

The Perfection of the Prophetic Word

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the fifth chapter of Ezra, Ezra 5. As you turn, I want to mention one edit to the bulletin. We actually, the men's Bible study that I teach on Friday mornings on systematic theology actually begins on September 13, not this Friday the 6th. I'll be out of town so that was a change that we needed to make in the schedule. There will be no men's Bible study on Friday, September 6. It'll start on the 13th.

Today we move to a new chapter. We're gonna have to see how it fits together, of course, but we come to a wonderful really unveiling of the power of God's word which is one of the main themes and maybe the main theme in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is the relationship of the people to the word of God and the power of the word of God to build God's people. So this morning, the title of the message is "The Perfection of the Prophetic Word." The perfection of the prophetic word. I use that title because we're gonna see that the word of God comes to God's people through two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah are both raised up contemporaneously by the Lord to speak messages, distinct messages but essentially the same thrust, get to the work, get back to work, but they have different emphases, wonderfully different and beautiful emphases, but the author of Ezra lets us know that this is the pivotal turning point in the rebuilding of the temple is when God sends forth his prophetic word.

Now that means that the word, the power of the prophetic word, the perfection of the prophetic word is the title, the perfection of the prophetic word applies to us in that the word of God is perfect, it is exactly what we truly need. And the idea of the prophetic word, I kept that title, I debated because, you know, when someone's just looking at a sermon title and the prophetic word, what's that mean? Well, the reason I used that is because it's the word of the prophets but also it's a way of understanding what the Bible really is. The Bible when it's speaking of history and historical events even, is still a prophetic message; that it is the word of God given through men which makes a claim on the lives of those who read it. A prophetic claim on our lives. When God's word comes to you and me, it speaks to you and it makes a claim on you. It comes with authority. It calls us to change and it addresses very specific issues in our lives.

So we're going to see that in this unfolding of this event, the rebuilding of the temple, the resumption of the work of the rebuilding of the temple, we see the glory of the prophetic

word, the perfection of the prophetic word here in the lives of God's people. I remind you if you haven't been with us, we're talking about the setting is 536 BC and when you're counting BC, counting down means you're going forward in history, right? So basically what we're gonna see is we're moving from 536 to 520 BC. Chapter 5, verse 1 is we've jumped from 536 at the end of chapter 4 to 520, first verse of chapter 5. Fifteen, 16 years have passed and what's happened is, the book of Ezra at this point is dealing with the return of the people of Israel who had been exiled to Babylon 586 BC, they've come back to the land, they've been called to rebuild the temple and they began the work in Ezra 3, in Ezra 4 they encountered opposition and the opposition we saw was great, so great that it's understandable that they were stymied, that they came to a standstill. And here God sends forth his word through his prophets and the work is resumed and the work then encounters opposition but it's a whole different response of the people when the opposition comes, and the work is wonderfully completed. From 520 to 515, they finished the temple in less than five years. The Lord blesses the work greatly but it all turns on the giving of his prophetic word. That's the decisive turning point. Fifteen years the work had been stopped, 15 years their lives had been at a standstill and then the word is given.

So let's read. Now I need to set a little bit of context so I'm gonna have you start off, actually turn the page back to Ezra 4:3-4, we're gonna read two verses there, and then we're gonna jump or actually, I'm sorry, Ezra 4:4-5, and then we're gonna jump ahead to verse 24 which is the continuation of the narrative, and that will read us right into chapter 5 and we'll read the first two verses to start. So Ezra 4:4, they're building and this is what happened when the opposition comes. Ezra 4:4,

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.

Then the narrative jumps 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.

That's 536 BC, I mean, it stops in 536 BC until the second year of Darius. He's taking us in that second year of Darius is 520 BC. So you have a 16 year, that's pretty good speed there between the first part of verse 24 and the last part. The work ceased in 536, it stays that way until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

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.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we ask that You would help us now as we attend to Your word, that the entrance of Your word might give light, in Your light we might see light, You might grant repentance and faith, and Your perfect word might restore our souls. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

In fact, the perfection of the prophetic word, one of the verses in my heart through the week as I was thinking about this message was Psalm 19:7, "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul or restoring the soul." The NASB says "restoring the soul," the King James says "converting the soul." Actually the Hebrew word there translated "restoring or converting, the law of the LORD is perfect, restoring or converting the soul," the Hebrew word is the Hebrew word "shub" which means "to return; to turn or to return." It's a word that often is translated "repent." So the law of the Lord is perfect and it comes to the heart and what it does is it returns the heart to its rightful place. It repents, it leads to repentance. It restores the soul to what God intends the soul to be and the word of God is the perfect remedy for everything that is really wrong with us.

