

# Down But Not Out

*Books of Ezra-Nehemiah*

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ezra, Ezra 4. I appreciate Jess preaching last Sunday in our absence and it was so good to be able to leave the congregation in such good hands when we go out of town and I appreciate his faithfulness to the Lord and to the word.

This morning, we're resuming our exposition of the book of Ezra and we had two weeks off because Dr. Street preached two weeks ago and then last week Jess was in another passage, and so today we go back to the fourth chapter of the book of Ezra and the title of the message this morning is "Down But Not Out." Down but not out. I believe that and this theme comes from I think the clear purpose of God in the way he structures the fourth chapter of Ezra. I've been wrestling with this for the last several weeks. You know, if you remember, if you were here three weeks ago, you remember that we talked about how as you read the fourth chapter of Ezra, there is a narrative, a story, a recounting of a historical event that happened 536 BC and that was the people of God beginning to rebuild the temple and the opposition that they encountered that resulted in them stopping the work, but when you read the fourth chapter of Ezra, what you have is this historical event described in the first five verses and then you have this large parenthesis inserted into the narrative. The parenthesis is 18 verses long, then you resume the narrative in verse 24, and so really the narrative of what happened is verses 1 to 5 and verse 24 and the question is why such a large parenthesis? And it's even tricky for us as we read it as 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans so far removed from the events that are described, it's easy to be confused. We have to be very careful in our reading of the text, we always need to be but especially in this passage, that we follow what the author is saying and doing.

It was much easier for the original audience to follow that and not get distracted by the changing periods because what he does, remember he's talking about an event that happens, he's talking about 536 BC, the temple is begun, the work is started, opposition happens, the work stops. That's the story. He's gonna pick up and tell us in chapter 5 that the work is resumed 15 years later. So there's a 15- or 16-year work stoppage and he's gonna tell us in chapter 5 and chapter 6 about how the work gets resumed and the building of God's temple, God's kingdom, continues. That's the flow of the narrative, but why this large parenthesis from verse 6 to verse 23 of chapter 4 where he then inserts two separate historical events into the narrative.

The people reading it would have recognized it immediately what he was doing, for us it gets tricky. The names are changing and they're different names and the periods, we don't have this working knowledge of this history but what I want to set before you is that the author's purpose, I believe, in putting the narrative, the parenthesis in the narrative is essentially to encourage the people of God to faithfulness even when you come to standstills in your life. I believe this is one of the more tender passages of narrative in the Scriptures where God is essentially saying stagnation, periods, occasional occurrences of stagnation are understandable in the Christian life. It's not what we're to seek. It's not what we're to strive for but he's saying it's understandable and I'm gonna add another word, necessary for at times you in your Christian life to encounter roadblocks that stop your progress.

It seem counter-intuitive, doesn't it? Okay, it's okay, just relax. I'm not saying that at all. That's not what the text is saying. The text is not saying relax but the text is saying that the mystery of God's ways are beyond our ways and that I think what's happening in this passage is the author is showing us that they were providentially stopped in the work. It doesn't justify the fact they stopped. This is the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. You and I are accountable to do what God says and to be about his business at every moment of our lives. By his grace because of what Christ has done for us, we're called to obey. But I think as we look at this passage, I'm telling you right up front, I think this is what you're gonna see and I encourage you to check it out carefully, be a Berean, we're gonna see that the Lord is essentially saying to his readers in this book, "Don't be so hard on the people that came back with Zerubbabel. The opposition they experienced was much greater than you imagine or than even meets the eye." It was understandable that the work stopped and it was necessary because what the work stoppage did was create in the people an awareness of their absolute spiritual destitution before God and this is the purpose of standstills in the Christian life. This is the purpose of periods of waiting, to show you and me that we are impoverished apart from grace; that we are spiritually destitute and unable and our only hope is the word of the living God. This is what this large parenthesis is about, showing us that when we encounter opposition and when we find ourselves stymied, we're not supposed to stop, we're not supposed to quit, but when we find ourselves we can't make progress, we're still trying but we're not making any headway, what are we to know? We're to know that what we need more than anything is for the grace of God to be manifested through the word of God in God's timing but we are to cling to the word of God, we're to cry out like the psalmist does in Psalm 130, "Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ear be attentive to the voice of my supplications. I'm in the depths, I'm overwhelmed, hear me, Lord. If You, Lord, should mark iniquity, O Lord, who could stand, but there is forgiveness with You that You may be feared." Listen what he says next, "I wait for the Lord. My soul does wait and in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman for the morning, indeed more than the watchman for the morning." He's waiting for the Lord and for the Lord to speak his word and to bring deliverance.

