

# **Building the Church**

**Scripture: Ezra 1**

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**Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

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**Morning Service**

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People of God: It's the beginning of another church year. Today, the Sunday School program and catechism gets launched, while youth group has already begun. GEMS, Cadets, and Friendship are all re-starting as well. Committees are meeting again, after the summer slow down. September really is the beginning of a new year.

Of course, all these programs and activities require people. Some programs have been well staffed for quite some time, while others still need more volunteers in order for the program to really get off the ground. Earlier in the service I mentioned some of those needs.

But what is it that we are trying to do with all of these programs and activities? How do they all fit together to fulfill the mission of the church? What is the mission and vision of the church? What does it take to build the church? What are the challenges and obstacles to be overcome? What are the opportunities and resources we can build upon?

These are not new questions. They get asked on a regular basis in the life of a church. They have been asked here for sixty years. Next year will mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this local congregation. And so, next year's celebration of ministry will be a special one. It means that sixty years ago people were beginning to raise the question: Should we start a church in the Williamsburg area? Is there a need? Do we have the resources? What does it take to build a church?

The book of Ezra can help us answer some of these basic questions. It's a book about the rebuilding of the temple and the worshipping community—the OT version of the church. Over the next number of weeks, as we will work our way through this book, we will seek to learn how the community of faith was restored in the days of Ezra and how that applies to us today.

But in order for us to appreciate what is going on in this book, we need to place this book in the overall story of God's people. Verse one establishes the setting:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation...

And then follows the proclamation, which allowed God's people to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

We know exactly what year this would be: It's 538 BC. Let's put that in some context. Abraham lived around 2000 BC; King David around 1000 BC. This book takes place 500 years after David; 500 years before the birth of Jesus.

More important than dates is the flow of redemptive history. Under Joshua God's people inherited the Promised Land promised to Abraham, a place where they would freely worship and serve the Lord. Under David and Solomon, covenant life seemed so promising. But after Solomon, things went downhill. While there were a few good kings who served the Lord and led the people in righteousness, most were bad kings who led the people into disobedience.

It got so bad, God sent the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, as well as take the people into exile. The Promised Land was left in ruins. God's people were in exile. But God, who is forever faithful to his covenant, promised through Jeremiah that the exile would be limited in time. After seventy years, God would restore his people.

That's what happens in the book of Ezra. It's seventy years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. Now after seventy years, God's people are allowed to return to Jerusalem. To rebuild the temple, to rebuild the city, to rebuild their lives in place they had not seen before. It was a huge undertaking. That's the story the book of Ezra, as well as the book of Nehemiah—a book we considered two years ago—describes.

We, today, of course, are in a very different setting. We live 2500 years after these events. And most importantly, we live after the coming of Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of all the OT promises. And so, we need to read the book of Ezra in the light of the coming of Jesus.

In the light of the coming of Jesus, I wouldn't describe the church as coming out of exile but being in exile, creating the Promised Land where we are. Let me explain. In the OT, God's people were given the Promised Land, where they could serve the Lord. During the exile, God took that away from them because of their disobedience. But in the return, the land is restored to them.

But with the coming of Jesus, God's people are given the whole world in which to live and to reclaim for God. We're not called to live in one small piece of territory, but can live anywhere in the world and still serve and worship the Lord. But the problem is that this world has been held in the hands of the enemy. Though this is our Father's world, it is a world in rebellion against the Lord.

But God still claims it all. And through the work of Jesus, God is reclaiming it all. And as his people, we live in enemy territory, we live in a sinful world. But as we worship and serve the Lord, as we live out what it means to be disciples of Jesus, the kingdom of God, a NT term to describe the Promised Land, is being established on earth.

And so, the building effort, God's people are engaged in today is different than in the days of Ezra. That rebuilding effort focused on the temple—a real, physical building. Of course, that actual building had spiritual meaning.

Today, the concern is not with an actual building, but with the people of God. As Paul explains in I Corinthians 3, we are the temple of God. He says, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?... God's temple is sacred and you are that temple." The temple, today, is the living, breathing collective of God's people.

That's a problem with the word church. Too often, when we hear the word church, we think of a physical building. But the church is not the building, it's the people. While the mission of the church, as God's people, does require a physical presence—we do need a facility like this one to fulfill our calling, this building is not the center of our mission, like the temple was in the book of Ezra. As a result, the call to rebuild the temple, in the light of the coming of Jesus, needs to be translated for us into building the community of faith, of making faithful disciples of Jesus, of living out the rule of God in our lives.