Now we have to let God tell us what's wrong with us. Part of our problem is we want to define our problems, we want to define what our needs are or listen to the world and tell us what our needs are, and then we come to the Bible and try to find the answer to those needs. The problem is God defines what your need is and my need is. We don't define. It's not that we would think we need to be loved more, we need to be affirmed more. This is what the world tells us but what God says is you need to repent and you need to know the Lord. That's your need. That's my need. And the law of the Lord is perfect to recalibrate the soul to understand what it needs and then to give it what it needs, and what we're gonna see is that God raises up Haggai and Zechariah to bring the word of God and it's exactly what the people of God need to bring him glory and to do what he's called them to do. That's the sufficiency of Scripture. It is sufficient to bring, to help you bring God glory and to enable you to do what he's called you to do.

Now let's think a moment again about what the circumstances are of the people. Fifteen years the building project has stopped. It's at a standstill. The people have become discouraged. They're wondering, "Has the Lord forgotten us?" And then the word of God is given through his prophets Haggai and Zechariah and everything changes.

So I want us to consider this under three points this morning, the perfection of the prophetic word under three points. The first is the necessity of the word. The necessity of the word. I want to ask you as you read through Ezra, we've read through it, this question: why did God stir up the people of Israel to leave Babylon? Remember he stirred up in chapter 1, verse 1, he stirred up Cyrus to issue the edict that they could go back and return and build, and then he stirred up the people to go back and build, and so almost 50,000 of them return to Jerusalem to Judah and they began to build, they're stirred up to start the building process. Why did God allow them to be stirred up? Why did he stir them up himself and then not give them what they needed to complete the work until 15

years later? Was it that God just didn't plan well? I mean, did God not know that they needed the prophets to complete the work? Did he underestimate them or overestimate them? Think they're up to the task and they really weren't and so then he waits for a while and finally says, "I'm gonna have to do something else. Plan B, send the prophets." That's not our God, is it? Our God knows the beginning from the end. He's working out a perfect plan and so he allows the 15-year gap obviously not because he was surprised, but he wanted the people to realize how great was their need for the word. The necessity of the word is even underscored by the fact that they encounter the opposition, they're not able to do what God called them to do, and for 15 years the work lays dormant.

He does this partly so that they can see the glorious power of his word. That's what the author wants us to see. I mean, look at how he emphasizes the word "prophet" in verse 1 of chapter 5, "When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews." Now when the prophets, it could've been, "When the prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered to the Jews," but he doesn't, he emphasizes the word "prophet" three times in that verse, "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." And he adds it again, "then Zerubbabel," verse 2, "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." Four times in two verses the word "prophet."

Now this word is an Aramaic word. This whole section is in Aramaic. We're gonna deal more with that, the why of that in messages to come, but it's a cognate language, it's a language of the people around the Israelites. It's the language in which the letters that are being sent back and forth and the various testimonies that we've read, the parenthesis last time, there's another one coming up in chapter 5 where you have a letter exchanged, sent to the king again and the king responds and those are in Aramaic. So this whole section's in Aramaic and the word "prophet" is here in the Aramaic as well but Aramaic is a cognate, a relative language to Hebrew and so the same word is in Hebrew as well.

This is in the Hebrew Bible, this word occurs hundreds of times, it's the word navi. This is the word, the Aramaic word is a relative to that word. Navi means spokesman and the idea of the prophet, what the prophet is, is one in whom God puts his word. We see this when the Lord explains to Moses in Exodus 6 what he's calling him to do, "I'm gonna give you the words to say. I'm gonna give you Aaron and you'll speak to him. You give him your words and he'll be like a prophet to you in the same way that I give my words to you." So that the distinguishing mark of a prophet was they said this, "Thus says the Lord," and you find this phrase, "The word of the Lord came to Malachi. The word of Yahweh came to them." Or like Jeremiah shares, the word of God in him was like a burning in his bones. He couldn't contain it. The word of the Lord came to him and he had to speak it. That's the prophetic word.

