

Collective Redemption for God's People

Printed Text • Ezra 6:1-12

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will CONSIDER the pivotal role of Darius in getting the new Temple built in Jerusalem; CONTEMPLATE excuses we offer for failing to act in accord with God's will; and CONFESS our failings before God, receive the joy of forgiveness, and get on with the task at hand.

In Focus

Breana and Chanel have been best friends since college. They were there for each other through all the highs and lows.

Chanel was having another low in her life after the birth of her first daughter. Having her little mini-me was one of the happiest moments of her life, but since they came home from the hospital two months ago, Chanel's emotions were all over the place. She didn't feel like herself anymore. She thought no one would understand.

One day, Breana stopped by Chanel's to visit. Breana hadn't heard from Chanel since the baby was born, but Breana figured Chanel was just getting adjusted to being a mom. Breana was shocked to see the state of her best friend. "Girl, what is wrong?"

"Everything! All she does is cry. All Robbie does is work. I never get a moment to myself. My body isn't the same. I just need a break from everything."

"Chanel, why didn't you call me? It sounds like this might be postpartum depression," Breana explained. "I didn't think you'd understand," Chanel said. "There is nothing to be afraid or ashamed about. Many women face this issue, and God has equipped helpers to assist you."

Chanel felt relieved. "We are sisters. You can come to me about anything, and I'll be by your side. I will also ask my sister who she went to see about her postpartum," said Breana, hugging Chanel.

Like Chanel, God is calling us to play a role in redeeming those in our community. God may assign us to share his message of collective redemption with our friend group, church, city, or nation. What helps you to be sensitive to the plight of others in your community?

Keep in Mind

"And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed." (Ezra 6:12, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Sing (v. 9) shiyr (Heb.) — To sing, especially a religious song

B. Sing (v. 9) zamar (Heb.) — To sing, especially while accompanied by a stringed instrument

Say It Correctly

Achmetha. ak-MEE-tha

Tetnai. tat-NIE

Shetharboznai. sheh-THAR-boze-nie

Apharsachites. ah-FAR-sah-kites

Ecbatana. ek-bah-TAH-nah

Aramaic. air-ah-MAY-IK

Akkadian. ah-KAY-dee-an

KJV

Ezra 6:1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits;

4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house:

5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence:

7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered.

9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:

10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

NLT

Ezra 6:1 So King Darius issued orders that a search be made in the Babylonian archives, which were stored in the treasury.

2 But it was at the fortress at Ecbatana in the province of Media that a scroll was found. This is what it said: "Memorandum:

3 "In the first year of King Cyrus's reign, a decree was sent out concerning the Temple of God at Jerusalem. "Let the Temple be rebuilt on the site where Jews used to offer their sacrifices, using the original foundations. Its height will be ninety feet, and its width will be ninety feet.

4 Every three layers of specially prepared stones will be topped by a layer of timber. All expenses will be paid by the royal treasury.

5 Furthermore, the gold and silver cups, which were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar from the Temple of God in Jerusalem, must be returned to Jerusalem and put back where they belong. Let them be taken back to the Temple of God."

6 So King Darius sent this message: "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province west of the Euphrates River, and Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues and other officials west of the Euphrates River—stay away from there!

7 Do not disturb the construction of the Temple of God. Let it be rebuilt on its original site, and do not hinder the governor of Judah and the elders of the Jews in their work.

8 "Moreover, I hereby decree that you are to help these elders of the Jews as they rebuild this Temple of God. You must pay the full construction costs, without delay, from my taxes collected in the province west of the Euphrates River so that the work will not be interrupted.

9 "Give the priests in Jerusalem whatever is needed in the way of young bulls, rams, and male lambs for the burnt offerings presented to the God of heaven. And without fail, provide them with as much wheat, salt, wine, and olive oil as they need each day.

10 Then they will be able to offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the welfare of the king and his sons.

11 "Those who violate this decree in any way will have a beam pulled from their house. Then they will be lifted up and impaled on it, and their house will be reduced to a pile of rubble.

