

CONTENTION AND OPPOSITION

We are into the story of the Second Temple. The Babylonian Captivity was the utter destruction not only of Jerusalem and the temple built by Solomon, but also of the hopes and dreams and promises for which the Children of Israel had lived for over fifteen hundred years. Then, seemingly “out of nowhere” – with the support and blessing of Cyrus, King of Persia – Zerubbabel led a band of Israelites out of Babylon, back to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple. It was like a second Moses, leading the Israelites out of bondage, back to the Promised Land, to rebuild the temple and their Way of Life.

I would love to tell you this story calmly and in a clear and orderly manner. But I only have four Sundays. The story covers one hundred and six years. During this period, there were five major rulers of the Persian Empire: Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, Xerxes (Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther), and Artaxerxes I. Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes all maintained a consistent and surprising favor and support toward the Jewish people, encouraging them to rebuild their homeland, their temple, and their Way of Life. If you were a Christian King, is that how you would feel toward Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Indians, or whomever?

There are many players in the story, and the records are spotty and sometimes confusing and inconsistent. That’s why I told you it was something of a “no-man’s land” of Scripture, and why I suspect that such an incredible story is seldom told in our churches.

Therefore, I must stick with a few major themes, and skip over details and scholarly controversies that some of you would love to know more about. Today, for instance, I read a tiny portion of the Scripture which tells about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This happened near the end of the story, but it illustrates the contention and opposition that occurred throughout the entire Second Temple period.

Sometimes for clarity we need to oversimplify. Link in your minds Zerubbabel with rebuilding the temple, Ezra with reestablishing the Covenant, and Nehemiah with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel – temple. Ezra – Covenant. Nehemiah – walls. If you lock onto that, I won’t be able to confuse you too badly. ZERUBBABEL, who was a King in David’s line and direct ancestor of Jesus, went from

Babylon to rebuild the temple. EZRA, who was a priest who could trace his lineage back to Aaron (Moses' brother and the first High Priest of Israel), was sent by the King of Persia (Artaxerxes) to teach and reestablish the Covenant. No use rebuilding anything if the plan and purpose of God are not at the center – that is, are not the real reason for all of it. NEHEMIAH, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, heard that things were in great disarray in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes appointed him Governor of the province and sent him off to Jerusalem. But he had to promise to return when things were straightened out. Later Artaxerxes would send Nehemiah back for a second term as Governor. It was Nehemiah who finally reestablished Jerusalem as the major city in the region.

Zerubbabel – temple. Ezra – Covenant. Nehemiah – walls.

Back to Zerubbabel for a bit. In 538 B.C., Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest headed for Jerusalem with the Jewish exiles who wanted to return. The majority of the exiles, of course, stayed in Babylon. It was much more comfortable in Babylon than it had ever been in Israel. And now there wasn't much to return to except a lot of hard work – and an ancient dream about a Covenant with the Lord God. The journey between Babylon and Jerusalem took about five months, and who knew how many dangers were along the way?

After reaching Jerusalem, it took a little while to get organized. The people had to build or rebuild houses to live in, take care of the animals they brought with them, and start growing food. Then they had to start clearing the rubble at the temple, sort through what was there, and gather supplies for the building. Two years and two months later, they started laying the foundations for the Second Temple.

With the foundations laid, they took time out for a great celebration – a worship service with chanting and singing, with trumpets and cymbals, with prayers and praises and rejoicing that God was so gracious and was restoring them to their former destiny and purpose. Some were shouting, and some were weeping. Some say the older folk among them wept because, even with just the foundations laid, the Second Temple seemed paltry in comparison to the First. Or perhaps they wept because it was a forceful reminder that the First Temple had been destroyed. I think they wept mostly for joy, because they were rebuilding what they had long believed was lost forever.