Well, he's emphasizing the fact that God has spoken. He's telling us that what happened here was the Lord called his spokesman, two of them, and he emphasizes that three times, "When the prophets." I mean, if you're trying to, if you were writing a term paper and you

turned this in, you would probably get, I know in the stuff that I've been reading about writing and stuff in doing my doctoral work, it's always everything's about brevity and concision. Don't say anything unnecessary. And so this would be something that would get marked off. "When the prophets, Haggai the prophet," no, you mean to say, "When the prophets Haggai and Zechariah." No, the Lord says, "When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, prophesied." Well, thankfully God's not looking for our grading and if we have any sense, we grade him 100, A+++++, right, because he knows what he's doing. He's emphasizing this in the middle of this narrative as you're walking through it, he wants you to see God sent his prophet. God put his word in the mouth of a man and sent them to him, not just one but two men.

The prophetic word. He's saying, in a sense, that the word is what you need, and he allowed them to have that 15-year standstill to be excited about the building, to be stirred up to start the process, and then to come and hit a brick wall and to wait for 15 years as that temple, the foundation, just the foundation, the bare foundation taunting them each day for 15 years. Why? So that they could see the power of the prophetic word; that what we need is the word of God. We cannot build without the word of God. We cannot build one another, we cannot build our lives, our hearts to be what God wants them to be apart from the word of God. You may be stymied in your life, you come to standstills in your life in relationships, in your battle for purity, in your battle with anger, your battle with fear, you've lost hope and what this is saying is what you need and I need more than anything else is the word of the living God. We need the prophetic word and the Lord has a way of letting us encounter brick walls and dead ends so that we come to see that what we must have is the word of God. This is his way. So take courage. You are exactly where he wants you to be if you will now attend to his word, call out for his word, seek him in his word.

This is what the Lord tells us even way back in the Pentateuch when Moses is writing or speaking to the people giving his sermons that formed the book of Deuteronomy, his farewell address essentially as they're getting ready to go into the land. He knows he's not going in and he reminds them in Deuteronomy 8 that he said, "The Lord tested you when you were in the wilderness. Do you remember how He tested you? You didn't have any bread, you didn't have any food, and so He fed you with manna from heaven to test you to see what was in your heart, and the reasons He fed you with manna," remember they would have to, the way the manna worked, they would wake up in the morning and the manna would be on the ground and they would take the manna and they had to do a little bit of work to it to make it actually, you know, they'd bake it or whatever to eat it, but it was basically ready to bake bread. It was like, it wasn't exactly like this but I can imagine, you know, if you walked out and there were like Pillsbury cinnamon rolls on the ground, you've got to take them home and bake them. Well, as good as those are, if you ate those every day it would be tough to eat those every day, and so the people began to complain rather than be marveling that, "We still every day there's Pillsbury cinnamon rolls out of the sky." I mean, that should never have gotten old in that sense, I mean, "Lord, we would love something else but I want to tell You, the one thing we want to say is we are so amazed that You are feeding us out of heaven." But what he says is the reason God did that, why did God do that? It was, again, he didn't plan well, he couldn't have brought

them through a garden, well-gardened area. No, he said, "The Lord made you eat bread out of heaven on a daily basis so that you would know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; that what really is our life is the word of God."

In our class this morning, last week, one of our elders, Ted Guthrie, has been teaching and he was teaching last week about Genesis 1, how God when he made man, this is really something to ponder and think about, when God makes man, the first thing he does is speaks to him and he speaks to him again and again and tells man, first of all right off the bat he tells him who he is and why he's here. Paul Tripp in his book, "Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands," makes the point that this shows us that man was made to be, this is his phrase, a revelation receiver. We were made to need God's revelation to us. Now think about that. In Genesis 1 before sin enters the world, what man must have is the word of God. Before he's a sinner, he needs the word of God. When he's perfect, he needs the word of God. He must have the word of God to make sense out of himself. This is why the world is such a mess today, gender identities and sexual problems and all these things that are happening, man must have God's word to know who he is, who she is. We can't live apart from God's word and this is what the Lord teaches again and again, this is what he's teaching his people in 520 BC, "You must have the word of God to build your lives to be pleasing to Me."