12 May the God who has chosen the city of Jerusalem as the place to honor his name destroy any king or nation that violates this command and destroys this Temple. "I, Darius, have issued this decree. Let it be obeyed with all diligence."

The People, Places, and Times

Psalms. Any sort of religious song can be considered a "psalm," whether it offers a cry for help, a shout of thanks, or simply adoration. The words of many Jewish religious songs have been preserved in the Scriptures. The book of Psalms is a well-known source for these songs, but some of the psalms are also repeated in other parts of the Scriptures. In today's lesson, we have a psalm that parallels several psalms found in the book of Psalms.

David. As king of Israel, David was responsible for unifying the nation, building Jerusalem as its capital, and bringing the Ark of the Covenant to a proper place of worship. King David composed many songs, some of which are recorded in the Scripture.

Background

The book of Ezra is not written in a clear chronological order even though the events it describes are telling a historical account. Between chapters 2-6, Ezra traces the history of rebuilding the Temple and restoring worship under King Cyrus the Great of Persia and then the interruption of the rebuilding process. There was resistance to rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem from many sides: people who were left in the city during exile, Samaritans who lived nearby, and enemies of Judah who did not want them restored to the land. In addition, the people had gotten distracted, focusing on rebuilding their own homes and assimilating to the culture around them, rather than restoring worship at the Temple.

Within this messy context of building, stopping, and facing continued resistance, we come to Ezra 6 when the rebuilding continues with renewed fervor.

What sorts of things keep people from following through on projects? Are they different or similar to things that keep people from obeying God? Why or why not?

At-A-Glance

1. Resurrected Decree (Ezra 6:1-4)
2. Restored Protection (vv. 5-7)
3. Renewed Resources (vv. 8-12)

In Depth

1. Resurrected Decree (Ezra 6:1-4)

King Darius investigated his imperial records after he received an inquiry from his governor Tatnai about whether or not the Jews could rebuild their Temple. It was a sign of wisdom and humility that the king looked for the decision of his predecessor rather than simply dismissing prior history and making a new decree himself. The information was not found in the place he expected, but in a fortress in a completely different city.

The original decree from Cyrus the Great was for the Jews to rebuild their Temple in the same place it had been, and to have it paid for from the royal treasury of the Persian Empire. This was an incredible set of circumstances that led to incredible news. God's will to have the Jews rebuild the Temple was being carried out, and He was using the wisdom, authority, and resources of a conquering king to do it.

What documentation methods do your church and local governments use to make sure they stand by previous decisions?

2. Restored Protection (vv. 5–7)

King Darius added to this decree that the materials that were stolen from the Temple by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon were to be restored to the Temple in Jerusalem. Further, in addition to restoring precious treasures, the king restored the protection of Judah. He commanded his governor to leave the Jews alone as they rebuilt the Temple, and he commanded all of his other officials in the region to leave the Jews alone. This would not only protect the peace of the people of Judah as they rebuilt, but it meant the king was protecting the rebuilding project.

How has God protected you or a loved one in the past?

3. Renewed Resources (vv. 8–12)

The king concluded by instructing the governor to help the people of Judah rebuild the Temple and make sure they had all of the resources they needed to finish. This went a step beyond leaving them alone to actively helping them. What a testimony of God's power, that those who were (and still are) enemies are used as servants and helpers!

King Darius didn't stop there. He wanted to make sure the priests had everything they needed to give proper sacrifices to the Lord, not just once, but consistently. He asked that they honor the Lord on his behalf as well. He was an unbeliever who wanted to help God's people worship and to worship himself. Lastly, the king added that anyone who tried to stop the Jews from rebuilding their Temple would be executed and their houses destroyed. The king had spoken, and his decree would not be broken!

What resources are needed to accomplish the things God has called you to do as a believer? What resources are needed to accomplish the mission of your local church?

Search the Scriptures

1. Who were the people who needed to authorize the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 6:1, 6)?
2. What would be supplied by the king to help the Temple be rebuilt (vv. 8–9)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. The people of Judah had returned to the land with a commission from God, and yet faced resistance and distraction that caused them not to follow through. How can we resist temptation that distracts us from God's will? How can we work to follow through on what God has called us to do?
2. What are some obstacles that keep us from trying again if we haven't finished something? How can we overcome those obstacles?

