

What Are You Building?

Today In Your Reading...

Daniel shared his final prophecy, which included a detailed account of the coming struggles for God's people (11:2-12:12). Though they would have asylum under Persian rule, Persian power would be thwarted by the Greeks, namely Alexander the Great (refer to the ram and goat prophecy, *Daniel 8*). However, Alexander's early death broke apart his empire into four pieces. "The Kings of the North and South," who battle each other in Daniel's vision, are two of Alexander's generals — Seleucus in Syria and Ptolemy in Egypt. Daniel's vision was so accurate that Bible critics believe that it was written after these things happened. They cannot stomach the thought of prophecy being true.

Of course, as these two countries — Syria and Egypt — antagonize each other, God's people, the Jews, are right in the middle of the action. Eventually, one king, Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria, emerges victorious, but he persecutes the Jews and desecrates the Temple. Because of his heavy hand, the Jews manage to sustain a rebellion called the Maccabean Revolt, during which they will cleanse the Temple and rid themselves of Antiochus' rule.

All of these things in Daniel's vision will take place, as history now confirms, between the Old and New Testaments. More than 400 years of history is passed over between the last prophecy of *Malachi* (last book in the Old Testament) and the opening scenes of Matthew's gospel. The rest of Daniel's vision provides us with another brief look at the end times (12:1-12). A powerful leader will rise, the Anti-Christ, who will defy God's authority, disrespect His Temple in Jerusalem, and attempt to destroy the Jews.

Our section today ended with a look at what was taking place in Jerusalem. The momentum of the first return had been sidetracked. The peo-

ple there were tasked with rebuilding the Temple but they focused, instead, on rebuilding their homes. That's when the Lord sent the prophet Haggai to jolt His people into action. "Why are you living in luxurious homes," He said, "when My house lies in ruins? This is why you plant much but harvest little... I have called for a drought to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get... Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild My house" (1:3-11). Haggai's message sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the other leaders, and they began the Temple project again.

Daily Reflection

All of us are building something, either the kingdom of God or a kingdom for ourselves. The Jews were so concerned about their own business that they neglected the work of the Lord. By setting His work on the shelf, they were forfeiting His blessings in their lives. Instead, he was working against them, to frustrate all of their efforts.

What are you building? Where is your focus — on the things that God has called you to do or are you too busy accomplishing your plans? Explain your answer.

Remember when Nebuchadnezzar was walking around his palace, overlooking Babylon? He said this, "Isn't Babylon great? I have built this city by *My own power* and for the *glory of My own majesty*." He was absorbed with building his own kingdom. Does this describe you? **You cannot build God's kingdom and your own at the same time.** It will be one or the other.

Today In Your Reading...

Amidst the bustle of Temple reconstruction in Jerusalem, God sent two prophets to encourage the people, Haggai and Zechariah. "Take courage, Zerubbabel," said Haggai. "Take courage, Jeshua, the High Priest. Take courage all you people still left in the land. Take courage and work, for I am with you, says the Lord Almighty.

My Spirit remains among you... so do not be afraid" (2:4, 5). "Zerubbabel and Jeshua responded by beginning the task of rebuilding the Temple, and the prophets of God were with them and helped them" (*Ezra 5:2*).

After seventy years in captivity, there was a bit of uncertainty whether or not the Lord would bless His people, particularly in regards to the line of kings and priests. God quickly squelched any fears the people might have had. First, He blessed Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and the Governor of Judah. "I will honor you, Zerubbabel, My servant, says the Lord. I will treat you like a signet ring on My finger, for I have specially chosen you" (*Haggai 2:23*).

Regarding Jeshua the High Priest, Satan quickly tried to discredit him. As Jeshua stood before the Angel of the Lord, "Satan was there at the angel's right hand, accusing Jeshua of many things. The Lord said to Satan, 'I reject your accusations. Yes, the Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebukes you...' " Jeshua's clothing was filthy as he stood there, a symbol of his sins. But the Lord responded, "Take off his filthy clothes. I have taken away your sins, and now I am giving you these new clothes" (*Zechariah 3:1-4*). In this way, Jeshua was purified and, therefore, he could represent God's people in the Temple.

Concerning the city of Jerusalem, which lay in ruins, the Lord promised protection. "Come away! Escape to Jerusalem, you who are exiled

in Babylon! Anyone who harms you harms My most precious possession. I will raise My fist and crush him (*Zechariah 2:6-9*).