What happened next was predictable, but it still surprises many people who hear of it. Those who had been there all along did not like these newcomers from Babylon coming in to reestablish the former ways and worship. Who did they think they were?! What right did they have to think they were so superior, or so religious?! And who told them God wanted the temple rebuilt anyway? It was a new time – a new day – and the way they had learned to do things in the meantime was just fine, thank you very much. Who needed a religious reform, or a renewal of the Covenant, or a Second Temple?

When Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom back in 722 B.C., all the useful citizens had been carried north into Nineveh, leaving the so-called “dregs of society” in the land of Israel. To make matters worse, Nineveh then shipped down all *its* undesirable citizens, to get rid of them, thus leaving Israel to sink or swim the best it could – the poor and unwanted of Israel, with the poor and criminal of Assyria – a kind of early Botany Bay. So the old Northern Kingdom of Israel was now the dregs of Assyria mingled with the dregs of Israel. But of course new children were born, and they eventually began to form a society of their own, mixing not only bloodlines but Assyrian ways and worship with what was remembered of Jewish ways and worship, becoming what in Jesus’ time were called “Samaritans” – half-breeds, and unclean. You know that the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was still huge in Jesus’ time.

A piece of the history of that rift between Jew and Samaritan was seen in Zerubbabel’s time. The Samaritans were hostile to the returning exiles from Babylon. (Nehemiah 4:1) Seeing the foundations of the temple actually laid and the great celebration that followed, they came to Zerubbabel and Jeshua saying, “Let us build with you.” But Zerubbabel and the other leaders saw through the ruse and rejected the offer.

Of course, today you will hear that the Samaritans should have been welcomed with open arms, and that a united people could then have worked together and rebuilt everything better and faster. Then there never would have been this unfortunate division between Jew and Samaritan. Possibly. Possibly Zerubbabel was an idiot and Jeshua was a jerk, and there are no real issues worth fighting over, and the world would be a peaceful place without sin or evil if we would only all cooperate.

On the other hand, the Samaritans had done nothing over all the years thus far to rebuild the temple, to restore the worship of Yahweh, or to reenact the Covenant Way of Life. Zerubbabel knew that if they joined the work, it would be to corrupt it or stop it. Ezra 6:21 gives us reason to believe that any who were serious about the work and its purpose, and who wanted earnestly to purify themselves and become part of God's new people, would be welcome. The exiles from Babylon were, in fact, not self-righteous. They believed that they and their forebears had lost Jerusalem because they had not kept the Covenant. They returned a chastised and repentant people. And since they had already been destroyed once for neglecting and ignoring the Covenant, they were not about to be half-hearted, compromising, and lackadaisical about it again. The Samaritans, from everything they could see, were not repentant – and *were* half-hearted, compromising, and lackadaisical about the Covenant.

In any case, the work came to a standstill. The threats and the anger from the Samaritans became so great that the returning exiles lost heart (Ezra 4:4-5) and were afraid to go on with the work. Meanwhile, the Samaritans began writing letters to the Persian court, making all sorts of accusations and charges against the Jews. Cyrus was off fighting nomads east of the Caspian Sea, where he was eventually killed. His son, Cambyses, did not care or was too busy to figure it out. Darius came to the throne in 522 B.C., and two years later the prophet Haggai (seconded by the prophet Zechariah) started screaming: "Build the temple! What are you waiting for? It is the work of God – the will of God! You were sent to do it, and you sit around feeding your faces and living in your *own* houses, but God's house is abandoned with only the foundations laid. Move your lazy ..." I have no way to adequately portray the Hebrew message of Haggai and Zechariah. Of course, Haggai also believed that Zerubbabel was God's chosen instrument – God's signet ring – and that this great work was Zerubbabel's life purpose, and a sign that God was restoring the destiny and purpose of Israel.

So Zerubbabel and his people went back to work and finished rebuilding the temple in just four years. Incredible! The Second Temple was finished and dedicated in 516 B.C. Meanwhile, of course, the opposition continued to threaten, accuse, and rant and rave. They tried to discredit the Jews in the eyes of the King. But Darius, as you heard last Sunday, had his scribes search the archives and they found the edict of Cyrus supporting the return and the rebuilding of the temple.