What you're gonna see is this is the larger flow again before we get into reading the text, they're building the temple, they start off wonderfully but there's this opposition, the stoppage happens for 15 years, and what you're gonna see is the emphasis in the text then is what does God do to get the work going, he sends Haggai and Zechariah and it's the word of God that then reignites the work and brings about success, and I think that the work stoppage for 15 years was so that they might know how desperately they needed the prophets of God and the word of God. And so the Lord has that kind, this is his way, his way is to bring us to a point of utter complete awareness of our utter destitution, our utter poverty so that in our weakness, he might be strong.

So let's read the text together. What we're gonna do now, I'm gonna read verses 1 to 5 and verse 24 to show you and read into chapter 5 a little bit, and then we're gonna read the parenthesis and I really encourage you to try to stay focused with me. I'm gonna try to talk maybe a little slower, I'm gonna try, than I normally do because, you know, if you get, this is just, there is complexity to trying to explain this narrative but it's so rich.

"Now when the enemies," there's 1,

1 Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel, 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here." 3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us." 4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, 5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The narrative then skips to verse 24.

24 Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Chapter 5, verse 1,

1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, 2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

That's the flow of the narrative.

Let's ask the Lord for his blessing on his word.

*Father, we do pray that You now would grant us the ministry of the Holy Spirit to illuminate for us Your word in our hearts. Father, for everyone here, those who have a saving relationship with You and those who don't, may You today apply Your word to every heart and may those that don't know You be granted repentance and faith, love for Christ. And for we that do know You, Lord, may we be granted more repentance and more faith and more love for Christ. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Down but not out, the reality that standstills in the Christian life are understandable. That's essentially the theme and they're purposeful of God. We're not to seek them, we're not to explain them away, we're to be like the psalmist and cry out to God and keep seeking him fervently through every means possible, but we should be encouraged that the Lord in the mystery of his will sometimes uses these things to do greater and deeper work in us.

I'm reminded, I think it was C. S. Lewis who said, it wasn't original with me for sure, it may have been Lewis who said God sometimes allows a believer, a child of his, to fall into sin so that he might deliver him from a greater and more deadly sin. Think about that. God may allow a believer to fall into sin, I mean, the will of God is always don't sin, that's the declared will of God, but sometimes the declared will of God and the decreed will of God are not the same. Often that's the case and so God, though he declares this, he decrees and allows for the believer to fall into some measure of sin, some struggle. Why? So that he is humbled and broken and saved from spiritual pride which is a damning sin.

So essentially the same kind of thing happened I think in the text. Let's look at it together and see how the Lord unfolds this for us. We're gonna consider the text under three headings. The first is the reality of opposition and essentially these are, you know, the first two especially are explaining why it's understandable that there will be standstills in a Christian life. It's understandable that we will sometimes find ourselves mired and stopped in our progress, first of all, first point, because of the reality of spiritual opposition. We spent some time talking about this three weeks ago and the text is really clear about the opposition. In fact, in the narrative itself, 1 to 5 and 24, we're told about how the opponents, the enemies of Judah and Benjamin come and they feign to be friends. They offer their help and assistance but the Israelites recognize that these people don't really want to help build true worship to Yahweh, to the one true God, they don't really want to be involved in that. Yes, they think they want to but I think they were sincerely offering to help, the best they could tell, but the people of Israel understood that the offer, the sincere offer of these sinful hearts was, "We would like to help you build a temple to your God. We've been offering sacrifices and we would like to come to your temple and offer sacrifices as a part of our life but, of course, we're gonna keep offering all our other sacrifices to all our other gods." That's what they were offering and the Israelites recognized that, that they're not people who have been worked, their hearts have been changed by Yahweh to come and worship him truly because proselytes were always invited to the people of God. If people wanted to convert and become Jews, but to

