

# The Purpose of the Prophetic Word

*Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

By Ty Blackburn

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**Providence Church**  
2146 Buford Hwy  
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

**Website:** [www.providenceduluth.org](http://www.providenceduluth.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch](http://www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch)

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ezra. We continue our study in this Old Testament book that you find just before, well, just after 1 & 2 Chronicles, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. They end up the historical books before, then you have the writings of Job, Psalms and all that, so it's before that if you're not familiar with where Ezra is. It's not a book that we maybe often read but all of God's word is profitable and hope that you've been blessed as we've been working through this word of the Lord to us, the book of Ezra.

The title of this morning's message is "The Purpose of the Prophetic Word." The purpose of the prophetic word. If you've been with us in the last couple of weeks that I've been preaching through these chapters, you know that we've been talking about the prophetic word to describe the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah that are talked about in our text with great emphasis. In chapter 5, verses 1 and 2, we're told that the ministry of Haggai, Zechariah are what jumpstarted the rebuilding project of the temple and we're going to read the passage, chapter 6 in just a moment where we'll see in verse 14 that it's the ministry of Haggai, Zechariah that the author again reminds us was so pivotal in bringing about the completion of the temple and the purpose of what God had ordained for his people to do. And the prophetic word, that is, when God gives, the prophet was the spokesman for God. In fact, the word "prophesy" and the main idea is not foretelling the future, that's sometimes an element of prophesy but that's not the real emphasis of Scripture in the word "prophet" or "prophesy." The emphasis of the word "prophet, prophesy" in Scripture is not foretelling but forth telling, that is, speaking for God. The prophet is God's spokesman, that is, God gives his word to the prophet to speak that word to God's people.

I used a sentence or a series of phrases, I said that the prophetic word is a specific message, to a specific people, at a specific point in time, with specific problems. It's a specific message that is sent by God through his prophet, through his man, to a specific people, at a specific time, with specific needs. This is the way God has given us his Bible, it is he speaks to his people in real life circumstances with real challenges, real problems that overwhelm them, and he sends forth his word to address those needs. This is why we have 66 books, they're all prophets or apostles inspired by God, given his word to speak to specific people, in specific circumstances, with specific needs. This should be a great

encouragement. This is God's way to deal with us. He is a God who deals with the specifics, the details of life.

So the prophetic word for us is God's word, the Bible now given to us. The Lord has a way now by his Spirit of speaking to us through his word that he spoke to people back then but he quickens it and empowers it to speak directly to your need today. His word speaks to the brokenness, the confusion, the despair that we often find in our lives. His word speaks with specificity, perfect specificity to meet the needs of our hearts. Now one of the things that we're gonna see, though, this is so crucial, is the needs of our hearts that God is going to address are the real needs, not the felt needs. There's a difference between real needs and felt needs. Felt needs are what you and I think our needs are, but the reality is we don't know what our needs are and in a world that is all about self, we see this mindset come into the church and pressure us so that so often what happens in evangelical churches is they cater to felt needs. You go to church to get some helpful principles, to learn techniques so that you can make your life work in areas it's not working, but the problem is in those situations you and I still are on the throne of our lives determining what we want to do and we're just trying to use God's word to make our ends happen. God is not in that and the purpose of his word is not so that you and I can use it and find helpful techniques to make our goals happen. No, the word of God does something, it radically reorients life and it does that in a way that comes to us and doesn't do what we want at first but it always does what we really truly want if we knew our hearts. It does something much better than meet your felt need, it meets your true deepest needs of your soul and when it does, you understand that the prophetic word spoken by God into your life is exactly what you truly needed and it produces great joy and it moves mountains.

Last week we talked about the power of the prophetic word and we saw that the word accomplishes its purposes, that it's going to do what it needs to do, and we saw the metaphor that Zechariah uses where Zerubbabel, one of the leaders of the people, would be able to move the mountains before the people. The mountain would be made level through his ministry and it was through the word of God that that would happen. The word of God is powerful and it changes everything. It moves mountains. Sometimes that, those mountains we talked about are sometimes moved slowly, incrementally, at times almost imperceptibly but the word of God always does its work when people respond in submission and faith.