Then Darius issued a decree that fully supported the Jewish labors, including the command to defray all expenses from the King's revenue, and an order to execute anybody who tried to get in the way of the work. It's nice to have friends in high places. God also has some friends in high places, something we frequently forget.

But the moment Darius died, the opposition was at it again. (Do you hear that? It's never over, is it?) During the twenty-year reign of Xerxes, things fell into a shambles in Jerusalem. The temple was built, but very soon people did not honor it. The priesthood was in total disarray. They could not have offered proper sacrifices even if they had wanted to. The holy days and festivals were not observed. The people would not provide wood, animals, or tithes to maintain the temple or its religious functions. The Torah was not known, read, or studied enough for people to obey it even if they had wanted to. Jerusalem itself was still mostly a destroyed city, the walls breached in many places since the siege of Nebuchadnezzar, and none of them repaired. So there was no safety or order within the city.

It looked as if the labors of Zerubbabel and the first wave of pilgrims from Babylon had been for nothing. Life was a mess again. The light was going out again, having barely flared up for a brief time in a handful of exiles coming out of Babylon. Does it remind you of anything in our time? In any case, Nehemiah lived in Babylon's capital city of Susa, where he was cupbearer to the King, and this was the news Nehemiah received from his brother Hanani, who lived in Jerusalem.

Eventually Nehemiah received permission from King Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and see if he could bring order out of chaos. Artaxerxes appointed him the Governor. Nehemiah gathered a second wave of pilgrims, close to 50,000 people, to go to Jerusalem with him. Well, if you really want to know: close to 50,000 people, 6,700 donkeys, 435 camels, 736 horses, and 245 mules. After reaching Jerusalem and getting organized and set up, Nehemiah secretly looked over the situation and then established work parties, each to rebuild the city walls nearest to their own houses. (Nothing wrong with a little self-interest.)

Of course, if the walls were ever rebuilt, it would be possible to set up a government with some security, and bring law and order back to Jerusalem. So first, the opposition tried to make Nehemiah look stupid. "This is ludicrous – nobody can accomplish such a huge and difficult task." But the work continued. Then they tried to threaten

him. But the work continued. Then they tried to bribe him. But the work continued. They tried to discredit him with the King, but he was too close to the King, having been his cupbearer. Then they set up a plot to assassinate him. From which comes one of the memorable lines from Nehemiah, which a few of you may remember: “*I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down.*” (6:3) Nehemiah did not find it necessary to play any of their games. He simply went on about his true business: rebuilding the walls. As you remember from the reading, the workers carried tools in one hand and weapons in the other. They did not want to fight; they only wanted to rebuild. But fight or not, they would rebuild.

Meanwhile Nehemiah, together with Ezra, was working not only to rebuild the walls, but to rebuild the moral and religious fiber of all Jerusalem.

Last week we talked about getting a Second Chance. God does keep offering us Second Chances. God in Christ Jesus surrounds us with grace and mercy – forgiveness and new chances. That is wondrous to know, and even more wondrous to experience. Sometimes we need to be reminded so that we will watch for the Second Chances, and lest we cut ourselves out of these very opportunities because we ourselves have decided we do not deserve them. *Of course* we do not deserve them. Mercy that is deserved is not mercy. Grace that is deserved is not grace. Forgiveness that is deserved is not forgiveness. If you can put it all together on your own, you do not need God, and you certainly do not need a Savior.

Today’s message is not as warm and wonderful as last week’s, but it is no less necessary. Just deciding you want a Second Chance, even when it is offered, doesn’t cut very much ice. All Second Chances are followed by the hard work and difficult programs that make them real. There is a lot of confusion about such principles in our time. If we know the Gospel, we know we cannot work our way into Heaven. We cannot *deserve* God’s love. There is no way to be righteous enough that we can walk into God’s presence and demand the keys to the Kingdom. Only the love of God – and only the goodness of God – holds out any hope at all for our final destiny.