This is why it's so important that we build the word of God into our lives in every way. This is why we've been working so hard to make our children's ministry more comprehensive in the way we think about it, so we're teaching catechism in our Sunday morning hour before worship. That's systematic theology basically, question and answer format along with music and learning about worshiping God through music. So both parts of that happening in that first hour and then in the children's church right now what they're learning out there is they're going through the whole Bible book by book in three years. And then on Wednesday nights, we're adding in, they're going to be that dig deep, digging deep is actually the title, "Digging Deep in Genesis." They're learning, our kids are going to be learning, grades 1 to 5, how to study the Bible inductively, that is, how to look at the text and determine by careful observation prayerfully as they wrestle with the words and the sentences and the phrases, what is God saying here so that they can know when someone tells them what the Bible says, they can test and see if that person is right. They can be what the Bereans were in Acts 17:11 where God says they "were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica." What made them so noble-minded that they would get that high commendation? This is what the Bereans did: when they heard Paul teach, they went home and they read their Bibles to see if what he said was true. "Is what this apostle saying consistent with what we've already received? Is what he's saying sound biblically?"

So we need the word of God. It's that which restores the soul. It returns the soul. Now I want you to think about this: God's way to bring you and me his great blessing to make us effective in building his kingdom is to bring us to places of standstill and inadequacy. The Lord only works through people who either are inadequate and who have no resources, or who if they have resources are willing to disown the resources because God

works through people who trust completely in him. And so if the Lord's way is to bring us to the end of ourselves, if the Lord's way is to bring you to the end of yourself through adversity and suffering, spiritual opposition, are you resenting that and wanting your circumstances to change? That's our natural way. That's our sinful way. We wish it could be easy. The first thing we need to understand is God is so wise and so good that he makes us know the necessity of the word by making us desperate for it. So if the Lord has you now, you feel like on the anvil and he's pounding away at your life through circumstances, what you need to do is embrace that process. Stop kicking against the goads. Stop resenting what he's doing. And what do you do? Then you seek the word. "Lord, You have a purpose. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans not to harm you, to give you hope and a future." The Lord said that to people who were looking at their lives in absolute disarray because this is the way God works, he lets things come to nothing often so that he can show us that he's everything, that we're nothing and he's everything.

So stop fighting God. Stop resenting his ways, Praise him. Do like Sarah Edwards said about when she lost her husband Jonathan, interesting developments in church history. Jonathan Edwards, many people say the greatest theologian in the English language. He's definitely up in the top three. Many people think he's the greatest. Jonathan Edwards, he died from complications from a smallpox vaccination. Smallpox was an issue, they had developed a vaccination, he's away at Princeton University starting that college, the new president of that college, his wife and family are in different places and so they get word that Edwards got sick and died from a smallpox vaccination. Sarah, the wife, writes her children. In one of the letters she wrote to a daughter and she said this, "The Lord has taken from me that which is so precious," and she says essentially, "We must kiss the rod. The Lord has done that which we never wanted to be done but we must kiss the rod and trust that He is our sufficiency. And so," she says, "we must give ourselves over to God completely." This is what the mother who just lost her husband saying to her daughter, "We must give ourselves over to God. That is where I love to be, given over to God."

So we need to stop fighting God. It doesn't help to resent the circumstances, always try to change everything about our circumstances. I mean, it certainly doesn't mean you never try to deal with life. Of course, you work on things but where God is working and he's doing, allowing adversity to come, our first instinct must not be to escape, our first instinct needs to be to find Christ in this moment. "Lord, let me have more of Your sufficiency."

So he wants to teach us the necessity of the word and so that the word was necessary and he sent two prophets to them, Haggai and Zechariah. In fact, the emphasis of this even in the, I mean in the Aramaic as I said this section is in Aramaic, most of the Bible, Old Testament is in Hebrew but the first word in Aramaic is like Hebrew, the word order can change around a lot more than we can in English, the first word and usually the first word's the one which is emphasized, is actually the verb "prophesied." They prophesied. That's the first word. So you come out of the work ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia, they prophesied. They began the act of prophesying, proclaiming the prophetic word and that's the turning point.

So that's the first point, the necessity of the prophetic word but, secondly, not just the necessity, secondly, the specificity of the word, the specificity of the prophetic word. God sends two messengers, Haggai and Zechariah, each of whom say repeatedly as you read their books, their prophecies which we have both of these in the Bible, which is so cool, the Lord gave us. I mean, sometimes we hear about a prophet ministering and we don't have the record of what he actually said, but the Lord actually records for us the prophecy of Haggai and Zechariah, what they said to the people.

