

Neither Snow Nor Rain . . .

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part VI

Ezra 5:1-6:12

Introduction

A Persian king, by the name of Darius, had an administrative priority – it was called, “the highway”. Thousands of miles of paved roads wound their way between major cities within his vast empire. It was called the highway simply because it was higher, this being by virtue of the stone paving and other materials that created a level road for travel. The low road, or the byway, was simply the dirt path along which the common person traveled. But, if you were wealthy enough to pay the toll, you could travel on the highway.

If I can jump to the New Testament for just a moment – you might remember the Lord Jesus referred to his kingdom plan as a plan that required us, as His messengers, to go out into the highways and the byways (or along the hedges, the dirt paths, the low ways) and invite them all to fill the Master’s house. In other words, the invitation of the church is to those who are wealthy enough or important enough to travel on the highway and also, to those who travel along the ordinary pathways of life. There is no class distinction in the kingdom.

Now, in the days of King Darius, the highway was created primarily because he wanted to keep in touch with his empire. It was along this road that his royal couriers would travel. A Persian courier could average two hundred forty miles a day because Darius had built, what he called, “postal stations” every fifteen miles. So, every fifteen miles, a courier could mount another fresh horse and gallop off. Galloping was made more efficient by another invention of Darius’ Persians – the horseshoe. It

would take a wagon on the low way three months to travel the distance a Persian courier could travel in one day.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, was so impressed by the efficiency of the Persian mail system that he coined the well-known saying in honor of Darius’ postal system,

Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

This same Darius received and sent letters, by his royal couriers, that have been translated for us to study today. Thousands of years later, we discover them preserved in the book of Ezra, chapters 5 and 6.

Prelude To A Busy Postal Season

Let us start with chapter 5, verses 1 and 2, as the people are challenged, not by letters from some king, but by sermons from two prophets.

The Ministry of the Prophets

When the prophets, Haggai the prophet 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, then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

Two prophets are mentioned: Haggai and Zechariah. If you read their sermons, you discover that they, together, spoke to the conscience and the emotion of the people.

The truth was, the people had abandoned the project about fifteen years earlier and had focused, instead, on their own survival. One commentator wrote that rampant self-interest and self-preservation had crushed any interest in rebuilding the house of God.

The message of priority

So Haggai and Zechariah preached a message of priority. It is still preached today, as Matthew, chapter 6, verse 33, tells us that Christ Himself said,

But seek first His kingdom . . . and all these things shall be added to you.

The model of partnership

The prophets also provided a model of partnership, as they stayed with the people and helped them rebuild the temple of God.

Now notice verses 3 and 4,

At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?" Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.

You can imagine how intimidating that would be, "Give us the names of the men involved!"

The motivation of providence

Now notice verse 5. This key verse gives us the motivation of God's providence or care.

But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report should come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

What does that mean, ". . . the eye of their God was on [them] . . ."? Was God's eye not on them fifteen years earlier when they first encountered opposition? Yes. The difference is, now the people realize it and depend on it. At this point, they are motivated by the providence of God and would not stop the work even though new opposition has just been mounted against them.

By the way, knowing that God's eye is upon you, that He sees you, that He knows everything about you can do one of two things to a believer:

1. encourage him, or
2. convict him.

A struggling Christian, burdened down with circumstances beyond their control, takes refuge in the fact that, in Psalm, chapter 32, verse 8b, God says,

. . . I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

But, tell a believer who is involved in some sin, "God is watching you," and they are not encouraged!

When my brothers and I were young, we spent just about every Friday night in downtown Norfolk at the Christian Servicemen's Center. My father would teach the Bible to thirty or more sailors in a Bible study, while my mother would play the piano and manage the soda fountain for the men who would come off the street. In those days, the downtown streets of that Navy town on Friday nights were filled with sailors and sin. My brothers and I, along with the other missionary kids, were basically free to get into all sorts of mischief.

