

Return: Joy in Faithful Completion
Ezra 5-6

*“And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven day **with joy** for the LORD had **made them joyful**”*

Introduction: Trusting in God's providence does not mean life will get better or easier, but it does mean we can make sense of and find purpose in it all. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are a narrative, a story of God's faithfulness to His people by fulfilling His promises, and He does so without uttering a direct word, without doing a tangible miracle, and without ever "showing" Himself. In a parallel way today, He acts through His Word, His people, and His unseen providential hand. This means we can take courage in the fact that God is building His church, that He is reaching the nations, and His Word is still powerful. But it also means we can make sense of hurricanes, shootings, and fires. It means that even when we do not have the direct answer to our "why" questions, we know God is working all things out according to His will, and His purposes cannot be thwarted. This does not give us giddy feelings, but staunch conviction that God cares, He loves, He weeps, and He has an end to all of this. We respond with sorrow, compassion, action, and hope in all tragic situations knowing that God has never left the scene nor was anything ever random. This tension was captured in 1774 by the hymn writer William Cowper, a man given often to depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and a hope in the sovereignty of God. His good friend and pastor was John Newton (writer of "Amazing Grace") who walked with William through his bouts of times of questioning his own salvation. Toward the end of his life, Cowper wrote the hymn "*God moves in a mysterious way*" based on Romans 11:33 - ***Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!***

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

"Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face". That is the hope we hold onto in a world that is broken, a system set against us, and a God who is control of it all. How did a relatively small group, recommitted to building, finish their mission in spite of a secular government, opposition, and a legacy of failure? They believed that God was with them, so they could accomplish all they were called to.

How does God's Providence Free up Faith-driven Action in a Secular world? (5-6:12)

No Fear (5:3-5)

At the same time **Tattenai** the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" ⁴ They also asked them this: "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" ⁵ **But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them** until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

The people were freshly motivated, recharged by the stirring of the spirit of God, the reassurance of the presence of God (I am with you – Haggai 1:13), and a response to the Word of God (Hagg. 1:12), the leaders rallied the people together to start the re-building of the temple in earnest. They were willing to stand up to the pressure around them and move together toward this common goal. But no sooner had they re-started that they quickly faced a new roadblock. Not only were the Samaritans (local syncretists who had a mixture of religions and heritage) opposing the effort, but now the governing authorities started to take notice. **Tattenai** is identified as a governor of a large swath of land that also contained Judah. He had no axe to grind nor was he overly oppressive, but was simply doing his due diligence as overseer of the land.

What would your reaction be when the government officials, especially those that were not elected by you, came knocking on your door? There would be a natural fear that would set in, a de-motivating response to whatever was going on. However, this was NOT the response of the **elders**, the leaders of the people. They did not respond by stopping or by high handed rebellion, but continued on trusting the Lord and the work. How? **The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews.** They were aware of the fact that God was working, even though there was not a word or discernible sign that this was so. The belief that God was behind all of this, even foreign government involvement, allowed them to continue working. Part of putting off fear in our lives is training our minds to have an ever present, ever awareness that God is at work in the space that we cannot see, in ways that we cannot hear, but by faith we know that He is there, and He is not silent.

Integrity (5:11-17)

And this was their reply to us: 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. ¹³ However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. ¹⁴ And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; ¹⁵ and he said to him, "Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site." ¹⁶ Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.' ¹⁷ Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter."

Second, notice that Tattenai sends a report up the chain of command to Darius the king, a correspondence that could have taken weeks/months to get there, give a response, and come back. His due diligence came when he observed that there were great stones (5:8) being moved into place, timber laid in the walls, and the work was happening with great ferocity. Was this a "normal" Temple or something to be concerned about? Was this going to lead to insurrection? Was this good for the nation?

To answer the question posed to them, the elders simply did so. They laid out the story of why they were building it (11), the failure that brought the need for it (12), and how Cyrus had made a decree to

return. Note that they did not dance around the question, did not answer it in a hidden or deceptive way, but simply told the whole of the story.

