

## Finishing The Temple

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### Introduction:

Have you ever gotten a project started with great enthusiasm? You hit it hard and fast and made a great deal of headway in a short time. But then something came up that distracted you and then something else and then something else. Suddenly you looked and realized you hadn't done anything in months or years about the project. It just sat there languishing. You kept looking at it thinking you should do something, but you couldn't get back into the groove with it? I've been there a dozen times. We are in good company. The restored children of Israel faced this exact same situation in **Ezra** when they returned to rebuild the temple.

In about 537 B.C., Cyrus, emperor of the Medo-Persian Empire, granted liberty to the Jews who had been deported in the Babylonian captivity (**Ezra 1:1-4**). However, not everyone returned to Judah. **Ezra 1:5** describes a particular kind of person returning: "... everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem" (ESV). So, 42,360 Israelites made the nearly 800 mile journey through the Fertile Crescent back home and immediately began to rebuild the temple of Jehovah (**Ezra 2:64**). Within a year, they had rebuilt the altar, reestablished the festivals and feasts of the Law and laid the foundation of the temple (**Ezra 3:8-13**). These were a people who, though surrounded by false religion, were striving to restore the worship and work of God's original law for them. Isn't that what we are striving for? These were a people who were rebuilding the temple of Jehovah. We too are a people striving to build the temple (**Ephesians 2:19-22**). As we consider these Jews at the end of the captivity, we can see parallels to ourselves and our work. This is important to note as we continue the story. Because, while they were stirred up enough to travel nearly 800 miles, to begin sacrificing, to gather materials and get started. It wasn't long before the people quit working on the temple. In fact, after the foundation was laid, it was at least another 16 years before anymore work was done on the temple. What happened? How did such an excited, enthusiastic people turn from their goals so quickly? And then how did they overcome those weaknesses and refocus on their goals? Answering these questions can help us today.

### Discussion:

- I. Why did they stop?
  - A. The Israelites overcame the first attack of unity with mixed religion.
    1. Before noticing what stopped them, notice the first attack against their work that didn't stop them.
    2. In **Ezra 4:1-2**, the people from the provinces surrounding them offered help. They claimed to worship Jehovah as well. This was only partially true. The ones speaking were the descendents of those brought into the land following the Assyrian conquest of Israel. You may recall the story of **II Kings 17:24-41**. These were people of mixed religion. They feared Jehovah, but not enough to follow Him fully or put away all their false gods.
    3. These of mixed religion wanted to be united in work with the restored Israelites. Yet, Ezra is quite clear that they were enemies. Those of mixed religion were not friends because their very practices of idolatry would destroy and corrupt the temple worship God had commanded.
    4. Today, there are many of mixed religion around us. They fear Jehovah, but not enough to follow fully the pattern of God revealed in scripture. They want to add their own forms of worship, their own teachings and their own plan of salvation. These mixed religions are today crying out for unity among the churches. They want us to be able to work together on the temple. But we must be strong, as were the Israelites, recognizing we have nothing in common with those of mixed religion (**Ezra 4:3**). This is in accord with Paul's words of **II Corinthians 6:14-18**. We must not be in "union" with unbelievers. There is no room for mixed religion in the building of Christ's temple.
  - B. The Jews were discouraged by those in mixed and false religion.
    1. Though the Israelites overcame the first attack by denying unity with those in mixed religion, they were quickly thwarted by the very people from whom they refused to accept help. In **Ezra 4:4-5**, the men of mixed religion began to discourage the Jews. They began to frighten them and hire counselors against them. They did this for 16 years until the reign of Darius.