Finally, Zechariah was given a brief look at the promised Messiah. "Soon I am going to bring My servant, the Branch... I will remove the sins of this land in a single day" (3:8, 9). The Lord had used the term "My Servant" before to describe Jesus (*Isaiah 42:1-4*). He has also been called the Branch before, a righteous king from the line of David (*Isaiah 4:2; Jeremiah 23:5*). At the cross Jesus would remove the sins of all those people who had trusted in this coming King.

Daily Reflection

On a day like today, when our reading is full of random, seemingly disconnected passages, it can be difficult to see what is there to apply. But, be encouraged. God was faithful to secure for His people an obedient King who would bless the people by his commitment. He was able to purify a righteous priest who would mediate for the people in their iniquity. He was able to provide protection for His holy city even though the walls were in shambles. He even promised to put plans into motion to rebuild those walls, a hint at the ministry of Nehemiah (*Zechariah 1:16*). Finally, He reminded the people that He still intended to bless them by sending the Messiah to make all things right.

All of these things were brought about because of His mercy. "It is not by force nor by strength," He said, that the people had somehow made these things happen, "**but by My Spirit**, says the Lord Almighty" (4:6). "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin" (4:10). **The Lord is faithful, who finishes what He started.** The same goes for you. "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (*Philippians 1:6*).

Reality Over Ritual

Today In Your Reading...

The Temple reconstruction project continued despite the efforts of a neighboring governor named Tattenai. He was not aware of King Cyrus' decree and, thus, questioned the authority that Zerubbabel and Jeshua had for sanctioning such a plan. However, after he wrote a letter to King Darius, the King returned a message that included a warning to leave the Jews alone (Ezra 6:6-12). "So the Jewish leaders continued their work, and they were greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah" (6:14).

One encouraging message from Zechariah centered around the end times. "This is what the Lord Almighty says, 'Take heart and finish the task! Now I will treat the remnant of My people as I treated them before. Once more I will make the remnant in Judah and Israel the heirs of My blessings... I will rescue you and make you both a symbol and a source of blessing! So don't be afraid or discouraged, but instead get on with rebuilding the Temple!'" (8:9-13).

One of the sources of blessing in the end times will be the fact that the Messiah will live among the people, and He will join the roles of both King and Priest in Himself. Zechariah symbolized this by crowning Jeshua the High Priest, saying, "Here is the man called the Branch. He will branch out where He is and build the Temple of the Lord. He will build the Lord's Temple, and He will receive royal honor and will rule as king from His throne. He will also serve as priest from His throne, and there will be perfect harmony between the two" (6:12, 13).

Since the beginning, the roles of priest and king have been separate. Remember Kings Saul and Hezekiah got into trouble for daring to offer sacrifices when that was not in their responsibilities to do so. However, *Christ will be able to fulfill*

both roles in perfect harmony. He will be both Priest, our sinless mediator, and King, who has been given all authority to rule the earth.

Daily Reflection

Despite the excitement of the Temple reconstruction, the Lord gave His people a warning. He did not want them to repeat the mistakes of their forefathers and **fall into mindless ritual.** He warned against following the letter of the law without catching the spirit of the law. "Even now in your festivals, you don't think about Me but only of pleasing yourselves" (Zechariah 7:6). God wanted them to **practice righteousness.**

"Judge fairly and honestly," He said, "and show mercy and kindness to one another. Do not oppress widows, orphans, foreigners, and poor people; and do not make evil plans to harm each other" (7:9, 10). He continued, "Tell the truth to each other. Render verdicts in your courts that are just and that lead to peace... Stop the habit of swearing things that are false. I hate all these things" (8:16, 17).

What does it mean to **follow the letter of the law and miss the spirit of the law?** How do we fall into this trap today?

God wanted His people to be less about rituals and more about reality. Apply that to your life.

Today In Your Reading...

We finished the prophecies of Zechariah, which can be difficult, at times, to understand. To summarize, Zechariah's messages mostly emphasize the events of the end times, the second coming of Christ, and His earthly kingdom. "The Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day there will be one Lord — His name alone will be worshiped" (14:9).

However, because these prophecies are about the second coming of Christ, it is easy to overlook the prophecies of His first coming. For example, Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" was pictured. "Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you! He is righteous and victorious, yet He is humble, riding on a donkey, even on a donkey's colt" (9:9; *Matthew 21:1-11*).