become a Jew was to worship the one true God exclusively, "worship the Lord and Him only shall you worship."

So these folks come and they feign, they feign to be allies but in reality they're enemies. The text described it that way in the beginning and the proof is in the pudding. As soon as they're told no, what do they do? They reveal their true hearts. They don't repent and become proselytes, they began opposing the work. Verse 4, "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia." They go into relentless opposition mode to destroy the work of God there. That opposition was consistent throughout all the days of Cyrus.

Now why the parenthesis again? Because like I said, you could have, he could have made this a lot easier for me to preach this if he hadn't have put the parenthesis here, but he put the parenthesis here for a reason and one of the reasons was to show us the reality of the opposition even more fully, to show the reality of spiritual opposition that the people of God will always experience because he brings up two more examples. Verse 6. He's been talking about 536 BC, remember we're talking about BC so we count down, as we go lower that's later, right? Right? 536, so then he moves ahead to Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus. That's the king that reigned when Esther was queen. And he jumps ahead 50 years in the narrative to a time when some of those same Samaritans, the people who lived north of Jerusalem who were descendants probably of Israelites and all of those people brought in from the other places who are syncretistic, who are not worshipping the true God and him alone. They were the Samaritans and so they still are opposing. They were opposing in 536 when they did what verses 4 and 5 talked about, discouraging the people, frightening them, hiring counselors, and in 486 they were doing the same thing. They sent a letter to Ahasuerus and tried to encourage him to stop the work on the city of Jerusalem.

That's one verse that's told about that particular person and then in verses 7 and following it's another king, Artaxerxes who reigned from 465 to 424, and I think this particular, verses 7 to 23, are talking about 458 BC, 80 years after the events we've been talking about in the narrative verses 1 to 5 and 24. He jumps, you know, 50 years ahead, now he's jumped 30 more years ahead. We're 80 years ahead of the original narrative and he's lined up these events and he says, "Look, look at the opposition here when it happened when they were building the temple, look at the opposition 50 years later, look at the opposition 80 years later," and he spends 17 verses talking about it and he just unpacks how intense the opposition is.

He shows us like how ridiculous it was. When you read the letter, and let's go ahead and read it, we'll read verses 6 to 23 now. Verse 6,

6 Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

It's like, it's like Article 2 or what is it? Exhibit B to prove, look at the opposition they were against. Exhibit A was verses 4 and 5, what happened in 536. Exhibit B is look what happened in 486 or shortly thereafter. They were doing the same thing. They sent a letter to the king accusing the people and trying to disrupt what they were doing. Then Exhibit C starts in verse 7.

7 And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic. [And here is the letter] 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows-- 9 then wrote Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported

Now did you get all of those different people that are involved? All of these people have joined in the writing of that letter. This shows you the unity of opposition against the people of God. I mean, he could have just said a whole lot, you know, I mean, it was enough Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe and the lesser governors and the judges and the officials and the secretaries and the Babylonians and the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites and the rest of the nations. Everybody is against them. They're trying to make a case to the king, "Stop the work. We're all against it." But as we look at it, we see look at how unified the opposition against the people of God is.

Now let's look what they say in their letter when we finally get to the text of the letter, verse 11,

11 this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him:

Now we have in their own words what they said.

"To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now 12 let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.