They both began in the first verse saying, "The word of the Lord came to Haggai. The word of the Lord came to Zechariah." And so they are then given a specific message and, in fact, turn over, hold your place, we're gonna come back to Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, that's the last three books of the Old Testament. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. So if you find the place where the Old and New Testament meet, then go back a couple books and you'll find the book of Haggai. Zechariah has 14 chapters and Haggai has two, so it's a small little book so it's not easy to find.

I want you to notice three things about the specificity of the word. First is, what? There are three questions we'll ask: what, when and why. The specificity of the prophetic word. What? It's a specific message. The word of the Lord, look at verse 1 of Haggai 1, "In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying," and then he gives a message. Verse 3 he reminds them, "Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying." Chapter 2, verse 1, "On the twenty-first of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet saying." And then there's quotation marks at exactly what God told him to say. So the specificity of the word, there is a specific message.

Now did you notice also it's not just what, but also when, second subpoint here under 2, the specificity of the word. When? In verse 1 of chapter 1, it said, "In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month." This is talking about 520 BC, that's the second year of Darius, he came to reign 522, 521, and this is the second year, the sixth, the first day of the sixth month. It comes at a specific time. Then he also gets another message that he gives in chapter 2 which is a month later, "On the twenty-first of the seventh month," now they need to hear something slightly different. A month later, a month and a half later, he gives them another message.

If you turn over a page toward the back of your Bible, you find Zechariah, Zechariah 1, verse 1, "In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the prophet." Do you see that, the eighth month? Well, we just saw that the first two messages of Haggai came on the sixth month and the seventh month, and then Zechariah comes on the eighth month and they tell us carefully when they ministered and what they said.

So you have the specificity of the prophetic word is God gives a specific message, at a specific time, to a specific people, in a specific predicament. He gives a specific message,

at a specific time, to a specific people, in a specific predicament. This is how the Lord gives his word. This is what makes it the prophetic word. He speaks to real people, with real problems, and he addresses them specifically.

Earlier Jess read from the book of Philippians. Now think about, I want you to stop and think a moment: why did God give the word to us in 66 books? Have you ever asked that question? Why do we have 39 books in the Old Testament, 27 books in the New Testament? Why didn't the Lord just give it to us like a systematic theology? Here is what the doctrine of God, and he gets some prophets together and they put...or maybe this would be, think about the New Testament, the New Testament could've been done this way. Hey, you've got 12 apostles now, you've got Paul there, you know, you've got a lot of great, all the people who are with Jesus so much and now, guys, we're gonna gather together, we're gonna have a month-long process, we're going to create the New Testament Scriptures. Peter, you write on evangelism. Paul, you write on how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament. James, you write some real practical stuff. And just lay it all out and we're gonna put it together. Why didn't God do that? Do you ever think about that? What did God do? God put his message in the hearts of his people and they dealt with real people who were experiencing specific problems and specific needs and they spoke the word of God to those specific needs. The people of Philippi had specific issues they were dealing with and God gave the book of Philippians through Paul. The people of Corinth had specific issues they were dealing with and so God gave the book of Corinthians, 1 Corinthians, and they still were dealing with issues, the book of 2 Corinthians. The people in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia were dealing with specific issues and so God gave Peter to write his first epistle to them. You see, the word addresses real life problems. God is not interested in just filling our minds and helping us think rightly as if our thinking is the only thing. No, he wants to address real issues and show us how to live for him and his word meets us at the point of our need, not necessarily what we think our need is but, listen, what our need truly is. His word addresses the true needs of men and women, of all people.

A specific message, at a specific time, to a specific people, in a specific life predicament. This is true even in the Old Testament. I mean, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is given, we're gonna work on this a little bit later, it gets a little confusing and without having visual aids it's hard to do this, but I want you to listen to me for one second about this. We're talking about how God sent the prophets in 520 to a specific group of people who were discouraged and had let the temple not be built for 15 years, he sends those two prophets to speak to them, right? Now blow your mind a little bit, maybe some of you have thought of this before surely but some of you may not have, but the book of Ezra 5 telling the story of that event is actually written with a prophetic purpose to a group of people who lived 100 years later. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah is telling this story to people in real life circumstances 100 years after the temple is built to tell them something. Does that make sense? Genesis is given, it tells a story from the beginning of the world, right? It tells about the flood but it's given at a specific time, by a specific man, to a specific people, in a specific predicament. Who are those people? They're the people who've just left Egypt. Moses is the author. He's giving his word to the people of Israel after they've left Egypt. He's telling them their origins so that they can relate it to their

life circumstance in the moment. It helps you to interpret the Bible when you understand that.