One of our favorite things to do was to climb out a third story window which opened onto the roof. The typical old downtown buildings had flat gravel and tar roofs. Sometimes we would take with us a stack of tracts that were printed to look like five dollar bills. We would crumple them up carefully and then, drop them on the street below. Oh, the reactions we would get, as we watched from high above.

Beneath us and across the street was, what was called in those days, an X-rated theater. I do not think they exist anymore. From what I hear, the movies are rated R. We would wait for some guy, dressed in his whites with his round sailor cap, to come up to that little X-rated theater and hesitate before going in. I still remember one fellow. We watched him as he went to front door and stopped, then looked back over his shoulder, this way and that, and reached again for the door. At that point, we yelled in unison, "I see you."

The poor guy nearly had a heart attack! Hey, we considered that part of our ministry.

Tell a believer who is living or acting in sin, "God is watching you" – when you make that phone call or date with someone you should not; when you look on another person's test for answers; when you

make up a bogus expense report. “Hey, God is watching you!”

The fact that God’s eye is upon us was intended to be a source of motivation and strength, not fear.

I Peter, chapter 3, verse 12, says,

For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer

...

That is so encouraging! God sees you, God hears you, and He cares.

First Letter Sent: “Dear Darius . . .”

It is time, now, for the first letter to be handed to that Persian courier. He mounts his horse and gallops away. Here, in verses 6 through 8, is that letter he carried, bound for King Darius himself.

This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: “To Darius the king, all peace. Let it be known to the king, that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.”

Who said, “No One’s watching you?”

Who said, “No one’s watching you.”? You had better believe they are watching you. Do you realize that we just read a review report of the believers, performed by the unbelievers? Look back at verse 8 again.

Let it be known to the king, that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, . . .

Their God is . . .

Did you catch that? “Their God is not just any God, He is a great God. You should see the house they are building for Him.”

. . . which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; . . .

They serve Him . . .

Now notice,

. . . and this work is going on with great care

...

This is not some quick project. These people are doing the building project with tremendous quality and care.

Their work is . . .

Then, finally, of their work,

. . . and is succeeding in their hands.

Have you ever thought about the fact that how you work out there testifies loudly of what you say you believe in here? The quality of your work says a lot about the quality of your walk. The excellence of your handiwork communicates to unbelievers the excellence of your Heavenly Father.

Who said, “No one’s listening to you?”

They are not just watching, they are also listening! Notice verses 9 to 11,

Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, “Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?” We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head. And thus they answered us, saying, “We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.”

Imagine being asked by pagan enemies, “We want to know who you are so we can tell the great King Darius!”

If there was ever a time to soft-pedal your faith, it is now, right?

Their testimony of . . .

But, did you notice that their testimony of service was courageous?

. . . they answered us, saying, “We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth . . .”

I love that! No pulled punches, no fear of reprisal by some paranoid polytheistic king, just simply, “We serve the God of heaven and earth.”

Russ Blowers is active in the Indianapolis Rotary club. Each week at the club meetings, a different member from the business community is allowed to give a brief statement about his corporate position and a little biography about his company. When it finally came his turn, this believer said,

I'm a member of a global enterprise. We have branches in every country in the world. We have representatives in nearly every parliament and board room on earth. We operate hospitals, feeding stations, crisis pregnancy centers, universities, publishing houses, and nursing homes. We care for our clients from birth to death. Our original Organizer owns all the real estate on earth plus an assortment of galaxies and constellations. He actually knows everything and lives everywhere. Our product is free for the asking. Our CEO was born in a small town, worked as a carpenter, didn't own a home, was misunderstood by his family, hated by his enemies, walked on water, was condemned to death without a fair trial, and arose from the dead. And I talk to him everyday.

You could not help but listen to this man.

Their testimony of . . .

Now this letter also reveals that the Israelites testimony of sin was confessed. Notice verse 12,

But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.

There are no denials and no excuses, just simply an admission of sin and the consequences of sin. Continue to verses 13 through 17,

However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. And also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor. And he said to him, "Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place."

Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet completed. And now, if it pleases the king let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter.

Now notice, the Israelites have not stopped building – not this time!

Old Memo Found Re: Jerusalem Project

Look at chapter 6, verses 1 to 3,

Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. And in Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum – In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained . . .'"

We will stop with that.

Perhaps you are thinking, like I am, "How in the world could Darius put his hands on a memo from a previous administration?"

History reveals that the Near Eastern kingdoms were famous for their record keeping systems. The Persians kept tablets and scrolls, and marked them with labeling devices so that they could be found. Their system was so efficient that Alexander the Great later adopted it for his library in Alexandria.

Second Letter Sent: "Dear Tattenai . . ."

So, once Darius read that Cyrus had indeed allowed the rebuilding of the temple, he dispatches another royal courier to take off along the royal highway back to Jerusalem. And, beginning in verses 6 and 7, the letter read,

Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from

there. Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.

“Leave this work,” can be literally stated, “Keep your distance, keep away from there.” You can imagine the shock those words created and the uproar when this letter was read. But, for Governor Tattenai, it gets worse! Continue to verse 8,

Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.

Now, county taxes are to underwrite the project! There is more – in verses 9 to 10a,

And whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail, that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven . . .

To fully understand what this meant to the Jewish people would be to apply what happened to them in their building project to us in a building project. Imagine, “Town inspectors, stay away from the church building site. Town Council, take note, anything the church wants to build, let them build. Furthermore, take eight million dollars out of the city’s bank account and give it to the elders of the church. Then, provide that congregation with whatever they need – new chairs, hymnals, a sound system – whatever they would like to use to corporately worship their God in the new facility. Take city taxes and buy it for them – without fail.”

Wow, that would be quite a switch, would it not?!

Then the king adds this interesting phrase, in verse 10b,

. . . and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

That is just the “icing on the cake”! The King says, while you are at it, Tattenai, tell those people to pray for me and my boys! Unbelievable!

Is there someone in your life that you have wondered if they would ever change their attitude toward you or if they would ever soften toward the gospel? Perhaps it is a son or daughter, an aging

parent, a neighbor, or your boss. Maybe you have even thought to yourself, “Even God can’t change that person.”

Well, every Jew would have considered Darius one of those people. They must have been holding their breath, as they worked on the Temple, waiting for the official reply. And now, they discover that Darius has asked them to put he and his family on their prayer list. Only God can do that! And here He did just that.

Verse 11,

And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.

Would Darius do something like that? Well, we know, from history, that he impaled three thousand Babylonians who resisted his throne.

This form of execution could have been, literally, driving a beam through a person’s body and then anchoring the beam in the ground. Or, it could be a reference to crucifixion, which was another invention of the Persians to take a person’s life while raised above, what they considered, sacred earth, so as not to defile the goddess earth.

Darius is deadly serious.

Verse 12,

And may the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence!

I love the next verse, verse 13,

Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence . . .

I’ll bet they did!

Darius’ motto for his royal couriers was,

Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

That is really more like a description of God’s will.

Divine P. S.

I see, in these ancient letters, a divine P. S.

Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night will hinder the full and final completion of . . .

Perhaps that is the primary reason God allowed these letters to be preserved for us thousands of years later – a re-discovered letter in a pagan library suddenly turned everything around.

This is the post script He wants us to read in between the lines of these ancient letters – whether it has to do with nations and kingdoms, or your own personal life – God is fully in control.

Nothing can separate you from His love; nothing can stop His sovereign will from being fulfilled.

Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, nor persecution, nor trial, nor height, nor depth, nor the opposition of rulers, nor the sin of nations, nor the power of Satan, nor any other thing can keep the Sovereign of the universe from fully completing His supreme design and His perfect plan.

Our part is to simply be, like these believers, conscientious in our work, consistent in our worship, and committed in our walk as servants of the God of heaven and earth.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/25/1999 by Stephen Davey.

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