They have clearly a very strong agenda here, the rebellious and evil city. And look how they continue to pour it on. Verse 13,

13 "Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.

Telling the king his business, "Listen, if you let this city go forward, you're gonna be, you're gonna lose all the revenue. Verse 14,

14 "Now because we are in the service of the palace [because we only want your good, O King, essentially they're saying], and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king, 15 so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past days; therefore that city was laid waste. 16 We inform the king that if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River."

Man, that's an amazingly audacious letter. They're saying that everything west of the Euphrates is gonna be gone if you let them build this temple, if you let them build the city. They're talking about the city now. It's actually the walls. I think this is when Ezra goes back, takes the people back in 458, they start building the walls, they're building the gates, they're building the city, and they send a note to the king, this terrible note to the king, the king stops the work and then they tear down the walls, they tear down the gates, and that's what Nehemiah is weeping over when he goes to this same king and asks him to reverse his decree.

But you look at the opposition. I mean, it's absurd. They are 50,000 people. Yeah, they're gonna take over your empire. Evil is so malicious, the slander and wickedness of evil. That's what we're supposed to see and be appalled at. Look at how ridiculous this opposition and hatred and antipathy is to the things of God. People are just trying to build a temple, build the city of Jerusalem again and what is it, what's up with this? And so you are trying to live a life of holiness before God, you're trying to fight sin, you're trying to be a good spouse, a godly parent, you're trying to honor God in the way you do your work, the way you do your studies at school, all you're trying to do is live a life before God, why so much opposition? Because we are fighting a spiritual war. We have an axis of evil arrayed against us. The world has not changed and will not change. It will every day, every year, it will oppose the kingdom of God. The flavor changes slightly, the lighting changes a little bit, but the undercurrent never changes. The world system hates God, hates Christ, hates the Gospel, and hates his people. The devil is the same roaring lion that he's always been, he's seeking to devour. The flesh is just as evil in your heart and my heart as it has ever been or ever will be, our only hope is to be delivered through faith in Jesus Christ and through finally being delivered from this body of death.

So the world, the flesh and the devil are against you every day and not only this, but not only your flesh but if you're trying to build a godly marriage, your spouse's flesh, if you're trying to be a godly parent, your children's flesh, they're not saved yet then you've got nothing, no spiritual help from the inside. With all of this opposition, it's understandable that we run into periods of stagnation. That's why he spent 16 verses. He continues on. I haven't read it all. Then he lets us hear them in their words, then he lets us hear the king in his own words. He could have summarized this. Like I said, it would've been so much easier to preach if he had just done it differently, but the Lord didn't want that. He did what is best, of course. He lets us hear the king in his own words.

Verse 17,

17 Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River [and here is the text of the king's response]: "Peace. And now 18 the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me [the king doesn't speak Aramaic, he's a Persian so he had it translated from Aramaic into Persian.] It's been translated and read before me [and now here's my word back to you]. 19 "A decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city [that's about Jerusalem] has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it [and it was true in the history certainly, there was just no danger of it now, never gonna be that way again in God's plan. But anyway, this is the king still talking] It's true that these things have happened, 20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom and toll were paid to them [in the history books, yes, there. Look at Solomon, this is testimony from the Persians to what the Bible says about Solomon's reign is true. Look at verse 21, this is his instruction, this is the emperor, the king of the Persian empire saying this]. 21 "So, now [he's saying this to Rehum and Shimshai] issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me [that second decree that he is allowing a window for is what Nehemiah is gonna bring about. And look what he says, we have all of this detail. I mean, it didn't have to be there but] 22 "Beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?" [The king basically says, "I've heard what you've said. I agree completely. Go quickly and stop the work!" And look what they do,] 23 Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.

Now again, this is talking about 458 BC, almost 80 years after the original event we're really talking about which is the building of the temple and the stoppage of the building of the temple. They're talking now about the building of the walls of Jerusalem and that that was stopped and the people reading this don't get, as they read through it, don't get as confused as you and I do because we don't have working knowledge of these different, three different events, we don't have a working knowledge of these three different names, these three different kings. They have it.