Integrity is a novel idea in our culture. I say novel because people like the idea, but do not understand the cost. The people of Israel had nothing to hide. They were not doing anything illegal, underhanded, or “what everyone else does”. There was no bribery, no payoff, no underhanded wrangling. The reason there was no running away from the governments question was the fact they had NOTHING to hide.

“The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion” (Prov. 28:1). How does God’s providence free us up to take action in a secular world? We do not have to play by its rules but by God’s. Honesty even when it costs, doing what is right even when it hurts, and keeping transparency are ways to love boldly in a culture without always looking over our shoulder.

Hard Work (5:8; 6:13)

Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on **diligently** and prospers in their hands.

Thirdly, there are multiple times in this narrative that points out that the work prospered because the people worked **diligently**. There was a dedicated and disciplined approach to the building. We will see that it took over 4 years to get this part done, which meant sacrifice, splinters, and Saturdays. But trusting in the providence of God and knowing that He is sovereign should free us up to work harder, not less. Understanding the grace available to us means we can push through our thresholds, labor to the point of exhaustion, and do it all for the high calling of God’s glory. *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”* (1 Cor. 15:10).

Boldness (5:11-17 – see text above)

As we consider the elders responses to the governing authorities from another perspective, we see in this not only integrity, but great boldness. They not only gave the information that was asked for, they also gave the reason behind it **“we are servants of the God of heaven and earth.”** This was an opportunity to not only give information, but to share the goodness of God to a group of unbelievers. Boldness requires risk and sacrifice, and we are reminded of this in three areas:

1) **Boldness for a cause**

Esther 4:16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. **Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.**"

During this same period of time while still in exile, we read the story of Queen Esther who God used to save her people from the plot of Haman. Esther is a book where the name of God is not mentioned, but His hand and work is all through. Esther's uncle Mordecai challenged her that she was put into the King's court *"for such a time as this"*. Esther was willing to put her life on the line, and even break the law of the land, in order to preserve the life of her countrymen. We are all called to submit to the governing authorities placed over us, knowing that God has placed them there (Rom. 13:1). However, there may be a time when breaking the law of the land upholds life (think hiding Jews during the attempted extermination of WWII). But notice here: *this kind of boldness required an all in commitment, meaning the willingness to lay down ones life*. Too often today, the problem is not that protests go on, they simply are not protesting something worth dying for.

2) Boldness in no compromise

Daniel 3:15-18 Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ **If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.** ¹⁸ **But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."**

In the time right before Ezra, we find Daniel and his friends in a foreign land, given foreign names, and taught a foreign philosophy and language. In the midst of a call to compromise against their God, they refused to kneel to a foreign idol, since this was not simply a cultural expression but a submission in worship. Notice that there was a real belief that God would save them from burning alive in a furnace (even though I don't think that had ever happened before), but even if God did not, they would not compromise. There may come a time in our lifetime or our kids that we are forced to worship something other than our God (unfortunately we do this all too often with manmade idols that we choose to worship). Trust in God's providence allows us to stand strong in an uncompromising way, knowing that He will deliver us, if not in this life, for sure in the next.

3) Boldness in declaring the good news of the gospel

1 Thessalonians 2:2 But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, **we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.**

For us today, this boldness in God's providence gives us boldness in engaging people with the gospel. We have good news to offer, but that good news cuts at the root of so many idols. There is good news for people who are wearying themselves to death, trying to make enough money or gather enough things to find the significance or identity they've always craved. There's good news for those who think material gain will satisfy, only to find our appetites are too voracious to fill. There is good news for those who have trusted themselves to overcome fear, disappointment, and shame. The gospel frees us from all of these things, but idols do not give up their control easily. So we will always be faced with conflict, both externally and in men's hearts, since we are calling for people to die to their old life and self to experience new life.