But how does it do that? How does it change everything? We're gonna see today that it radically reorients the heart. It completely renovates our life, our focus. It redirects our focus to what God created us to do and that is to worship. The purpose of the prophetic word is to create in you and me in whatever moment, all the mess we find ourselves in, the pain, the anguish. If you think about your life, areas you're struggling, maybe it's relationships, it's a relationship, and you are losing hope, you're discouraged, you're worried that you're not gonna be able to rebuild, it's never going to be what it should be, the word of God has the power to change everything in that relationship, but that word has the power to do it in you first and it's going to do it in you in a way that's not exactly what you naturally want. It's like if you have a marriage problem, the way that we all

come to that naturally in our own minds is we have a marriage problem, we think that we're part of the problem but we think most of the problem is on the other side. This is how people come to marriage counseling and, "Tell me what's going on." And so you ask the husband, you ask the wife, and as you listen to them, almost invariably when people are in that situation, you can tell as they are communicating that, yes, they're acknowledging, "Yeah, I'm part of the problem but, you know, the real issue is right over there. The real issue is over there and if you could just help me change them, then everything would be okay, or we would be so far along that the small things that I need to work on will just take care of themselves." God's word comes to you and me and says, "Will you follow Jesus even if your spouse doesn't? Even if your spouse never changes in any of the ways you know they need to change, even biblically, if they never change, will you follow Christ and worship Him by being a loving husband or wife and honoring Him for His glory? Will you do that?" If you will, the word will give you the power to do that and it will give you incredible joy in that that is far greater than having the marriage that you want. But the word is not something that we use to get what we want. The word is God reigning over you to make you what he wants you to be.

That's the prophetic word, so we need God's word. There are areas in our lives where there's darkness, there's confusion, there's difficulty that doesn't need to be there and we need the word to be spoken to us. We need to be under the word. We need to share our hearts with one another so when people are speaking the word to us, in those moments what's going to happen is a reorientation of our lives that will make all the difference.

Now we're getting this from the book of Ezra and we're gonna read chapter 6 in a moment. Before we do, I'm going to launch into something I don't think I've ever done on a Sunday morning. It's not that big a deal but it feels like a big deal to me, so just... We're gonna use a visual aid. I'm gonna try to help catch us all up on where we are in history, what's going on, okay? So let's go ahead and put the slides up. What we're gonna look at is a timeline and this timeline I want to use to help you. Now good news too, you're gonna get an email with this if you're on our email list, you'll receive an email, and if you want to be, you can be so just contact Bethany or [admin@providenceduluth.org](mailto:admin@providenceduluth.org) and we'll get you one. You'll get a timeline with this that you can study in more detail. If you're like me, you like to kind of look at this and keep, and we can't spend that time that we all need. Not come up, "Hey, everybody look at this. Tell me when you're finished." No, we're gonna look at it, run through it, and then you will have it later.

Now what I want us to do is see where we are in history. This is the history of Israel. Around 2160, God calls Abram to follow him in Ur of the Chaldees, okay? God calls Abram who becomes Abraham. You have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and for about 300 years, they are in Canaan, living in Canaan in tents. Around 1880, they move to Egypt. So a little before this Joseph, remember, goes down ahead. He gets sold into slavery and so then the people are in Egypt from about 1880 to about 1440. At first they're doing fine. You know, Joseph, everybody loves Joseph so they're doing well but then they become slaves and they're in slavery in Egypt and the slavery ends with the ministry of Moses. Remember Moses is called by God to deliver the people and so he goes to Pharaoh and says, "Let my people go," and the plagues happen and God delivers the people. So he's

delivering his people of Israel now, the 12. Jacob had 12 sons. They grow to now several million. They leave in 1446 Egypt and they're ready to go to the Promised Land but, remember, they don't have faith to go in the Promised Land so they wander for 40 years and then at the end of that period under Joshua they enter the Promised Land, around 1405-1406 BC.

Now they're in the land and they're ruled by judges. They don't have a king. God is their King and so this is where they keep, the cycles of good and bad with the judges. They sin, God judges them. I mean, he actually sends affliction upon them to wake them up. Then he raises up a judge to deliver them, people like Deborah, Gideon, Samson, all the judges. The period of the judges ends when Samuel is a judge and anoints Saul as king and then David, and you have the time of the united monarchy. This is the golden age of Israel as a country, okay? It is about 120 years. You have basically three 40-year reigns: Saul, David and Solomon reign for about 40 years each. So you go from 1050-930. Solomon builds the temple early in his reign and then when he dies, you have because he sinned, the Lord removes 10 tribes from him and you have the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

So next slide is the continuation of that timeline. Then you have his son, Rehoboam, is ruling the southern kingdom but 10 tribes follow a guy named Jeroboam and they form the northern kingdom which when you're reading the Bible, you'll see Israel and you'll see Judah. Judah is the southern kingdom, Israel's the northern kingdom. The importance of Judah is it's where Jerusalem is, it's where the temple is. It is also the one ruled over by the line of David, which is so key because to David, the son of David is going to be the Messiah, and so you keep your eye on Jerusalem, you keep your eye on the king in the line of David.