So this chapter, we're gonna get to that and we'll work on that a little more going forward. Today I'm going back to now what Haggai/Zechariah were saying to the people, but one of the reasons we know it applies to us is because it applied to the people 100 years later for him to write it down and tell them about it.

The specificity of the word. So I said what and when, so the why. Why does God, then, give these two men, Haggai and Zechariah, a specific message, the word of the Lord came to them at a specific time? Well, it's to address the specific needs of the people in 520 BC. When you look at the messages of Haggai/Zechariah, Haggai and Zechariah, look at Haggai 1:1-2, "In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "This people says, 'The time has not come, even the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.'"" He says the people, the prophet goes and he says to the leaders, "The people are out there saying, 'Hey, you know, it's just not the right time.'" "Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying," verse 3, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" You say it's not the time, I'm telling you it is the time. Is it time for you to dwell in houses in luxury while the house of God is not? And so he basically says, verse 8, "Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified." Get back to work. That is a specific message, to a specific need, and it's clear. It's precisely what they need.

Now Zechariah basically says the same thing but he doesn't just tell them to get back to work, he addresses their real spiritual need as well. Their spiritual need is partly your complacency needs to be abandoned. Yes, you've become complacent. Yeah, I let you get held up but it's still your fault. This is one of the things we have to realize. When God brings all that adversity against you to make you see how much you need him, when God allows suffering upon suffering to pile up in my life, we can feel like God's being unfair to us, in fact, it's very natural for us to think that because of our audacious pride, but in reality if we want what we deserve, we get hell. That's what we deserve. And what we ought to think when the Lord has to pile up adversity upon adversity upon adversity to get my attention, what I ought to say is, "Lord, my heart is this hard that it took this much to get my attention. Thank You for doing what was necessary to break this hard wicked heart." That's seeing it biblically. God in his kindness doesn't leave us to our own devices.

Now and he's so kind, though, when we turn back to him, even though he says hard words to us, when we turn back to him, when we repent and we trust in him, we find that he is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. As the Lord has compassion on his children, as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. He knows our frame. He remembers that we're dust. Our Lord is gracious and compassionate and you see this even here. He gives them exactly what they need.

Now think about what was it that stopped them from building? The opposition, right? Well, hold your place in Haggai 1 and I hope you marked Ezra, and if you didn't, just listen to this, Ezra 4:4, "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building." Do you remember that Ezra 3, even when things were still looking good, Ezra 3:3, when they set up the altar before they started building the foundation, chapter 3, verse 3, listen to this, "So they set up the altar on its foundation," this is talking about the people of Israel, the people of Judah back in the land, "They set up the altar on its foundation for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands." They're terrified even when things are going good. Then chapter 4, they encounter the opposition and they're frightened. They're discouraged and they're frightened. God stirred them up to do it but they're terrified, they're frightened.

Look at the message of Haggai, look at chapter 2. Well, first of all, chapter 1, his first message he gives them that first time he goes out and ministers in the sixth month, he says, "Here's the word of the Lord." He tells them, "Hey, basically you say it's not the time, I'm telling you it is the time. You have paneled houses, get to work." Chapter 1, verse 13, "Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke by the commission of the LORD to the people saying, 'I am with you,' declares the LORD." In the rebuilding, "I am with you." "So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God." So the word of God stirs up the people of God and what he tells them is, "Get to work. I am with you." That's the most important thing that you can know in any moment is that God is with you.

Now they need a reminder because they need...and remember we saw in chapter 5 when he was talking, when the author of Ezra is telling us about this, the summary, he says the prophets prophesied and they were with the people supporting them. Remember that? Ezra 5:2. The word "supporting" is a word which often is used to mean to uphold but it's a word which is used sometimes to speak of, in fact in Genesis 18 it's used this way, "You're probably tired from your trip. Let me make some bread to strengthen you." The idea is like giving someone food to reinvigorate them, to strengthen them. And so the prophets are there supporting them. The prophets are with them in the process, in the building. It's not just that they give the word. No, they're staying with them and they're continuing to nurture them and give them the word and support them.