Trusts God will do more than we expected (6:1-12)

Ezra 6:12 May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. **I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence."**

Ephesians 3:20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

The story is amazing. After explaining plainly and clearly where the impetus to rebuild came from, God moved in Darius in an unexpected way. Darius ended up doubling down on the decree of Cyrus, told the local officials to back off (6:6), said cost offsets would be paid for by tax dollars, that any resource for offerings such as livestock or wine should be given, and if anyone messed with his edict, they should be impaled on beam and his house turned into a pile of dung (love the expressiveness of the OT). Think

about that. Darius easily could have halted the project, charged more taxes, could have taken away privileges, or simply done nothing. Instead he paved the way even more clearly for the people. Our problem with God's providence is not that we believe in it too much, but far too little. We do not think God can or will actually do more than we think or ask, so we do not even try. We should ask for and anticipate great things from God when those things accomplish His will, carry out His mission, and serve His purposes.

Recognizes both responsibility & credit (6:13-15)

Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.¹⁴ And **the elders of the Jews built and prospered** through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building **by decree of the God of Israel** and **by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes** king of Persia;¹⁵ and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

The house was finished after 4 1/2 years, accomplishing the mission for which the people returned. Notice all the hands of how it got done: the local governments did their part in compliance with Darius, the elders/leaders built and prospered, the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah motivated. It was accomplished by the decrees of the rulers of the known world, but it all happened, it all moved, it all was originated by the decree of the God of Israel. God's providence does not cut out responsibility, but it does demand who gets credit. It was God that worked all these things, which gave everyone else to freely play their role. The mission was accomplished. Now what? There was time to celebrate and rejoice.

What are Responses to God's Faithfulness & Faith Driven Obedience? (6:13-22)

We celebrate & worship what we value the most (6:16-19)

Ezra 6:16 And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, **celebrated** the dedication of this house of God **with joy**.

On completion, the people dedicated the Temple in much the same way as Solomon in 1 Kings 8, but by much more modest standards. Solomon was a king, they had the Ark of the Covenant, and they sacrificed so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered (8:5). But even though it paled in comparison, the joy was still there. They sacrificed to the Lord, they offered a sin offering to cover their own sin, and celebrated. They were able to set up worship with the priests the way it was prescribed in the Law. At the first Temple, there was lavishness. At the second, there was a sense of accomplishment of mission. But in both, there was celebration in worship. We celebrate in worship what we find the most valuable, and that means it has less to do with the externals (lights, experience, sound) and more to do with the object, which is God bringing us into worship through the sacrifice of another.

We have a greater Passover & Temple (6:19-20)

On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles **kept the Passover**.²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves.

They kept the Passover, slaughtering the lamb, and remembering that God had passed over the houses of those who put the blood on the doorposts in Egypt. We are reminded that we have a greater

Passover, one established by Jesus to remember His blood shed for us on the cross, and a better Temple. Since there is no Temple today, we worship God differently, more freely. *We are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in us* (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). We do not *go* to a place to worship, we worship God through the Spirit dwelling in us. That means we have access to God at all times. We do not have to sacrifice blood of rams anymore because we have been washed in Jesus'. We can freely worship because God is with us in the Spirit, who points us to Christ.

We worship in a way that is attractive to others (21)

It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also **by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD**, the God of Israel.

This cannot be missed. We talked about the seemingly short-sighted call of the leadership that did not allow the Samaritans to help them build. It seemed very exclusive, narrow, and unloving. But notice that upon the completion of the Temple and the reinstatement of worship, there were others from the land who **joined them**. The way we worship should be attractive. Not attractive because of extreme guitar solos or a good show, but attractive by people thirsty to know God, understand forgiveness, and experience the love that can only come from Jesus who gave Himself up for us. Israel was always to be a light to the nations, and because they did not compromise, they were able to be one. Holding the line of holiness IS a way to reach people who truly need salvation, not temporal feeling.

Resting in God's Providence leads us to great joy (22)

And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread **seven days with joy**, for the **LORD had made them joyful** and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

We would be remiss to exclude this last note. The people worshipped and celebrated seven days with joy. Joy had come in the morning after the darkness seemed the darkest. There is joy in resting in God's providence and seeking to accomplish His mission, even though there will be pain, disappointment, and hurt along the way. Joy is transcendent beyond all other artificial happiness that we could seek. Joy is an experience of fullness that we experience now in part, but will experience forever when we finally see the object of our worship.

So we cling to His providence. We trust in His purposes. We rest in His sovereignty.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.