

Spiritual Rebuilding VI

Ezra 4.24–5.5, 6.13–16

We've been looking at how the defeated people of the Old Testament church suffered their long exile and how they were suddenly, after seventy years, given a second chance, but also how not everything was put right at once. Remember that the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild, but they were people who did not worship God according to His word, who believed that all gods should be worshipped, that all religions told the same basic story, and because of that the returning exiles refused their help. These Samaritans ignored one of the most fundamental commandments: *I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt; you shall have no other gods but me*. Because the Jews refused their help, they took offence and began to oppose the work that was started on the temple, and although the foundations were laid, for a long time nothing else could be done. The first verse of this morning's passage shows just how long: *24 The work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia*. Darius became king about fifteen years after the first exiles returned to Jerusalem. Recovery from any serious setback can be a slow business. God doesn't do everything at once, and His purposes in our recovery may not be ours.

And during these periods of waiting it can be easy to lose sight of the goal. That's what happened to the returned exiles. They began well, building an altar and offering the sacrifices that assured them their sins were atoned for, and laying the foundations for a new temple to be a sign of God's presence among them, but when they ran into opposition, they began to get discouraged. We heard this in our reading two weeks ago, 4.4: the Samaritans *set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.*

We know that this discouragement did lead them to lose interest, or at least lose confidence in their ability to do what God had called them to do. We know this because God did what He always did in those days when His people were wandering from the right path: He sent prophets to guide them back. The next verse of our reading makes that clear: *5:1 Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, Who was over them.* God sent not just one prophet, but two, and some of the message that God gave them can still be read in the Old Testament books that bear their names.

Here's how the book of the prophet Haggai begins, for instance: *1 In the second year of King Darius*—the same year as is mentioned in the first verse of our reading

from Ezra—*on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built’.*” During their first year home they had worked like dogs digging new foundations, fifteen years later they don’t think the timing is right! The opposition tactics had worked: they had given up on their primary purpose for being there, they had found excuses not to do what God had called them to do.

And through Haggai God called them back to their task, called them to make the main thing once again the main thing. *This is what the LORD Almighty says, Haggai continues:*¹ *“Give careful thought to your ways. 8 Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD.* And then, Haggai says, *Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him.* Compare this to the next verse in our reading: *2 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak [same names, different*

¹ I’m leaving out a lot about what God told Haggai was the result of their failure to stick to the task.

spelling] *set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.* Haggai says that the people listened because they knew what Haggai said was a word from God, and Ezra says the prophets helped them rebuild. The help the prophets gave, of course, was the word of God.

When we have prayed about something and sought guidance from God's word about it and concluded that God wants us to do something, and then we abandon that plan because it's too hard, or taking too long, or whatever, the word of God always calls us back to the plan. When we are stuck because people disapprove of what we are doing, the word of God helps us to get moving again. When we don't know what to do next, the word of God shows us. When we don't think the timing is right, the word of God shows us when it is right.

We have such an amazing resource in God's word—I never know what to say when a Christian tells me they don't read the Bible much except in church. I know what I feel like saying, but my mother told me not to call someone an 'idiot' once, and I suppose it's left me too polite. St Paul wasn't that polite when he found people in his church ignoring what the word of God had taught them: *You foolish Galatians!* our translation says, but 'brainless' is a better translation of Paul's actual

word. *Stupid Galatians!* And I can't blame Paul; imagine having a million dollars in the bank and spending all year wishing you could go to Paris for a week. Even that is not as brainless as having the word of God on your bookshelf and spending all year wondering whether it's time to do something about your spiritual condition, or your finances, or the behaviour of your kids, or whatever it is. The word of God is what so many of us need most, and use least.

But thanks to Haggai, who didn't wait for people to take God's word off the shelf but went and said it to their face, the exiles get back to the task of building the temple. The main thing is once again the main thing.

Not that the opposition has gone away, notice. Vv 3–5 show that some of the Persian officials in Jerusalem were very suspicious about this resumed building plan, and started taking names—that's always a good tactic if you think someone's up to no good. Intimidates them a bit. But the Jews had the king's permission, of course, although it took a while to send a message back to Babylon and get a reply. Our reading skipped some of the details of that process—Ezra 5 and 6 tells us all about the Babylonian archives and gives us an actual copy of the reply that was sent back, but we just need to know that someone looked up a copy of Cyrus's decree of fifteen years before, so of course they are allowed to

continue building. In fact, they *must* continue building, because Cyrus was king of Persia, and you remember what was unique about the laws of the Medes and the Persians: *they could never be changed*. Cyrus had once said it, and Darius couldn't unsay it if he wanted to.

So, 6.13 *because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates carried it out with diligence. 14 So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper.* One of the things this means is that their discouragement years before had been unnecessary. People had made them afraid to go on building, so they had stopped. If they had sent word about the opposition back to Babylon then, they would have got the same answer the officials received now: 'what? someone is telling you not to obey Cyrus's order? *L se-majest* ! Don't they know that the laws of the Medes and the Persians can never be changed? You keep building, and we'll send a regiment or two to take of anyone who gets in the way.' Their discouragement was unnecessary, as so much discouragement is. The only thing that stops most of us from doing what God wants us to do is believing we can't. The belief is hardly ever true, but because we believe it we stop trying and we never discover that we could have done it if we'd kept going.

But let's finish the verse, so we can keep the main thing the main thing. V 14 told us that the people prospered; if we read on we see that they *prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah*. It's God's word that brings them their prosperity, that makes it possible for them to do what God calls them to do, to do what they most want to do, to live the lives for which they were created.

It's God's word that does the same for us. God's word is the light on our path. Whenever we have a task before us, if we will seek guidance in God's word, we will either find a way to achieve the task or find out that it wasn't God's will. Don't wait till next Sunday to get light on your path.

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