and delays. We can feel like we’re put in check. But we can rest assured in Jesus’ promise. He said

**Matthew 16:18** …I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

He has a mission for us to do. We’re maturing. We’re multiplying. We want to follow Jesus together. We want everyone that we can reach to do the same. The story of God’s providence is clear, here. We know from the book of Esther that He is at work even when it seems invisible and He is able to bring the perfect backfire swindle of a cross checkmate. God’s end game takes time to unfold, but you can trust that it’s absolutely worth the wait. However threatening or overwhelming enemies may seem, the might of our enemies is a nonfactor when we have the favor of almighty God. It’s a perfect reminder of the old hymn *This Is My Father’s World*.

This is my Father’s world.

O let me never forget

That though the wrongs seem oft so strong,

God is the ruler yet.

This is my Father’s world:

Why should my heart be sad?

The Lord is King; let the heavens ring!

God reigns; let the earth be glad!