

THE HOUSES OF GOD AND MAN

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 5

Fifth Message

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My wife and I have lived in Mountain View for 15 years now. We purchased our home from another PBC pastor who had retired and moved out of the area. When we bought the home, like all homes, we had to do some work to bring certain things up to code.

Last year we had to apply for something from the city of Mountain View, and we received a notice that there was an outstanding construction permit against our home that hadn't been closed. When I followed up on it, I found out that it was from some concrete work on our chimney that happened when we bought the house.

I have to admit that we did not going through with whatever we were applying for, so I never fixed the problem. It would have been a pain to fix. The work was completed 15 years ago, but it was never inspected. Because the permit was so old, I'd have to open a new permit, hire a new contractor to submit new plans, just to say that the work was already done. It didn't seem worth it to me.

That means somewhere deep in the archives of the City of Mountain View planning department, there is a permit that hasn't been closed out. A piece of paper which indicates that something was begun but not finished.

In reality, my chimney is fine. We've built dozens of fires in the fireplace over the years. That piece of paper hasn't in any way made sitting by the fire in our home less enjoyable. That piece of paper is pure bureaucracy. A document in a file folder in a government building doesn't align with reality but holds power nonetheless.

It's the governmental equivalent of an unfinished melody or a rhythm without an ending.

Here's the philosophical and maybe even theological question: does that piece of paper matter? I live in my house. The chimney was fixed. But I do live in a world where the City of Mountain View has authority over me. Next time I try to apply for something, this might come up again.

This morning we're continuing our series in the book of Ezra called Return and Rebuild. We see this group of Jews return from exile in Persia and attempt to rebuild the temple. Last week, Scott Grant told the story of how they got discouraged and the work stopped.

This week we'll see them start working again only to have to face the beauty of bureaucracy. The issue they are dealing with runs a bit deeper. It's an interesting chapter. The word for "house" is repeated 12 times in 17 verses. This chapter is actually tied for the highest percentage of word usage in the whole Old Testament. Eleven times the word "house" refers to the house of God. But in the last chapter, it's used to refer to the royal archives of the Babylonian government. That's the 6th century BC equivalent to the City of Mountain View planning department.

What we notice is this tension between the house of God which is being built and the house of man. Which one has ultimate authority? Which one is more important and powerful? This week we'll be exploring the Houses of God and Man.

These are very real issues for us. Throughout this series, we've been talking about how we're also rebuilding the house of God in our context. For us, the house of God is this community—all of us. But we also live in a world where the house of man has authority, and the New Testament is clear that we are supposed to honor that authority.

As a church located in Palo Alto, we have regular interactions with our city and county. We'll talk more about that in a moment. Over the season of COVID, we've talked a great deal about how to comply with government restrictions on our activity.

But it's bigger than all that because we believe that the God of the universe is sovereign over all these things. It's not just what we do or don't do. It's not just figuring out how to navigate our earthly bureaucracy. We're trying to follow Jesus. How does the will of God cut through all the various bureaucracies in our lives?

What I want us to walk away with this morning is to see how God cuts through all of that. We'll see the voice of God motivating. We'll see the eye of God keeping watch.

As God would have it, the day I sat down to write this sermon, my Bible reading in the morning was Psalm 127. It begins, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." So as we watch these Israelites building the house of God and as we think about our efforts to rebuild the house of God, we have to keep the obvious front and center.

We're not really doing the building. All of this is God at work.

Listen to the voice of God

Our story begins with a sermon that moves God's people into action. It doesn't happen that often in the Old Testament, but it happens here.

Let's remember what happened in the previous chapter. The work on the temple had begun, but in Ezra 4:4, we read, "the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build." It's been around 15 years now. Fifteen years of discouragement and the temple project has remained dormant.

But as Ezra 5 opens, the preachers preach, and the people respond.

Ezra 5:1-2:

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.

That must have been a great sermon. Haggai and Zechariah said something, and everyone got back to work! After 15 years of ignoring the house of God, the prophets were able to turn things around. What did they say?

We know most of what they said because it's recorded in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. Let's just look at a few verses from Haggai. He says that God's people are

suffering drought and famine because they've prioritized their own houses over the house of God.

Haggai 1:3-4:

Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"

Haggai 1:9:

You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.

Think about these Jews thousands of years ago. They had recently returned to their homeland. With a lot of enthusiasm and hope, they began to rebuild the temple of their God. But then everything became complicated. The people around them discouraged them, so they gave up. Instead, they focused on their own homes. That was at least clear to them.

