

By My Spirit

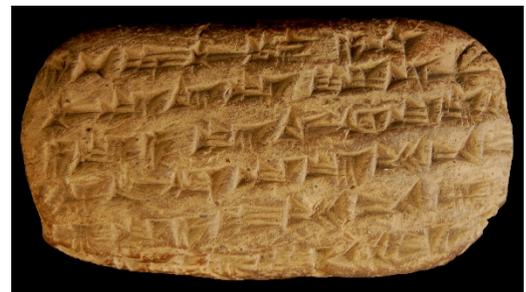
We are dedicated to these moments each week to look to God's Word, learn, and apply it to our lives. I like to have a series or two going; one of the benefits of a series approach like this, which works through books of the Bible, is that it forces me to consider parts of the Bible that I might not otherwise. I have *favorite passages* in the Bible; none of them are in Ezra (but there is one or two in Nehemiah).



So we are back in the Book of Ezra. Scholars might categorize Ezra and Nehemiah among the *historical books* of the Old Testament, since they are a straightforward telling of history (not a book of *worship* like the Psalms, or *prophecy* like Isaiah, as examples). The Book of Ezra focuses on the history of God's People returning to Jerusalem after exile.

Jerusalem and the Temple were at their most spectacular immediately after King David under King Solomon. But it only took a generation for the leaders to become corrupt and the people to rebel against God... resulting in division, violence, and loss, and eventually God's People being carried off into exile by the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

This *is* history... not some sort of *tale* of morality or myth. While in London last week, Laurie and I had a little time in the British Museum. I made it my goal to see what I could see from this era. I probably should have done a bit of research ahead of time so I knew exactly what I might find, but we were on vacation and made a very specific plan to make no plans. Nevertheless, it didn't take me long to find myself in front of an exhibit of materials from the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Here is an image of just one of the artifacts, a tablet containing writing of this ancient time. (That is a tablet, not a nutter-butter cookie.)



Just next to that display was another exhibit with items from the Assyrian empire, including one tablet depicting the Assyrian armies leading away captives... not necessarily Jewish captives (the Assyrians conquered many peoples), but they could have been.

The point is, these are real people in real places in real moments of history.

Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians fell to the Persians, and the Persians began to let some of God's People return to Jerusalem... decimated as it was with the City, and the Temple, leveled.

What we have read so far in the first chapters of the Book of Ezra was how the people, led by Zerubbabel (the Prophet Ezra was not yet on the scene) reestablished worship in Jerusalem with an altar, and began to rebuild the Temple. But there was opposition from the surrounding people, and the reconstruction of the Temple stopped... and that is where we are in chapter 5.

Here is how chapter 5 begins:

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. ² Then Zerubbabel [the governor] son of Shealtiel [the priest] and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. ¹

The rebuilding of the Temple stopped in response to a decree by the government, instigated by the local governors and ratified by the Persian King. Nothing had changed in that regard... so when the rebuilding restarted, so did the opposition. The surrounding governors interrogated Zerubbabel and Joshua, and then reported back to the Persian palace, by letter... a letter contained in Ezra 5. Allow me to read the short letter, because it gives a concise, yet fairly comprehensive, picture of what happened:

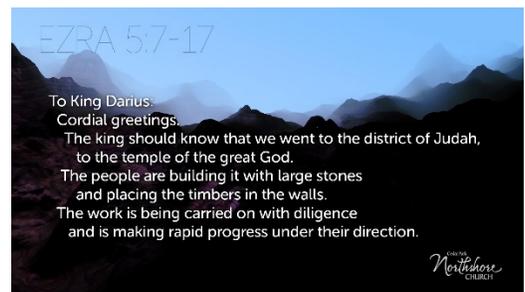
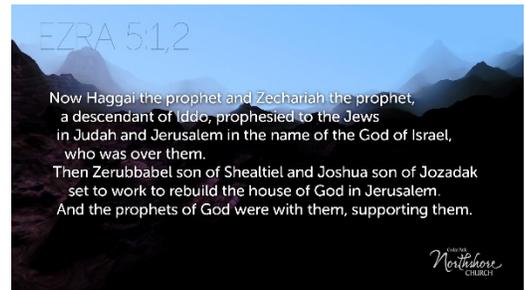
To King Darius:

Cordial greetings.