Liberating Lesson

During political campaigns we often hear campaign promises and policy proposals that would be beneficial to our communities, yet often we do not see them come to pass. It can be easy to grow cynical and believe that all politicians are bad, and feel hopeless about what we can do to help our neighbors and ourselves. But in our democratic society, the government is built to

serve the people, and often the policies that get enacted are in response to the people who engage the most with government, whether it be lobbyists or just actively engaged citizens.

How can we as individuals and churches be more actively engaged to make sure our government leaders respect our values and implement policies that benefit our communities? This is especially important to lift up concerns for marginalized groups such as immigrants, children, those returning from prison, and those who face homelessness or discrimination. If we stay engaged collectively, we can get far more accomplished than people with the loudest voices or largest donations and then see more of the changes we want. What policy proposals would your community benefit from seeing implemented? How can you work with your church and others to convince government officials to enact those policies?

Application for Activation

There are a diversity of ways to worship God, and everyone should be free to worship God in the ways that feel most meaningful and authentic to them. There are some people who worship loudly and expressively and some people who worship quietly or in silence. Some people love to dance, others love to sing, others love to lay down, and some stand with their hands raised. Some people feel most worshipful when they are reading the Word of God, others when they are listening to Scripture, and others praying or reciting Scripture. Some write, some walk or run, and some meditate, some give to others, and some even cook.

But often when we attend worship services, check social media, or see someone else in worship we may feel pressure to worship like those around us. This week consider how you feel most connected to God in worship. Is there anything that makes you feel restricted in your worship? How can you spend time with God alone and with others in ways that feel meaningful to you?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ezra 6:1–12

This section of Scripture is recorded in Aramaic, rather than the Hebrew that is used in the majority of the Hebrew Bible. Aramaic is a language closely related to Hebrew, and was originally spoken in Upper Mesopotamia and became the most widely used language in the Babylonian and subsequent Persian Empire. Jews returning from exile spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic, but by Jesus' day Hebrew was mostly only spoken in the synagogue, while Aramaic was used in daily conversation. Both the books of Daniel and Ezra contain sections of text in Aramaic (Daniel 2:4–7:28; Ezra 4:8–6:18) while the rest is in Hebrew.

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

When Tatnai and others asked Darius to look into whether or not the Jews actually had permission to rebuild their Temple, the king sent out a decree to search for any records of such an order. A “house of the rolls” is an archive made to store royal decrees. Caches of records found from this time period detail such things as judgments, offerings, and economic allotments for subjects. The Aramaic word used here translated “rolls” corresponds to the Hebrew for scroll (Heb. sephar, she-FAR). Etymologically, the word refers simply to “writing” no matter the form this media is transcribed in. We are used to thinking of Hebrew records as made on scrolls of vellum (calf skin), but Persian records were more likely to be stamped on clay tablets or cylinders. The writing was done in cuneiform, which is made by stamping the triangle tip of a stylus into clay, making signs for various words, syllables, or letters. These tablets would then be fired to harden the clay. The Persian Empire developed archives to store their laws, decrees, records of offerings, or anything else that would be important for the administration of such a large, long-lived empire.

2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

Achmetha, also called Ecbatana, was a city Cyrus captured in 550 BC and then established as his summer residence. Its historical site now stands in western Iran. The “province of the Medes” covered the area that is now mostly northern Iran, including the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Darius' administration must have searched far and wide indeed to see if the Israelites' claim was true, since Achmetha was 420 miles from Babylon, where they first started looking.

The word here for “roll” is different from that used in verse 1. This word, corresponding to the Hebrew megillah (meh-geel-LAW), actually does refer to a rolled up document. This was likely made of either papyrus (made from the Egyptian reed) or vellum (made from calf skin). Not only did they end up finding the decree in another city than they started, they also eventually found what they were looking for in a different format than they expected.