The problem is not that the people missed Jesus when He came to Jerusalem that day, but rather they misunderstood what He was there to do. The prophecy continued, "I will remove the battle chariots from Israel and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and I will destroy all the weapons used in battle. Your king will bring peace to the nations. His realm will stretch from sea to sea..." (v.10). When Jesus did not set up His earthly kingdom, the people mistook Him as an ordinary prophet and, thus, discarded Him.

Here is another prophecy of Jesus hidden in Zechariah's messages, "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, the man who is My partner, says the Lord Almighty. Strike down the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered and I will turn against the lambs..." (13:7). Pictured here is the crucifixion of Jesus and the dispersion of His followers, even the persecution of the Church. "I will bring them through the fire and make them pure, just as gold and silver are refined and purified by fire..." (v.9).

Daily Reflection

In the midst of these prophecies, one little verse grabbed my attention (12:1). "This message is from the Lord, who stretched out the heavens, laid the foundations of the earth, and **formed the spirit within humans...**" Those who hold to a material world (atheists, humanists, naturalists), meaning that everything is made of "star stuff" or tangible materials have trouble explaining the reality of man's sense of internal qualities — his personality, his feelings, his fears, his passions, his ideas, his memories, or his conscience or intuitive sense of morality.

These immaterial characteristics cannot be explained with material elements. That is because they were placed within us by God, our immaterial Maker. Though the Lord created our body with dust, that dust could not give us life. Thus, God "breathed into it the breath of life and it became a living being" (*Genesis 2:7*). Though we are trapped in a fleshly body, we are spiritual beings, like God. We were made in His image, having immaterial qualities like Him. Upon death, our spirit returns to the One who gave it (*Ecclesiastes 12:7*).

In the meantime, because of the Fall, our spirit has been corrupted. Paul described it as "dead because of our trespasses and sins" (*Ephesians 2:1-5; Colossians 2:13*). However, because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we, His followers, are made alive again in Him. Just as the Lord breathed life into Adam, Jesus breathed life into His disciples, by giving them the Holy Spirit (*John 20:22*). Now, our spirits have been made new (*2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 4:13*).

God is the "Giver of Life," both at conception and at salvation. You have been made and re-made in His image. Though you were dead, He has given you new life. Thank God for the spirit, His Spirit, that lives within you!

For Such a Time as This

Today In Your Reading...

We were given the details of two events that seem to be disconnected but which are actually very much intertwined. First, the Jews in Jerusalem finally finished repairing the Temple and dedicated it with great joy (*Ezra 6:14-16*). Soon after, they began celebrating their annual festivals, starting with Passover. It certainly was an exciting time. "There was great joy throughout the land because the Lord had changed the attitude of the King of Assyria toward them, so that he helped them to rebuild the Temple of God, the God of Israel" (6:22).

However, all of these things, the return, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the restarting of the Temple sacrifices were jeopardized by the second event. Circumstances had arisen that allowed a wicked official named Haman, the Prime Minister of Persia and enemy of God's people (*Esther 3:10*), to pass a decree sanctioning the elimination of every Jew in the empire. It appeared that the excitement of the return of the remnant from exile would be short-lived.

On the surface, the situation looked hopeless, except that God had been working behind the scenes to elevate two of His own people high into the Persian royalty. A beautiful young lady named Esther had been chosen to replace the deposed Queen Vashti, and Esther's guardian, a loyal man named Mordecai, had been promoted after unveiling a plot to assassinate King Xerxes.

After God had promised a bright future for His people, it seemed inconsistent to allow Haman to destroy them all. Of course, we know that didn't happen, but at the time, this situation was quite stressful. Still, the Lord had arranged for a way to prevent Haman from carrying out his wicked plans. Here again is evidence of His sovereignty and providence, the fact that He is able to provide in advance, to work all things for His

good purposes. **He always has His people in the right places at the right time.** Just as Daniel had risen to prominence for God's purposes in Babylon, now Esther and Mordecai had been placed in key positions in Persia. Mordecai even reminded Esther, **"Who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for such a time as this?"** (4:14).

Daily Reflection

While the events in your life may seem to be random or haphazard, they are not. **With God nothing is random or haphazard**, but, instead, *everything happens for a reason*. He is working all things for His good purposes.

Have you witnessed God's providence lately? How so?

Where you live, where you work, the things you do and the people that you are surrounded by are all part of God's plan, **to put you in places to influence others on His behalf**. Have you been aware of His purposes and available for Him to use for His glory? Explain.

You are in the circumstances you are "for such a time as this." **Be ready to do your part.**

Our Personal Purim

September 15 — *Esther 5:1-9:32*

Today In Your Reading...