⁸ The king should know that we went to the district of Judah, to the temple of the great God. The people are building it with large stones and placing the timbers in the walls. The work is being carried on with diligence and is making rapid progress under their direction.

⁹ We questioned the elders and asked them, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?" ¹⁰ We also asked them their names, so that we could write down the names of their leaders for your information.

¹¹ This is the answer they gave us:



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 5:1-2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² But because our ancestors angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.

¹³ “However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. ¹⁴ He even removed from the temple of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to the temple in Babylon. Then King Cyrus gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor, ¹⁵ and he told him, ‘Take these articles and go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem. And rebuild the house of God on its site.’

¹⁶ “So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished.”

¹⁷ Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter. ²

That is how it worked last time. The opposition sent a letter, and a ruling came down from the King in support of the opposition. But this time was different. This time it was verified that Cyrus *had* issued the decree (permit) and the construction was *legal* all along.

Not only was the *permit* reissued, it came with *resources*.

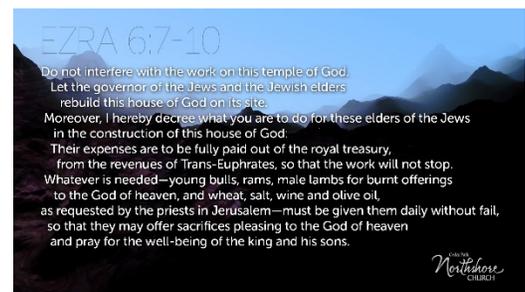
There’s a minor remodel going on upstairs as we prepare to open preschool. When the inspector was here Friday to approve the plumbing and electrical so that the wall could be closed up, all he did was sign a document. He didn’t leave a sack of money to pay for the rest of the work.

Here is an excerpt of the letter that came back from King Darius:

⁷ Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.

⁸ Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:

Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. ⁹ Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail, ¹⁰ so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons. ³



² The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 5:7–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 6:7–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Not only was the **permit** reissued, it came with **resources**.

There's a minor remodel going on upstairs as we prepare to open preschool. When the inspector was here Friday to approve the plumbing and electrical so that the wall could be closed up, all he did was sign a document. He didn't leave a sack of money to pay for the rest of the work.

The rebuilding of the Temple commenced, and this time it was completed, 21 years after it started (with a 15 year pause in the middle).

That is what **happened**... but is that all that was *going on*?

There are certainly many lessons from the historical account, including:

- God's promises can be trusted
- What God started will be finished
- Manmade barriers are no match for God

That is what **happened**... but is that all that was *going on*?

We can know a lot about what was *really going on* by following the clue at the beginning of chapter 5. I sort of *glossed over it* (on purpose, of course), but let's take another look:

Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet... prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel⁴

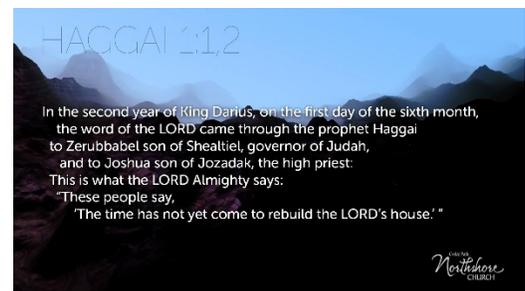
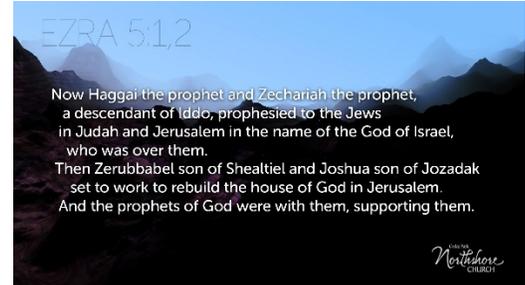
Haggai and Zechariah? Hey, I know those guys!