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered

sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; 4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house:

Cyrus generously provided for the building out of his own excessive wealth. This can be seen as kindness to the exiles, since they likely did not have enough wealth of their own to rebuild the Temple to the majesty that it deserved. It can also be seen as King Cyrus making a show of wealth so as to impress other nations and his own people. The three rows of stone and row of timber would be for constructing the Temple's inner courtyard as Solomon had (1 Kings 6:36). It is odd to list only the dimensions for height and width here, omitting length. Also the height of 60 cubits (90 ft) is taller than Solomon's Temple, which was only 45 feet high.

5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

Here we see an event astoundingly rare in colonial history: the repatriation of stolen cultural artifacts. Repatriation is when an item is returned to its original country after having been stolen or otherwise taken away. Showing a stark difference from Babylonia's imperial dominion, the Persian Empire allows their conquered people to reestablish their cultural pillar of worship with all its previous splendor. Modern empires often irreverently steal art from indigenous peoples, caring about them simply as precious materials (e.g., gold or silver) or as a pretty trinket. To the indigenous people, however, these art pieces are cultural touchstones that strongly represent their identity as a cohesive people. Stealing such items away from their native lands disrupts the nation's ability to remember and pass down who they are and what they value. Many artifacts, like the Rosetta Stone and the Benin Bronzes, are centerpieces of the British Museum in London to this very day, even though they were stolen from their original African lands. Currently, there are movements calling for repatriation of artifacts and lands that have been stolen through colonization and black market sales. Believers should participate in and call for the return of property to indigenous peoples. Working against Babylon's previous colonialist repression of native culture, Persia wonderfully returns Israel's Temple vessels. The reason behind this will be explained in v.10.

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence: 7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

Having decided in the favor of the Israelites, Darius also decreed against the governor who brought this issue to him. The king warns Tatnai and his associates to leave the Israelites alone. To "be ye far from thence" means to give them a wide berth and not invade or insinuate themselves in Israelite territory. At this point in history, Tatnai's governance likely included the Israelite territory. The boundaries only recently were redrawn to set aside the province of Israel, with its governor Zerubbabel. While Tatnai used to have control over this land, the king must

remind him that the Jews now have jurisdiction over their own province. They are in fact allowed to continue rebuilding their Temple, and should not be hindered.

“Beyond the river” is a common directional phrase in Babylonian records. The river in question is the Euphrates, and from the perspective of the Babylonian capital, beyond the Euphrates is to the west, including all the lands from that part of modern Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea. The phrase is used as the name of Tatnai’s province, which covered most of modern Syria and Jordan.

Shetharboznai is only known from the four verses in Ezra 5 and 6 that mention his name alongside Tatnai’s suite against Israel. The Apharsachites are only mentioned in this interchange and in an earlier suite (Ezra 4:9) when they and people from many other Persian cities and provinces brought a successful legal case against the Israelites being allowed to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. Scholars are not certain where in the empire they lived.

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king’s goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. 9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:

Darius also provides funds for the building project and offerings for the priests to give daily once the altar and Temple are built. Funds are requisitioned from the “king’s goods,” i.e., his personal wealth, and from the “tribute beyond the river,” i.e., the taxes that would have been collected from the area. Darius gives the people a tax break so that the funds that would have been siphoned off of the Israelites and given over to a far off imperial capital can stay in the land and help rebuild the Temple.

Darius makes sure they have these funds so that their building will not be “hindered” (Aram. beh-TALL). This word is also used when the Samaritans cause the building of Jerusalem’s walls to cease. The word does not simply mean to impede and make something harder to do; it means to be stopped. After learning that the Israelites should have been allowed to rebuild their Temple since the time of Cyrus, Darius does not want the process to stop again. Once the Jews have their Temple again, it will be good not only for them, but for the Persian Empire as well. After the Temple is finished, other nations will be able to hear and see how benevolent a ruler the Persian king is, how wealthy he is, and how generous he is with that wealth.

The word for “burnt offering” corresponds to the ‘olah (Heb. oh-LAW), which refers to an offering that was completely burned up for God. A whole burnt offering of a lamb was supposed to be offered at the Temple each morning and each night, besides any others that the people needed to make to cover their misdeeds (Leviticus 1:1– 17; 6:8–13). These sacrifices could be of a young bull, or male goat or sheep, and Darius provides for all these options. The wheat, oil, and salt were all used in grain offerings (2:4, 13), and wine was often poured out as a supplement to offerings, especially on festival days (Leviticus 23; Numbers 15). Some scholars suggest Cyrus

had a Jewish advisor when drafting this decree, since it provides specifically for details of correct Jewish sacrificial practice.