I used the illustration before that it's like, you know, if you're trying to make a case for why the United States went to war in World War I and I said, okay, and you guys all have unless you've been just exclusively public school and you went to an Ivy League school, you probably know about World War I and World War II. I think it's true that the Ivy League, the smartest kids go there and they come out dumber than they went in. World



War I, if I make a case, I mean, this is just an example to try to help us see this, right? I'm not really trying to make a case about world history or American history, but World War I, the United States entered the war in large part because of German aggression to our shipping and the final straw was the fact that we found out about a German offer or encouragement from Mexico to declare war on us if we ever declared war on Germany. So they were negotiating behind the scenes with Mexico. It's really it's not so bad when you look at, if you look at it from Germany's perspective you can kind of understand what they were doing, okay? I'm not trying to really, but they were much worse in World War II than they were in World War I.

Okay, but anyway, so if I'm trying to make the point that we went into the war because we felt like we were being, aggression was happening and it's the case isn't so clear in World War I. In a sense, what I'm saying that the author of this passage is saying is when they didn't fulfill the building of the temple, when the work stopped in 536, it wasn't so obvious that the work should've stopped to the naked eye, okay? Now so if I'm trying back to, go with me back to American history for a moment before we come back, okay? So I say to you to follow what's happening here, I'm trying to make the case that we should've entered World War I and we did it for the right reason or whatever and so I say the German aggression and then I say in the same way when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President, you see, I was talking about Woodrow Wilson, we entered the war because of German aggression, and then I say when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President, we entered World War II because the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I give you one verse on that, and then I give you 16-17 verses on when the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, something only about 15 years ago, 20 years ago. When the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, we declared war on Afghanistan because that's where they were based, and I spent a lot of time telling you all about the World Trade Center, I tell you about how malicious an attack it was, how unprovoked an attack it was, and I end up by saying, "So they attacked us maliciously, they killed 3,000 people and they were innocent people, and so we entered the war," I'm talking about the war in Afghanistan, and the next thing I say is, "and that's why Wilson entered the war in World War I."

Now this is what the text is doing. Do you see that? The text is causing the context to bleed into the present circumstance. The text is telling you that's what really, and it's doing it accurately and perfectly and like I said, it's not hard for the people that were the original audience could read it in the same way that I think I might have explained okay what we were talking about World War I, World War II, and the Afghan war. The reason the author puts it the way he does and look how verse 20, listen to verses 21 to 24, the end of his discussion of what happened in 458 under Artaxerxes, leading into what happened when the work on the house of God stopped under Cyrus.

Verse 21, the king says, "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me. Beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?" Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and

stopped them by force of arms. Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia." Do you see that? In fact, even I think the words are chosen carefully here. The word "stop" or "cease." In the Hebrew, I mean in the Aramaic, this is in Aramaic actually, it's a section of this book that is in Aramaic not in Hebrew. We'll talk about that, Lord willing, next time. But the word here is the same word. It occurs four times. Once in verse 21 when he says, "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop." The same word in verse 23, "they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms." Verse 24, it happens twice, "Then the work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased," the NAS says it ceased but it's the same word in Aramaic, "and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia." So what you have is the decree of the king stopping the work in 458, stop the work, and then you have now the work stopped in 536.

Now it's like the decree of the king stops the work and the stoppage of the work happened in 536. It's like it bleeds into our understanding and the feeling that we have and it's supposed to because what's going on is though there wasn't actually a decree in 536 to stop the work, there wasn't an official decree, the opposition was every bit as intense and spiritually the power against God's people was every bit as intense and that's what the author wants us to see. Sometimes you can't see it visibly, you can't hear it audibly but it is there in reality. That's why the author does it this way. He wants us to see it was understandable that the work stopped because of the reality of the opposition. The opposition was so incredibly great.