But look what he says in the next section, chapter 2, because now it's a month later. "On the twenty-first of the seventh month," this is Haggai 2:1, "the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet saying, 'Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people saying,'" and here again addressing exactly what they need, "Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?" We saw that in Ezra, didn't we? Remember the older people were mourning when the young people were excited when the foundation was laid? The old people saw the foundation and said, "It's gonna be nothing like the temple of Solomon," and they wailed in sorrow.

So the prophet says that, but look what he says next, verse 4. What's their need? They're frightened. "'But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD, 'take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,' declares the LORD, 'and work; for I am with you,' declares the LORD of hosts. As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!'" That is exactly what they needed. They needed to know God is with them and they needed to know they're not to be afraid. Three times, take courage: take courage, take courage. That brings it to the highest level just like holy, holy, holy. Take courage, take courage, take courage. It's the superlative commandment.

But why do you take courage? "For I am with you. You're looking at your enemies and it's impressive, they're impressive and you don't see any visible manifestation of My presence." I think even by alluding back to the exodus, some of them might have been tempted to say, "I wish we had the pillar of fire, the pillar of cloud." But that's not God's way now. God's way is to do it in more subtle and invisible ways because he is trying to cultivate faith and faith is the assurance of things not seen. It's the evidence of things hoped for.

So God is teaching his people to walk by faith and he says, "I am with you." In fact, Zechariah is gonna make this point, he's gonna basically, one of his main points is, "You don't see what's going on in the spiritual world. You can't see that God is with you, the angels are here with you. His angels are all here supporting you." This is essentially what Ezra and Zechariah are saying behind what he's saying. We'll see that, Lord willing, next time.

But the word is specific, take courage, do not fear. Verse 6, "For thus says the LORD of hosts," one of the things that's really interesting about Ezra, I mean about Haggai and Zechariah is their favorite name for the Lord is "the LORD of hosts." In fact, the usage of that phrase, Yahweh Sabaoth, is more concentrated in these two books and Malachi than any other books in the Bible. "The LORD of hosts," means "the Lord of armies. Sabaoth" comes from a word "saba" which means "fight." It's used, I think it's 14 times in Haggai and 48 times in Zechariah, two chapters, 14 times "the LORD of hosts, the LORD of hosts, the LORD of hosts, the LORD of the armies." You're scared of the people around you, you're scared of the might of the Persians but the one who is with you is the Lord of the armies, the Lord of the heavenly armies, the Lord who reigns and rules and who fights for you. Exactly what they need, the specificity of the word.

So the Lord is getting our attention at times, he calls us to say why are things stalemated and stopped, and we said before don't resent the adversity, but what do you do? You get into the word now. The word's gonna address me specifically. I need to stay in the word and to meditate on the word. I need to get help from other people to apply the word to myself. I need to be under the preaching of the word, under the teaching of the word, and if I'm really struggling, I need someone to sit down and open the Scriptures with me and try to apply the word to my heart specifically, and often when you do that, it doesn't, the answer doesn't come the first time you meet. Sometimes the Lord is still cultivating in us

the hunger. Will you stay in the word? Will you keep trusting in the means of grace that God has ordained, including other people to speak his word to you? Will you humble yourself and stop complaining against God and listen to the people in your life as they minister the word of God to you? And keep on doing that? If you won't, you will continue in your misery. Don't do that.

The third point is not just the necessity of the word, the specificity of the word, thirdly, the efficacy of the word. The efficacy of the word. Back to Ezra 5. Efficacy, it's achieving power. The word accomplishes the purpose that God sent it for. He sends his word specifically to your heart and it accomplishes what he intends in his timing, in his way. It changes the people. I mean, we've said that he sends the prophets in verses 1 and 2, they're there supporting them, now they encounter opposition in verses 3 to 5 but look at how different they are in the face of opposition. Verse 3,

3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

I mean, they hear what's going on, this is some massive work happening and this guy's doing his job partly, "I need to go find out what's happening," and so he goes and says, "Who told you to do this?" It's 15 years it's been silent, I mean, there's been nothing happening.