Those are the same Haggai and Zechariah with books in the Old Testament that bear their names.

Hear what is recorded by Haggai:

In the second year of King Darius, 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^e son of Jozadak,^f the high priest:

²This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.'" ⁵



⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 5:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Hag 1:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This is right *on point*; this Zerubbabel and Joshua are the same from the Book of Ezra.

There is a *sharpness* to what the Lord said through Haggai; he said “**These** people say” (not My People). Why did the building of the Temple stop in the first place? Had God changed His mind; had the order to cease come from Him? Sure, there was opposition, *serious* opposition... but on what basis had these people determined that the time to rebuild the Lord’s house had not yet come?

It gets worse:

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” ⁶

Paneled houses... this was not merely a matter of necessity, but of luxury. These people, charged with the work of building God’s house, did not merely attend to their need of shelter with tents or huts... but rather houses *paneled* on the inside with lumber, likely cedar that was scarce and costly. Each room was likely paneled on every wall, as well as the ceilings... beautiful and even *cozy*... *parklike* even, a *cedar park* for a home (oh no... perhaps we have a problem here?).



All kidding aside... God’s people had lost their way, focusing on themselves rather than God’s work. And it wasn’t merely the Temple that suffered, the people suffered. We can read on:

You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” ⁷

They toiled without blessing, stupidly choosing the meager provision they could *work out* on their own rather than relying on God’s abundant supply.



They planted, but harvested little. They took the One who controlled the rain and the soil out of the equation.

In their efforts to provide for themselves, neglecting what God had called them to do (even sacrifice), they found themselves cold, hungry, and thirsty.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Hag 1:3–4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Hag 1:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Do you ever feel like your wages go into “a purse with holes in it”... never sure where it all goes? This is where the people found themselves because they were neglecting their commitments to God’s house.

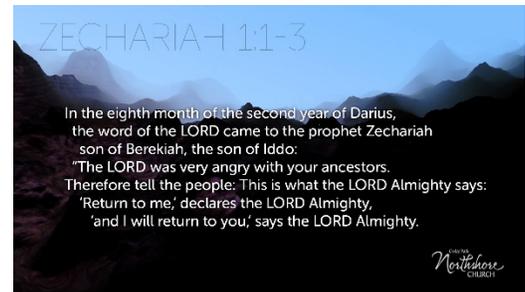
The record in Haggai parallels the record in Ezra; Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the priest took God’s calling to heart, they restarted rebuilding, and the Temple was completed.

Zechariah’s tone is different than Haggai’s. Here is how Zechariah starts:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo:

² “The LORD was very angry with your ancestors.

³ Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty.⁸



Same time period, same people, same circumstances... but while Haggai dealt with *practical* specifics, Zechariah dealt more with *matters of the heart*.

Perhaps the key verse of Zechariah is 4:6

“This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.⁹

The Lord’s call through Haggai was for *practical action*, a call to consider the state of things (with your *paneled houses* while the Lord’s house is but a foundation) and get to work.



The Lord’s call through Zechariah was a call to *faith*, a call to rely on the Holy Spirit.

Doesn’t there seem to be some *contradiction* here? Which is it? Did God want them to get to work, sacrificing time, treasure, and sweat... perhaps even putting their lives and livelihood at risk? Or was it a matter of God accomplishing the work, not by the mere power of humans but by the Holy Spirit?

Is there contradiction? Of course not. Zerubbabel and Joshua seemed to understand, and they moved ahead, completing what God had called them to accomplish.

⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Zec 1:1–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

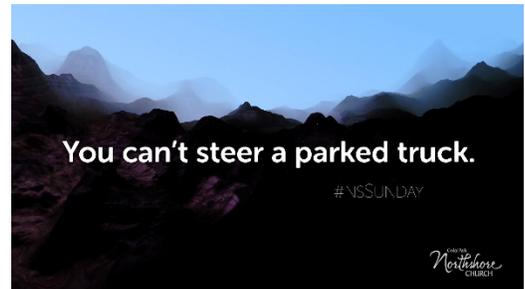
⁹ The New International Version. (2011). (Zec 4:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It was not just a matter of their work, and it was not just a matter of God's work; it was a matter of **both**.

Here's how I see it:

You can't steer a parked truck.

We can crank on the steering wheel all we like, even get the tires to rotate from side to side... but there is no change of direction unless there is motion. If we think of steering back before power steering (anyone remember?) we can imagine expending a lot of energy, working up quite a sweat, maybe even getting the wheels to rotate a bit... but all that activity would result in nothing productive. Crank on the steering wheel all you like; the only way there will be any change of direction is when the wheels are rolling. A skilled driver quickly learns that it is just wasted energy to try to start steering until the wheels are rolling. We hit the accelerator a bit before starting to turn the wheel.



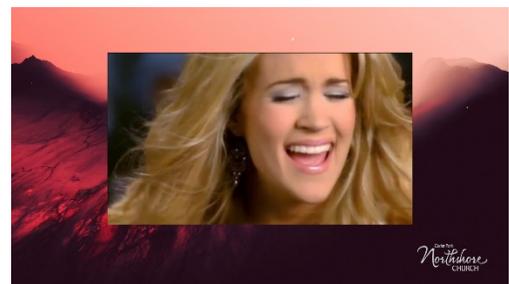
It seems to me that God lets us be the engine; **He wants to steer**. In most cases, the direction (steering) from God doesn't really come until we get moving.

That *renowned theologian* Carrie Underwood puts it this way:
Jesus take the wheel.

Wouldn't you like it if I had a clip?

Well... roll it!

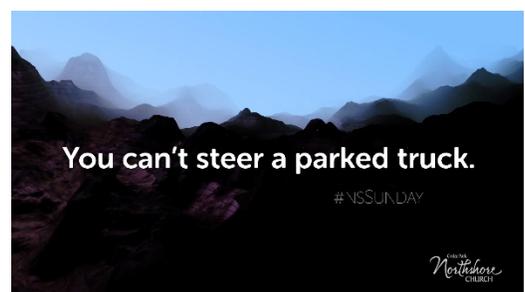
The theology isn't great if it is merely a matter of looking for a last minute rescue, or if it is a matter of abandoning all responsibility once we have put ourselves in a mess.



But if we think of this as a matter of God being in the *steering business*, using our horsepower under His direction, then it isn't half bad theology.

Are we looking to God for direction, for provision, for some way for Him to be real and active in our lives?

Perhaps He is ready to steer, but He is waiting for us to get the wheels rolling.



As we read in the pages of Ezra, Zerubbabel got started, met opposition, and hit the pause button. There is no indication that God sanctioned the pause... they just did. Perhaps they were waiting for God to somehow miraculously rescue them, to change the hearts of the king and surrounding governors. Once they got rolling again, hearts *were* changed. Not only were hearts changed, but economics changed as well as resources they could not have expected poured in.

Perhaps God is ready with the same sort of direction and provision for you and me. Perhaps God is ready with the same sort of direction and provision for us, together, as a congregation.

Taking this one step farther, it seems to me that this principle extends to those who do not yet believe as well. I've observed nonbelievers display the same sort of attitude, waiting for God to do some extraordinary and undeniable thing before they will take a step of faith to believe. Could it be that someone here is thinking that way today? Let me encourage you to take steps toward God, get the wheels rolling, and see how He takes step towards you.

It ***is*** by the Holy Spirit... and it involves ***our*** steps too. God help us to move forward with God, with Him steering our lives for His glory.

We commit ourselves, again, to work by the Spirit, not merely starting and stopping, planting and reaping on our own terms without God. And we commit ourselves to get to work... to sweat and sacrifice... moving forward as best we can to see where God steers and how God provides.