That's the first point, the reality of the opposition. Down but not out. Why do these standstills happen? Because of the reality of opposition. We come to standstills, we come to find ourselves at stopping points where we're not making progress in our lives, we're not growing in this area, we're not overcoming in this area, we found a problem in a relationship that we can't get past, sometimes it's the reality of spiritual opposition. Secondly, though, second point, why do we find ourselves in these situations? The mystery of providence. The mystery of providence. God's sovereign dealings with his people; that God sometimes ordains, decrees that his declared will be violated. That is, he allows people, free agents, to do what is in their own hearts against his will. He does not entice a person to evil, he does not cause evil, he never does anything of the sort. Scripture is clear on that. But his sovereign superintendence is so majestic, so far beyond our ability to understand that he governs and superintends free agents to accomplish his purposes and that even includes your sin and my sin. That is amazing. It is not a justification for sin. The Scripture will call you out and say things like, "If you sow to the flesh, from the flesh you reap corruption. Repent." But the reality is in circumstances like this, we see the mystery of providence.

The author's purpose is to say that God had a hand in this. The author's purpose is to say, "Listen, if God wanted this done quicker, he could have sent Haggai and Zechariah 15 years earlier." Why did he not? Why did they have to wait? This is where asking good questions of the text really is illuminating. "Lord, why?" And you ask them to the Lord as you read the text. You ask them reverently. You ask them humbly. "Show me, Lord." Do

like the psalmists do but they really lay out their hearts before God, they're honest with God, "Why did You do this, O Lord?"

The context bleeds that meaning, the decree. In fact, the word "decree" is a key word particularly in this section of Ezra. I mentioned in verse, well actually it also occurs in verse 19 of chapter 4, the king says, "A decree has been issued by me," then verse 21 we saw it twice, "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me." The word occurs 15 times from chapter 4, verse 19, through chapter 6, verse 14. Fifteen times and I think it's in like 42 verses or whatever, I can't remember the number of verses but it's something like that. It's more than one time every three verses. Decree. Decree. Decree. Decree. And you also hear the word "king, king, king, king." The king is decreeing things and what you see in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is God is superintending what the king decrees which is what the Bible says, "The heart of the hand is in the king, the heart of the king, the heart of the hand. The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. Like a watercourse, He channels it wherever He wishes," Proverbs 21:1.

The Lord, the king's heart, his disposition, his decree is completely in the hand of God and you see this, and I want to show you this in chapter 6, verse 14. Really interesting. After we finally get to the end, after the narrative picks up and then Haggai, Zechariah come on the scene and the people begin building, they encounter opposition again, but they keep on building, they finish the temple. Then we have a summary statement in verse 14 of chapter 6 and you see again the importance of the word of God. Listen to verse 14 but look for the word "decree," it actually occurs twice in the text, once it's gonna be translated "command" in the NASB but same Aramaic word. "And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the decree of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." Now Cyrus gave the original decree to start the building, go back to Jerusalem, remember? And Darius is gonna give the decree that says, "Hey, we searched through it, you've gotta let them go. Let them finish the building." Artaxerxes who comes later and who does issue a decree to help Nehemiah build the building, I think part of that's going on here, but he was also the king that stopped the building in 458 before he started it again with a decree and what this text is saying especially using the same word, it's according to the decree of the God of Israel. It says "command," same Aramaic word, according to the decree of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. The decree of the king is the decree of God. That's what he's saying, God is making everything happen according to his plan.

So what you have to say is when the Lord stopped the building in 458 under Ezra, it was a decree of God. It didn't mean they were supposed to do nothing, they were supposed to do what Nehemiah did, fast and pray and risk his life to go to that same king as cupbearer and say, "The reason I'm downcast and weeping in your presence is because my city's in ruins." To be sad in the presence of the king was a capital offense. He's got enough to worry about without you bringing your problems in to the king, so off with his head. That's what normally happened to someone who was sad in the presence of the king, but

Nehemiah risked his life to further the work, to get the work started again. The mystery of providence. But in the same way, then, the stoppage is a part of what God is doing. The 15 years back to 538 building the temple, 536 when the work stops, 15 or 16 years of work stoppage, the author is wanting us to see that's all in the hand of God as well. The mystery of providence.