4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building. 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report could come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

They did not stop the work. They basically and what we're going to see is they tell them, the next little section is Tattenai, this guy that's coming in to check out what's happening, he writes a letter to Darius and says, "Listen, these guys are doing this stuff. I don't know if they should be doing it and I'm writing to you to tell you about it. I'm concerned about it." But even the tone of his letter, when you compare it to the previous letter in chapter 4, it's remarkable the difference. When you compare the difference, the response of the people to the opposition in chapter 4 to chapter 5, it's remarkable the difference. When you compare the response of the emperor to the letter sent by the opponents to him, remember in chapter 4 and chapter 5, it's remarkable the difference. What makes the difference? The power of the prophetic word. The word of God changes everything. The word of God makes them able to keep their work going. They have the prophets telling them, "Listen, I am with you, declares the Lord." This is why they need that. They start the work and a month later they need that second round of Haggai saying, "Listen," remember it was a month later, a month and a half later, he comes back and he says, "I'm with you. Take courage. Take courage. Take courage." Why? Because the opponents just came and started questioning your work.

"I am with you. My Spirit is in your midst." And what happens is the letter goes, Darius makes a search for Cyrus' edict that has been forgotten. They have to search all over, don't find it in Babylon, they end up finding it in a remote vacation spot that Cyrus used. Really cool how the detail is there. Ecbatana, that's where it was. Well, the letter comes back from Darius and essentially he says, "Listen, yeah what they told you is right and I'm issuing a decree," this is Darius now, the Persian emperor, "I'm issuing a decree that you'd better give them every bit of help they need to rebuild that house, and if you or anybody gets in the way, I order that they be a beam taken out of the house of the person who opposes the work and that person be impaled on that beam." That's what the Persian king said about the temple being built. That's a little different than what happened in chapter 4, stop the work. No, this is don't stop the work and if you stop the work, I'm coming after you.

That's the power of the word of God. When God is ready to do his work and we are under his word, nothing can stop it. Now remember he doesn't operate on our timetable and very often he doesn't give us what we're wanting a breakthrough, we're wanting some measure of victory and we don't get it yet because our hearts aren't yet ready for it, but the message is still the same. Stay under the word. Stay with the people of God. Keep seeking his face and crying out to him.

He will answer. His word will not return empty, that's what Isaiah says in Isaiah 55. As the rain falls from heaven and does not return to heaven without watering the earth and giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, think about that, the efficacy of the rain. You can see that in the summertime in Georgia, especially if you don't have a sprinkler system or you don't run it very much, right? The grass is drying up and withering and the rain comes and everything changes. He said, "That's what it's like when My word goes forth from My mouth. It will not return to Me empty without accomplishing the purpose for which I sent it." The word of God is living and active. It is powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. It cuts to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow. It's a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart and it will do its work and you and I need to cry out to God to send forth his word. Every time we read the Bible, every time we meditate on Scripture, every time we gather together with other believers, every time we come to church to hear the preaching or teaching of the word, every time we're around the word and we need to be around the word more and more and more, our heart cry needs to be, "O Lord, fill our hearts! We're opening wide our mouths, fill them with Your word because man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are that Your ways are not our ways and Your thoughts are not our thoughts. Lord, we want things easy, we think we deserve better, we get angry with You when we look at our own lives, we get angry with You when we look at other people's lives and we see affliction upon affliction piling up in their lives. Lord, our hearts accuse You of wrongdoing. Sometimes it comes out of our mouth. We confess that that is absolute wickedness. Who are we and what do we know? We're of yesterday and

we know nothing. You, Lord, do all things well. You have never once done anything but what is perfect and righteous. You possess all wisdom. You not only want to do the right thing because You're good and can only want that which is good, You're all powerful, you have the power to accomplish Your good will, and You are all wise, You know exactly how in the most skilled way to accomplish Your purposes. And Your word tells us that You are reigning over every molecule in the universe, who speaks and it comes to pass unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Lord that both good and ill go forth? You allow hardship and even evil to happen. You don't cause it, You don't entice it, but You allow it for good purposes for Your people, for Your greater glory in the same way that You allowed the incredible evil that happened to Jesus at Calvary when He, an innocent, perfectly righteous man was crucified, spat upon, beaten. You turned Your back on Him as He became sin for us. As He bore our sins, You in Your holiness could not look at Him any longer and He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" and that horrible, darkest, most evil day, You turned to the greatest most glorious good for the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. And now You look at people who should not be able to dwell in Your presence and You see us clothed in the righteousness of Christ when we repent and place our faith in Your Son, and You only want to do good for Your people. If You did not spare Your own Son but freely delivered Him up for us all, how will You not together with Him freely give us all things? Lord, give us faith. Forgive us our foolishness and, Lord, help us get back to work in building Your temple and Your kingdom in our lives, our families, Your church, in the lives of people around us who are lost and who need Christ. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.