Therefore, many are saying today: “Stop trying. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will be saved no matter what we do.” That is an increasingly familiar response to the incredible, undeserved, unearnable grace and mercy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The problem is: If I am forgiven and stay the same, the forgiveness does me no good. Forgiveness by itself is of no value, except that it gives me time – a new chance to learn and grow. If I steal from you and you forgive me and I steal again, the forgiveness has done me no good. If I steal from you and you forgive me and the forgiveness awakens me – that is, I amend my life, stop stealing, and even move Heaven and earth to pay you back – then the forgiveness saves me. Then I am back on the Path, and LIFE can open up for me again. But if forgiveness leaves me a thief, no good has come from it.

The trouble with sin is that it is horrible, dark, ugly, and wrong. It destroys, and it especially destroys the sinner. Grace, mercy, and forgiveness do not mean that it's okay to stay a sinner. They are to awaken us, that we may return to Life. Jesus does not save us by forgiving us. That only buys us more time. Jesus saves us by forgiveness and grace that also fill us with a new light and a hope that cause us to want to move toward His WAY of Life. We no longer want the old ways – we no longer want to be the same. In fact, with increasing ardor, we want to be children of light, and true followers.

Forgiveness is not the end result. Forgiveness only buys us time. Sanctification is the goal: a good life; the “abundant life” Jesus says He came to bring us. “The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus died so we don't have to be good anymore.” Is that what we have turned it into? Is that what we think and believe and tell others, by our words or by our actions? Does that make sense? What if we *want* to be good? What if we *want* to be right with God? What if we *want* to be loving and productive and creative? And what if we *want* to come into the fullness of who God created us to be? Then forgiveness is only help along the WAY, not the goal or purpose. Jesus died to save us from sin, not to leave us stuck in it.

I'm sure this is all totally obvious to you. But I know people who have been in churches for years and this is not what they are hearing, saying, or believing. To them, the Cross is just a ticket into Paradise. But the Cross is not a ticket into Paradise. The Cross is what we did to a man (and more than a man) who was inviting us into a New Life and offering to lead us there, while showing us how far away from that New Life our present lives really are.

Maybe some people are still convinced that we can “get there” through drugs, sex, money, fame, or scientific progress. But that is not the Christian WAY – and that is not supposed to be the message of the church, or the conviction or the hope of its people.

Back to the point. Every Second Chance is followed by the hard work and arduous program that make it real. All genuine forgiveness means that you change your way of life. All true acceptance makes us *want* to become more acceptable. All authentic love hopes for and seeks the response of a returning love.

So may I quietly and gently suggest: If you have been given a Second Chance (in any of the ways I hope you have been pondering since last Sunday), *then you also* will have to rebuild the temple, renew the Covenant, and repair the walls. That is never easy. It is so much hard work, in fact, that without God’s help, we simply cannot manage it. That’s second-layer grace, by the way – we get help from God for appropriate and holy tasks.

And now you can feel what’s coming, the thing most people don’t want to face today: If you are rebuilding the temple, renewing the Covenant, and repairing the walls, *you will run into opposition*. It should never surprise you, no matter where it comes from, and no matter how severe and serious it becomes. Some of you hate that I keep mentioning this. You want me to tell you that there is no Satan, that we live in a perfect world, that there is no evil ... and therefore that there is always a peaceful solution. Many are peddling this very message today. They think it is saintly, but they pay no attention to the lives of the saints.

Let us awaken! We are given Second Chances. Together we are given Second Chances to become a truer and truer faith family. Yet none of it will become real if we do not change our lives and enter into the new ways of discipline and effort that match our purpose and faith. And we have opposition, and we will continue to run into opposition. It is as certain as the sunrise.

And so is God’s presence ... and help.