10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

Here we see the reasoning behind Darius' kindness. He hoped the priests of Israel would pray for him and his descendants. Darius' interest in providing animals for sacrifice and prayers on his behalf in Jerusalem is a clear indication of the differences between Babylonia and Persia. While the Babylonians saw conquering other nations as a sign of their gods conquering the other nation's gods (or God), the Persians were happy to let cultural groups within their empire practice their native religions. The polytheistic Persians figured it was better to assimilate all gods into their pantheon and not anger the gods of foreign people groups, rather than try to conquer them and their people. This leniency is seen in other Persian kings too, like Cyrus (6:5) to Artaxerxes (7:23). The Persians hoped this would foster good relations between the Persian government and the foreign gods, or at least between the government and the foreign people they now ruled. Persia still required tribute and military support from the new territory, but they allowed local religions to continue. This made the people less inclined to insurrection and helped the Persian nation flourish for many more years than the Babylonians did.

Readers must remember that none of the Persian kings truly converted to Judaism. As mentioned in the previous lesson concerning Cyrus, it must not be thought that all this favor toward the Israelites means that Darius became a devotee of Yahweh. Sometimes even pagans following their own pagan laws and traditions can be used to the glory of God.

The Aramaic term translated "sweet savours" corresponds to the Hebrew word *nikhoakh* (nee-KHOE-akh) of the same meaning. It is frequently used to describe the purpose of a sacrifice to God. It was thought that the smoke and smell of an offering rose up from the altar all the way to heaven where it reached God's nose. Anyone who has heard and smelled the bacon frying in the pan knows the sweet, savory smell of roasting fat. The phrase is common throughout Leviticus and Numbers, another indication that perhaps a Persian official who was Jewish was helping draft this decree.

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

The word used here for "word" refers not to the substance of the law, but the document itself. The warning here is against tampering with the wording of this law, whether as a scribal error or as an intentional change. Without this part of the decree, an official might try to add something to the regal decree to give himself a political or economic boost, like is done today with riders on bills and earmarked funds.

The word translated "hanged" comes from the Aramaic *mekha'* (meh-KHAW), which comes from roots meaning break apart and destroy. Rather than being hanged from a gallows, this likely refers to the execution method of impalement. The person who tried to change Darius' decree

would have their house disassembled and a timber from their house used as an impaling spike. Then the whole house would be condemned as a dung heap.

This may seem like a harsh punishment to the modern reader, but the punishment of one's house being turned into a "dunghill" is also used twice by King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:5; 3:29). Impaling as a form of execution was not uncommon in Persian society. Since public distribution of copies of this decree was the only way for Darius to rule his vast empire, it must be considered a capital offense to alter the king's word.

12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

Note that Darius simply refers to God as "the God that hath caused his name to dwell there." This allows room for other gods to dwell in other lands. Yahweh is just the one who dwells in Jerusalem. Darius lays down his law as to what will happen to those who disregard his own words. He also warns what will happen to those who disregard this God's words. He calls down God's own wrath to destroy those who seek to destroy the Temple. These two words for destroy are tellingly different however. Those who seek to "destroy" (Aram. khabal, KHAH-ball) the Temple would corrupt or spoil it with impurity. In response to this, God would "destroy" (Aram. megar, meh-GAR) them by casting them down into ruin. With a final dictum of imperial authority, Darius ends his decree, calling for it to be done without delay. This call for speed repeats what was already translated as "forthwith" (v. 8), and is indeed obeyed (v. 13).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Ezra 3:8-13

TUESDAY

Ezra 4:1-5

WEDNESDAY

Revelation 5

THURSDAY

Psalm 138

FRIDAY

Haggai 1

SATURDAY

Haggai 2:1-9, 15-19

SUNDAY

Ezra 6:1-12