Serving God is complicated and confusing. So they focused on what was immediately before them. They built their houses. They made sure their families were cared for. In the words of Haggai, "they busied themselves with their own houses."

I'm always amazed at how so much of the Bible resonates in our world today. Does it sound familiar to be drawn into focusing on your own house? I think I've heard people say those exact words: I just need to focus on myself for a while. I need to my own life prioritized.

Please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that to push yourself harder. In fact, I'm saying the exact opposite. What I want for you is to hear the voice of God cutting through everything else going on. To see that he might be inviting you into rebuilding the house of God, and to follow him where there might be life. Listen to the voice of God.

We had a staff meeting recently at PBC where we shared various aspects of how we're doing. And by the way, we have an incredible community of people at this church working on staff. One of the categories was "what do you need"? Over and over again, I heard the need for leaders. Children's Ministry. Youth ministry. Worship and Production. Outreach.

But I share this not because of the need. The primary aspect is not that there is a gaping hole, and we need you to step in to fill it. The main thing is to ask, what does it look like for you to hear the voice and God and follow? Is he inviting you somewhere? Is he asking you to step out in faith? Not because you can save the world, but because he wants to invite you into a new kind of life.

Pay attention to what's going on in your life. Haggai said that God had been trying to get their attention for a while now. Has God been trying to get your attention? Maybe it's time you listened.

Trust the eye of God

That's what happened in Jerusalem. The people listened to Haggai and started building again. And as the story continues, we are told of two different parties watching their work. See if you can notice both of them as we read Ezra 5:3-5.

Ezra 5:3-5:

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:[a] "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.

First, we hear about the Persian governor Tattenai who notices what they are doing. He wants to make sure it's all on the up and up, so he asks them questions. But then we find out that Tattenai wasn't the only one watching. "The eye of their God" was on them. This is a very unique phrase. We don't find it in the same way anywhere else in the Old Testament.

Nothing we do on this earth goes without notice. Do you realize that? Nothing we do on this earth goes without notice. Some of you might find that really encouraging. You've been feeling like nobody sees how hard you work or what challenges you go through. Some of you might find this terrifying. You've been engaged in unhealthy patterns, and you thought no one knew.

For the Israelites, as soon as they began working on the temple again, the governor of the region noticed. He doesn't seem to be hostile. His questions are fair and honest. He's in charge of the region, and he wants to make sure that whatever is happening is all on the up and up. Here's the government checking in on the people of God to make sure that they are following the law of the land.

We've had a lot of this kind of interaction in the past few years. Our kitchen was shut down a few years ago because of a county health complaint. Then we received a special permit during COVID to remodel our kitchen as part of a Charitable Feeding program from the county. We've had to apply for lots of permits for all the remodel work we've done. We've received some noise complaints about various things on our campus. But we've also hosted several county and city events in order to show hospitality. Obviously, our activities have been limited to different degrees by government regulations to limit the spread of the COVID pandemic.

Here's what I want us to notice: nothing that we do goes unnoticed. We live out in the open. People see what we do. We're part of this earthly system. But right after hearing about Tattenai, our narrator reminds us who else is watching. "The eye of their God was on them."

Tattenai was watching. But so was God. Not only that but God's eye is shown to be the more important one. So as listen to the voice of our God, we also need to know that his eye is upon us. This is meant to be comforting. God sees us. He watches over us. We can trust the eye of God.

Lately, I've been thinking about how many cameras we have in our world. My cell phone has four. My car has a few. My house has security cameras. My laptop, my tablet, etc. Then there are satellites, ATM machines, traffic cameras, business security cameras, and body cameras. We are literally surrounded by digital eyes.

I asked my children the other day at dinner how many cameras they thought existed in the world. We agreed that it was probably over 10 billion. Why do we have so many eyes in our world? What is behind our obsession with seeing everything that happens in our world?

I think it has to do with control. We think that if we can see what's happening, then we can control it. We like to be in control, don't we?

But think about all those cameras that exist in the world. If they were all recording at the same time, how much data would that be? Could we even store it?

But then consider this simple phrase, “the eye of their God was upon them.” God sees it all. Every angle. Every location. Every injustice. Every obstacle. Nothing escapes his vision.

The Jews start working. They get discouraged and stop working. The prophets speak and motivate them to start up again, so they do. Then the governor comes by and asks what they are doing. They feel out of control. Their circumstances are too much for them. But then they are told “the eye of their God was upon them.”

We can trust the eye of God.

Serve God

We are told that because God was watching out for them, the Israelites weren’t stopped in their efforts to build the house of God. They would allow the work to continue while the wheels of ancient Persian bureaucracy spun. So the governor Tattenai sends a letter to Darius the king of Persia. It begins like this:

Ezra 5:8-9:

Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, 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. 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?’