2. I do not know exactly what these lawyers and counselors said. However, based on what I hear from those in mixed religion today, I can guess. How often have we been attacked with lies and misrepresentations. "You guys think you are the only ones going to heaven." "You are legalists." "You sound just like the Pharisees." On and on the lies and misrepresentations go.
  3. How many times have "counselors" been hired to thwart good counsel, clearly given by scripture? On a subject as simple as baptism, the "lawyers" of the denominational mixed religions cloud the issue to discourage us from teaching the truth. Their approach is not based on clarifying God's counsel but clouding it. They attack **John 3:5**, claiming "water" can mean all kinds of things, not just water. They attack **Mark 16:16** by allowing the last half of the verse to deny the first half. They attack **Acts 2:38**, saying "for" is used on "Wanted" posters meaning "because of" not "in order to". They attack **I Peter 3:21**, claiming the baptism that is a like figure to the water of the flood is not water baptism. I once received an e-mail that claimed water baptism saves us, but not from sin. They ask questions about the thief on the cross. They make up scenarios about deathbeds and car wrecks involving people who just couldn't make it to the water. Most of the time, these people will claim they are not telling us not to be baptized. Rather, they tell us, since all these questions are there, "We can't be so dogmatic one way or the other." Regrettably, too many times these silly arguments, situational ethics and lies about the Bible are effective and Christians quit being so dogmatic about God's truth. The same thing is done with church organization, worship, institutionalism, social Gospel, etc.
  4. The Jews overcame the first attack, but the second foundered them. We must not be overcome by this same maneuvering and subtle deceit. We face it today from the modern mainstream religionists who mix the Bible with their man written creeds. They want false unity and when we won't give it to them, they will hire their "counselors" against us. We must stand firm and strive together, not alarmed by our opponents (**Philippians 1:27-28**).
- C. The Jews became distracted by personal pursuits.
1. At the same time the enemies were attacking from without, there was an internal struggle with the Jews themselves. The prophet Haggai reveals this struggle in **Haggai 1:2-3**. The people were distracted by their own pursuits.
  2. They had their houses to build. They had their fields to plant. They had their kids to raise. They had their parents to take care of. They had jobs to hold. They had spouses to please. They had wealth to attain. They had all the same things to distract them that we have today. I have no doubt it worked for them the same way it does for us. They were discouraged from doing the work God wanted, but were able to justify it in their minds because it was something they were going to get to, as soon as they reached a certain goal.
  3. This reminds me of two similar discussions I had when I lived in Dyersburg, TN with Mason Harris, an older preacher. One discussion was regarding contribution. He said it is interesting when you talk to people about their contribution. When they are young, they don't have much money because they are saving for college and will give more when that is covered. After college, they are newly married and can barely make ends meet. But they will give more when they are more on their feet. As they get more on their feet they start having kids and can barely feed and clothe them, but they will give more when the kids are gone. When the kids are gone, they are now paying for their kids' college. But they will give more when that is taken care of. After their kids' college is paid for, they are on a fixed income and can't give very much. But they have a clause in their life insurance policy to have some given to the church when they die. In other words, "When I finally don't have any use for my money, I will let God have some of it." The other regarded time spent doing the work of the church, conducting Bible studies, teaching Bible class, helping brethren, even just attending the classes and assemblies. It follows the same pattern. Mason said, when they are young, they have school but will become more involved when that is finished. But then they get married and have to devote time to their spouse, but they will devote more time to the church in a few years. But then they have kids with soccer, baseball, gymnastics, plays and piano lessons. But they will devote more time when the kids are older. But then they finally are retired and want to do some travelling. When they've gone everywhere they will have

more time for work. But when that is completed, they are old and say, "Preacher, I've spent my time in the trenches, its time for the younger people to step up to the plate." And it all starts over.

4. How easy it is to become distracted by our own pursuits and not build up the temple. How easy it is to lose perspective of our priorities. Paul commands us to keep our minds on things above for just this reason (**Colossians 3:2**).

II. Once they stopped, how did they get started again?

A. After the foundation had laid bare for 16 years, God sent his prophets Haggai and Zechariah to stir up the hearts of the people again to build the temple (**Ezra 5:1-2**). God has always worked through men to proclaim His will for the people. Unlike Ezekiel's day when people listened to the preacher like a pleasant song, for entertainment but not for purpose (**Ezekiel 33:30-33**), these people listened to the prophets and obeyed. The prophets essentially made three points that encouraged the people to prioritize properly. Within four years the temple was completed (**Ezra 4:24; 6:15**).