Now I want us to final, third point, the mystery of providence was the second point, reality of opposition the first point, third point, the beauty of God. The beauty of God. This pictures a God who is more wonderful than we would have hoped for. What this is, is God inspiring his prophet who's writing this book to say to the readers and to people who encounter themselves in circumstances like those in the text, in opposition, at standstills, God is essentially saying, "I understand your weakness and your frailty and I have even ordained that you would be encountering the full understanding of your weakness and your frailty now." It's the tenderness of God. The beauty of God, the tenderness of God.

He's a God who as Psalm 103 says as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, for he knows our frame. He is mindful, listen to this, he is mindful that we are dust. The great God of heaven who holds all the, spoke the universes into existence with a word, who dwells in light accessible, hid from our eyes, that great God of heaven in his mercy and his compassion looks down and says, "Don't be so hard on My people. Yeah, the work has stopped, yeah, progress is slow, it's come to a standstill but I am doing something so wonderful if it were told to you, you would not believe it."

The tenderness of God. One of my favorite hymns is "O worship the King," and you see this in the contrast of the greatness and transient glory of God and our weakness, and yet God's tender loving compassion. "O worship the King, all glorious above, and gratefully sing His wonderful love. Our shield and defender, the ancient of days, pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise." He's pavilioned in splendor, girded with praise, "O tell of His might, O sing of His grace, whose robe is the light, whose canopy, space. His chariots of wrath of deep thunderclouds form, and dark is His path, on the wings of the storm." Look how great he is. Look how terrible he is. Look how awesome he is. Listen to verse 4, "Frail children of dust and feeble as frail," frail children of dust and feeble as frail, "In thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail. Thy mercies, how tender, how firm to the end. Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer and friend." This is the God of the Bible, God of tender compassion, the God when Moses wanted to see his name, to see his glory, he said, "The Lord, the Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin, but who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished."

God leads with all of his kindness, all of his mercy. That's the beauty of our God and, secondly, the beauty of God seen not just in the tenderness of God but also the purposes of God. The fact that his decree is making this happen 15 or 16 years of waiting, 15 or 16 years of walking by that foundation with nothing on it, and they get hardened and they need the prophets to come in and straighten them out, no doubt about it. You read Haggai

and Zechariah, they come and they don't mince words. They are at fault even for this because God told them to build the temple, what we see is the mystery of providence that he allows us to be in circumstances which are too big for us and sometimes that involves waiting possibly for years for relief, for victory, for breakthrough. Why is that? It's the way of God. It's the way of a God who wants us to know the wonder of his sufficiency, the glory of his strength which is made perfect in our weakness. We have to wait and wonder sometimes. We have to confront our weakness and our inability and our impotence. We have to confront that so that we can cry out to God with increased fervor. We can seek him with increased intensity and then as we seek him with all our hearts and he creates that in us through those years of fruitless labor, he creates that greater hunger, that greater desire and as then we open wide our mouths, he fills it. When we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we will be satisfied.

The Lord creates that hunger because on our own, if he gave it to us too quickly, we would just be like, "Oh, thank you very much," and we don't think about it. This is why he made Abraham wait 25 years for a son. I mean, do you ever think about that? You're reading that and you're thinking about it, he's 75 years old, they're already way past, I mean, they're kind of late in the childbearing. Back then if you lived to be 150, that's like being more like, you know, 45, 35, 48, 38, when you get the promise. You've been trying to have kids for a long time. You can't have kids. You're almost to menopause. Sarah, when you get the word at 65, remember I'm adjusting for if you lived to be 150 rather than 75, does that make sense? Okay. So if you're already 65 when you get that word, your menopause is, your biological clock is ticking and you wait 10 years, tick, tick, tick, tick, and you come up with your own idea, take Hagar, seemed reasonable, God's telling you you're, he told you in chapter 15 that he's gonna come from your own body, he told Abraham that, he didn't tell Sarah that in chapter 15. So they made do with what they thought made sense. They should've waited on God. They didn't wait on God and they created a lot of problems.