We finished the incredible story of Esther, Mordecai, and Xerxes, all characters God used to save His people from their enemies. Yesterday, our passage left us with a cliff hanger, as Esther prepared to enter the king's court without being summoned, an act that would get most people into trouble. However, the king accepted Esther's presence and even granted her requests.

Through a remarkable series of circumstances, Haman's evil plot was exposed, Mordecai was praised and promoted, and Jews throughout the empire were allowed to defend themselves against their attackers. In all, nearly 76,000 people were killed, including Haman and his family. Once again, the Lord had turned the table and granted favor to His people.

One cannot read the book of *Esther* without being awed by the perfect timing of events, from Haman's construction of the gallows to Mordecai's unveiling of the assassination plot and subsequent parade, to the banquets and requests of the Queen. *God's timing is impeccable. He is in control.*

Even when Haman casted lots (like dice), called *purim*, for deciding the day to carry out his evil plans, God determined the date. He made Haman wait nearly a year, so that He could put things in motion and undo his plans. Solomon wrote in his proverbs, "We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall" (16:33). **No detail escapes His notice.**

I love how the book closes, with the people of God celebrating. In fact, Mordecai established an annual festival called the *Feast of Purim*, which the Jews continue to celebrate today. They take time to remember what God has done for them, to save them from destruction.

Daily Reflection

As Christians, we are good about celebrating major events, such as Christmas or Easter, or even Thanksgiving, birthdays, or days to honor our parents. Are there any other days that you celebrate what God has done in your life?

What we are not as good at remembering are our personal *Purim*, the little things in our lives in which God is working out His bigger purposes. We may believe that they are incidental or inconsequential but they are not. God does work in big noticeable ways, but **He is also working in the details**. His hand is in everything, but *when His acts are small, they are often unnoticed*.

What are some things that God does on a daily basis that you so often overlook?

It is great to celebrate those big events in your life, but it is just as important **to remember the hand of God from day to day**. He is working out all the details. Even those things that seem so random or haphazard play a part in His plans. My challenge to you would be to have personal *Purim*, moments in your day in which you recognize the providential hand of God in the minute details. **He is constantly at work in your life, but are you noticing?**

The Gracious Hand of God

Today In Your Reading...

A man named Ezra, a direct descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, led a second return of exiles back to Jerusalem (464 BC). This event occurred more than seventy years after the first return under Zerubbabel and Jeshua (538 BC). As a priest and scribe, Ezra was commissioned by King Artaxerxes with two tasks, to beautify the Temple and to teach the people the laws of God (7:25, 27). To beautify the Temple, the King arranged for vast amounts of money and resources to be given to Ezra from the royal treasury.

What could have possibly caused this pagan king to commission such a work to glorify God in this way? In a letter he sent with Ezra, the King wrote, "Be careful to provide whatever the God of heaven demands for His Temple, for why should we risk bringing God's anger against the realm of the king and his sons?" (7:23). Though the king may have allowed this work for selfish reasons, we know that there are other unseen reasons. We must remember that Esther and Mordecai are still alive at this time and influencing the activities of the state, not to mention that God has consistently stirred the hearts of kings for His glory for ages (*Proverbs 21:1*).

Whatever the reason for the king's kindness towards the Jews, Ezra credited **"the gracious hand of God"** (7:28). This phrase is used multiple times in both *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* (which is thought to be written by Ezra). "The King gave me everything I asked for because the gracious hand of God was upon me" (7:6, 9; 8:18, 31).

Why was the gracious hand of God upon Ezra's life? "This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the law of the Lord and to teach those laws and regulations to the people of Israel" (7:10). Ezra was a teacher of God's Word, someone who helped others to under-

stand what God expected of them. However, though he presented the words of God to others, he also practiced them himself. He was a student of Scripture, determined and diligent to know and do all that the Lord had commanded, and the Lord blessed Ezra as a result.

Daily Reflection

Ezra is an example of the man in *Psalms 1*, "Oh the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or stand around with sinners or join in with mockers, but they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither and they prosper in all they do" (v.1-3).

Yes, Ezra was a wise man, an effective teacher, and probably a great spiritual leader, but he did not credit his blessings to his own abilities. He credited the right source, the hand of God.

Whom do you credit for your successes?

Where do you see the gracious hand of God in your life? What is He doing that warrants recognition? Have you taken time to thank Him?

God honored Ezra because Ezra honored God.

Do your activities, the ways that you use your time, honor the Lord? How so?