Again, the questions are very fair and matter-of-fact. There doesn’t seem to be any hostility here. The letter continues by quoting the conversation with the Jews.

Ezra 5:11-13:

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

They go on to explain how generous Cyrus was in giving them back the treasures from the first temple. And they conclude with their humble request.

Ezra 5:17:

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

Here we have that one out of place usage of the word house. The phrase translated by the ESV as “royal archives” is literally “house of the treasures of the king.” It’s stuff like this that makes the Bible so fascinating to study. We’ve heard “house of God,” “house of God,” “house of God” over and over again in this passage. But here we have “house of the treasures of the king.” The contrast between these two houses stands out.

We understand that contrast because most of our time is spent worrying about the “house of the treasures of the king.” Whether it’s grades in school or our career path or the balance in our savings account, or the latest political development, so much of our lives are lived oriented toward the “house of the treasures of the king.”

But it’s like that piece of paper that lives in a filing cabinet somewhere deep in the planning division of the city of Mountain View. It isn’t really the most important thing. The house of the king is powerful. But all throughout this letter are subtle cues that point to how much more powerful the house of God is.

It’s a funny power dynamic. After all, they are writing to the house of the king to ask permission to build the house of God. They are acknowledging the power of the king of Persia. But it seems like the way they are able to recognize the power of Persia is because they are completely convinced of the ultimately greater power of their God.

Let me show you what I mean.

There’s a leadership principle that goes like this. If the people you are responsible for make a mistake, it’s your fault. You own that mistake. But if the people you

are responsible for do something great, give them the credit. They did great work.

We see something along those lines in the way that the Jews talk to Darius. Notice how they refer to foreign kings. Nebuchadnezzar was a violent, self-obsessed, erratic leader. But when they talk about how he destroyed the temple, they blame God. God was angry, and God gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Cyrus, on the other hand, allowed the Jews to rebuild their temple. Earlier we read how the Spirit of God stirred him to do that. But the Jews give him all the credit: Cyrus the king made a decree.

The Jews are softening their language as they interact with their government. The destruction at Nebuchadnezzar's hand is attributed to God, while the generosity of Cyrus is attributed to him.

How are they able to be so generous toward these government officials? Are they just playing politics? Or is there something deeper going on?

I think the answer comes in the way they refer to themselves. At the beginning of their letter, they say, "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth."

There's the secret. They know who they are. They know that the God of heaven and earth is so much bigger than the king of Persia. So that can give them the ability to defer to the house of man because its power is lesser. They are not servants of Darius; they are servants of the God of heaven and earth.

It may sound trite or obvious, but as we live in this world, we have to remember who we serve. We do not serve our companies. We do not serve our country. We do not even serve our families. We serve God.

When we're secure in serving God, it frees us to be better employees, better patriots, better husbands and wives and fathers and mothers and children. We might be under their earthly authority, but ultimately God is in charge. So we can speak to them with respect because we serve one who has much more authority. We're not threatened by them.

This is what surprised me about so much of the dialogue regarding COVID. It was as if some people

thought that an earthly government could possibly stand in the way of the house of God. It doesn't matter if we can't meet in person or have to wear masks or they tell us to stand six feet apart. We can honor the king because, ultimately, we fear God.

As we rebuild the house of God, let's honor the people we live among. They are watching, and our attitude toward them matters. They are not the enemy, even when they seem like the enemy. Our government leaders can't save us, and they can't ruin us. If you believe in Jesus, we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth.

Conclusion

Remember the piece of paper about the permit on my chimney? The one that's hiding somewhere deep in the City of Mountain View's planning department? In the "house of the treasures of the city?"

That's what these Jews were hoping to find in the archives of Babylon. You get the idea from reading their letter that even if it wasn't found, they were going to be okay. Let me remind us of one more thing. We definitely have some role in building the house of God. We all contribute all our efforts to this community. I hope that's been clear as we work through this book.

What should also be clear is that the real work isn't us building the house of God. It's God building for us. Listen to what Jesus says as he prepares to leave his disciples in John 14:7: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

Jesus is building a place for us. We aren't the builder; we are the building. God is building us, and he's building a place for us. It's a bit of a mixed metaphor, but the point is the same. God is working for your sake. You aren't working for his sake.

We can rest in our knowledge that we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth. We can rest in the knowledge that he is preparing a place for us. We can honor the house of man in our midst because we belong to God, and we can continue to contribute to God's house faithfully and fervently.