They're 85 and 75 then. They have to wait 15 more years after that and part of that is because God wanted them to see what he says in Romans 4, the beauty of God's ways. He describes Abraham's faith in Romans 4:18, "In hope against hope he believed," this is you're gonna be a father of many nations. He comes in chapter 17 of Genesis and says, "This time next year, you're gonna be a dad," and Abraham, you know, laughs when he first tells him and he says, "No, you're gonna be a dad," and then Sarah laughs later when she's told, and the reality is a year from now you're gonna have a child through Sarah, you're gonna name him Isaac, but at 99 and 89 when the promise comes, this is what Abraham's faith was, "In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and he contemplated the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform." The Lord has to get us often in a place where we look at our bodies as good as dead and the deadness of the womb, and we have no hope in ourselves, and all our hope is the promise of God and he does that in our lives.

So when you may find, it doesn't justify not working. Hey, it doesn't. If you're sinning, if you've got an area where you're struggling in, you need to be fighting every day and you keep fighting and you keep fighting and you keep fighting, and you may be fighting 10 years from now without making a lot of measurable increase, don't stop fighting but don't be discouraged. You will reap a harvest if you don't lose heart, Galatians 6. Don't grow weary in well-doing. This is the message of the text. Our God understands our frailty and our weakness. He invites us to look at our weakness, to contemplate it, face it honestly, to face our inability and to put all of our hope in the promise of God and so he prepares their hearts through those 15 years and then in Ezra 5, he sends his prophets at the right time, and he doesn't just give one, he gave two, Haggai and Zechariah. It was a double-barreled shotgun of God's word coming at them and it enabled them to do the work to build the temple to the glory of God and God's work continued on.

He will be faithful and he will not leave you in the valley longer than necessary. If you find yourself in the valley, remember that you're where Abraham was, David, the people in Zerubbabel's day. This is our God. Isn't it amazing that our God is not just about doing what we'd like, "Just give me what I need to fix and make it work." That's how you and I think. God says no. God says, "I want you to have problems and trials until you want fellowship with Me more than you want anything else, and when you want fellowship with Me more than you want anything else, I will give you everything." I'm so glad he's like that and Jesus Christ is the fullness of his glory and you can go to Jesus, always go to Jesus. Not only do we have a Father like this in the Old Testament, we have a Savior who came and experienced all that we experience so that he can be a sympathetic high priest, the tenderness of God fully revealed in Jesus who is full of grace and truth.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our Father, how grateful we are for Your truth that when You deal with us in ways that are not our ways and we understand Your thoughts are not our thoughts, but we thank You that You even in those moments are tender to us and You understand the struggles that we have to understand and contemplate these things. Father, help us to be people who cling to Your word. Help us to be like the psalmist who out of the depths cries to You, "O Lord, hear my voice!" And help us to wait on the word of God, to wait on the Lord and to wait on the Lord's word, that is to be reading it, to be studying it, to be meditating on it, to be memorizing it, even when it doesn't seem to be making a difference, help us be people who cling to the word of God because Your word will not return to You empty. It will accomplish Your purpose in Your time. Increase our faith. Make us people who want You more than we want anything else. We want You and fellowship with You more than we want the blessings of life, more than we want a good marriage or a good relationship with our child, or even the salvation of someone else, we want You more than we want anything. We want to want all those things in their appropriate measure but let us love You with all of our hearts and with all of our souls and with all of our minds and all of our strength, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*