Now there is a great spiritual danger in this call to build Christ's church. The danger is that I make it sound as if it is up to us now to finish the work of Jesus. Jesus did his work of salvation by his actions on the cross and empty grave, but now that Jesus is in heaven, it's now up to us to apply that work here on earth. It's easy to forget the work of the church is still the work of Jesus.

The opening verses of this chapter remind us that it is the Lord who ensures this rebuilding effort is successful. Because it is the Lord who moved the hearts of people to allow the return to happen.

Verse one says, "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia." When Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonian Empire, he reversed the

policies of that former kingdom. The Babylonians, when they conquered a nation, they deported the people, as well as forced them to worship the Babylonian gods. The Persians, under Cyrus, had a more, liberal policy. They allowed people to return to their homeland, as well as to worship their own gods.

And so from a secular point of view, Cyrus wasn't offering special treatment to the God's people in allowing them to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. It was all part of his new policy. And so, Cyrus was not necessarily aware that he was being used by God. But he was.

The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus. The Lord worked in him so that Cyrus would change the long-standing policy, allowing the return of God's people. Perhaps Cyrus was aware of the Lord working in him—the opening words of the proclamation sound pious enough. But then the cynic in me would say: that's just a politician using religious language to make himself look good. In any case, whether he realized it or not, whether he fully meant those words or not—he was an instrument of the Lord. Indeed, the Lord, the God of heaven, make sure his people could go back home.

That's an important reminder to us today that God continues to work behind the scenes in history to build his church and advance his Kingdom. The Lord will even use non-believers to make sure his plan of salvation is accomplished. Caesar Augustus had no idea that his decree for census would allow Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. Pilate didn't realize that his actions would allow Jesus die for the sins of the world. Today, we might not be able to discern exactly how the Lord is at work, but we can be assured that the Lord is at work, even in the hearts of non-believers.

Of course, the Lord is also at work in the hearts of believers. Verse 5 mentions that:

Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levities—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

In this verse we have the recognition that while God's people are called to be active in the work of the Lord, we need to see how God works in us to create that desire to work for him. So just when we think the work of building the church is dependent on us, we are reminded—no, God is first of all at work.

Now we need to appreciate that tough assignment God's people took up in this chapter. For seventy years they lived in exile. They had build their homes, established their businesses, made friends with their pagan neighbors. And now, they uprooted themselves to go to a ruined city to face the daunting task of rebuilding a temple. That calling to obey the Lord, that

desire to rebuild the temple, that passion to be part of this great renewal project—this all had to come from the Lord. God moved in their hearts so that they wanted to return and rebuild the house of the Lord.

God continues to work in the hearts of his people so that his church might grow. Sometimes it feels as if the work of the church is immense and daunting—and it can be, though not quite like the challenge in this chapter. Sometimes, we feel inadequate to the task—who am I do such a thing. But then, we need to be reminded, God can use me. God may be calling me.

Over these last number of weeks, we've been looking for people to teach Sunday School or to be a GEMS Counselor. At other times of the year, we elect elders and deacons. For the last year or so, we were searching for a Director of Youth and Young Adult ministries. We prayed for these things. We continue to pray: Lord, move our hearts to continue the work of ministry.

God answered these prayers. He moved the heart of Joe to accept the position. He moved the hearts of men to accept their election of elders and deacons. We continue to pray: Lord, continue to move our hearts. Move our hearts so that we remain enthusiastic to our calling. Move our hearts so that we will not become complacent about our faith, but become on fire for the Lord. Move the hearts of those not here so that they will want to worship you. Move the hearts for some to become teachers, others to become GEMS counselors, others to help out with the pies.

And as we pray these things, the question for us is whether we are open to the moving of the Lord in our heart. As we read about specific needs, just ask yourself the question: Might God want me to fill that role? Would God want me to that task?

And when we recognize that is the Lord who moves our heart we realize that even as work for God the building of his church isn't dependent upon us, but ultimately upon God. As Jesus promised, "I will build my church." That's important to keep in mind as we do the work of ministry in the 60<sup>th</sup> year of the life of this congregation. Amen.