B. Those who don't serve the Lord will be judged.

1. Haggai proclaimed judgment was already being meted out against the people (**Haggai 1:7-11**). The point was, just because God has been merciful and brought them back to the Promised Land did not mean He could not bring judgment upon them again.
2. Zechariah proclaimed God's judgment several times. In **Zechariah 1:18-21**, God revealed His coming judgment on the nations who had been against Israel. In **Zechariah 7**, God revealed that He would bring judgment on those who had returned just as He did their fathers, if they would not be faithful servants. Note especially **Zechariah 7:8-12**. Finally, in **Zechariah 14:2**, God revealed not all of the Jews were marked as faithful and those who were not would be cut off from the city of God. This is a prophecy of the 70 A.D. destruction of Jerusalem. But the point remains the same, judgment would come on those who did not serve God according to His plan, pattern and will.
3. Just so, judgment will come upon us if we do not obey the will of God. If we turn from His path and go on sinning willfully, even after coming to a knowledge of the truth, all that remains is certain terrifying expectation of coming judgment (**Hebrews 10:26-27**).

C. God is with you.

1. Because of their discouragement, the people had obviously thought God had forsaken them. In their own minds, this was confirmed because of the judgment they had brought upon themselves in **Haggai 1**. But the message of the prophets was, "God is with you" (**Haggai 1:13**).
2. Zechariah had a stirring vision to demonstrate this message to the people in **Zechariah 4**. While we may easily get bogged down in some of the details of this vision, we can never lose sight of the fact that God tells us exactly what was His point in this vision. "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit" (**Zechariah 4:6**, ESV). He goes on to say Zerubbabel would be successful in building the temple because God was with him (**4:7-10**). Over and again the message of God's presence with the people was a source of encouragement to them.
3. Just so, God is with us today. **Hebrews 13:5-6** gives us this hope. **Romans 8:31-39** provides this same comfort, demonstrating that God is on our side so our enemies do not matter. No matter the attacks of the "counselors", when we stay devoted to God's plan, God is with us and we will overcome.

D. God has plans for you.

1. Both of the prophets looked to God's plans for Israel. Of course, this ultimately came about in the coming Messiah (**Zechariah 9:9-10**). But other events are also mentioned.
2. **Zechariah 9:13** prophesies the conflict between the Jews and Greeks, which came about under Antiochus Epiphanes and Judas Maccabee. **Zechariah 13:7-9** foretells the death of the Messiah and the ensuing testing of His people. **Haggai 2:21-22** speaks of the established church, destruction of Jerusalem and victory of the church over the nations as demonstrated in **Hebrews 12:22-29**. God had plans for the Jews. Therefore they could have confidence in their coming victory.

3. Just so, God has plans for us, if we will simply obey Him. **Romans 8:28-29** demonstrates His plans for us. If we love Him, God has predetermined that we will be conformed to the image of Christ. He will bring that about, if we submit to Him. In **Ephesians 3:8-13**, God demonstrates His plan to use us to bring the mystery of God's grace to all people to the world. And most importantly, **I Corinthians 15:50-58** demonstrates God's plan for us in eternity. He will take this perishable and make it imperishable and we will dwell with Him for eternity in an inheritance reserved for us in heaven (**I Peter 1:4-5**).

### **Conclusion:**

Haggai 1:14 demonstrates the people's response. It is the response we need to make. Notice three points from this verse. 1) The people came. 2) The people worked. 3) It was all the people. In **Ezra 6:15**, in the sixth year of Darius, the temple was completed. From the beginning, it took them about 20 years to accomplish the task that should have been done in less than 5. We can do one of two things with this story. We can simply view it historically and discuss the facts of the story, learning the details, dates and personalities. Or we can realize that this is our story. We are reading about us. We all individually go through these times of discouragement and distraction. When we make that realization, we can apply the lessons to our lives, remembering that God will judge us even though we have become His children, if we do not endure in His service. We can have confidence, that if we remain faithful, God is with us and has plans for us. These things will help us persevere in building the temple. They will help us teach others. They will help us be devoted to worship. They will help us become one heart and soul. Where are you in this story?