Now what happens is all kinds of ungodliness. You've got Ahab and other kings in the north and this is where the ministry of the prophets begins, Elijah and Elisha. Anyway, 722, the destruction of the northern kingdom happens, the Assyrians destroy it, just wreck them, and they also are messing with Judah quite a bit too, but there's a miraculous deliverance from Judah from the Assyrians. So they continue for another 130 years until they're finally destroyed by Babylon. It comes in installments. In 606, a number of them begin, are taken into exile. In 597, there's a second exile. And then 586, the final exile when the Babylonians come and destroy the temple. This is the end of all the hopes of so many people. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet lamenting, Lamentations, over the destruction of Jerusalem, and what God has been doing in the world seems to come to a complete end. He's through with Israel, it appears, but of course, he promised even when the prophets were prophesying saying to the southern kingdom, "Repent or you're gonna be judged," like Jeremiah was saying this, he basically then would say, "If you're not gonna repent, God's gonna send you into captivity, the captivity's gonna last 70 years, and then He's gonna bring you back." So you have a 70-year captivity. 606-605, the exile begins.

In 538-539 right here, this is when the Babylonians and Babylon, they're in Babylon now. The Babylonians are defeated by the Persians and the first thing Cyrus does is issue an

edict in 538 that says, Cyrus, the Persian king, issues an edict and says he wants the temple rebuilt. That's where Ezra 1 started, the Cyrus edict, okay? Now the people can leave and so about 50,000 of them come from Babylon back and they arrive around 536. It takes a while to get their plans together to, you know, get everybody moving and they get there. So they've been out of the land for how long? Seventy years.

Now an interesting thing that we're gonna see, though, they start building the temple in 536, remember, that's chapter 2, chapter 1 to 4 basically. They start building the temple and then they're opposed, remember, and the temple, after they lay the foundation, the construction comes to a halt because of the opposition. They're like, "Why is God allowing all this opposition?" And so they quit and for 15 years it lies, this foundation just lies bare and the prophet, then God raises up the prophets with the prophetic word. You see, he puts his word in their mouths, they come to speak the word to the people so that they can be about God's business, they can do God's work, they can be what God has called them to be. They need the prophet to speak the word. One of the things that Haggai says is, "You say in your hearts it is not time for the temple to be rebuilt." So they were saying that. They were thinking, "It's not time. Clearly we need walls first. There's a lot that's gotta get done before we can build the temple and God understands." No, the prophet says, "No, it's not, you're not right, it is time. You need to repent and start building."

So that happens and it takes through the ministries of Haggai, Zechariah, this is what Ezra is talking about right now, this radical transformation happens. The people who were afraid and timid and unable to build, the temple lying in ruins, the people's lives in discouragement, "What's God doing?" The prophetic word comes and everything changes. God makes a way and they complete the temple and the temple is completed in 516. Do you notice something about the numbers? When was the temple destroyed? 586, it's completed in 516. How many years? Seventy years. It's like 70-year exile and a 70-year destruction of the temple. The Lord in his providence, in his glorious sovereignty even working through their sin showing the power of his word. That's why the temple was completed in 516, "Because I willed it to be so. Yet you're still wrong for not building." Do you see that? Doesn't justify them for they sinned, but the mystery of God's providence and this is so encouraging that even when we fail, if we will reorient our lives, put ourselves back under God's authority, he will work in us.

Now so then you have that going on and what we're doing, we're looking then in chapters, okay, next slide. Okay, the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. Here we see this is basically they cover from the end of the exile, the return to Jerusalem all the way through the ministry of Nehemiah, which is around 430 BC, okay? So 536-430, it's 130-year period.

Now next slide up. Okay these are the kings that we see. The green is the Persian rulers and these are the Jewish leaders. Like I say, you'll have this to look at home so it'll be easier then. But like Cyrus, you see Cyrus ruled from 539-530. He sends them home but he dies by 530. His son Cambyses is not mentioned in Ezra. He doesn't really do anything related to the Jews. He's not given any time. We've heard about Darius, Ahasuerus and

Artaxerxes and you see these long reigns: 21 years, 34 years and 41 years. So these are the guys that are, it's being talked about and if the original audience knew clearly who was being talked about. This is why when I was talking about chapter 4 and I was talking about how he goes here and there, he mentions him, he mentions him, this helps you to look at that maybe. I wish I'd done that before when I did chapter 4. Anyway, for some reason the Lord ordained that. I don't know. It's still, I'm still wrong though. Okay.

So now and you see the ministry of Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel, the prince, the governor. Joshua, the high priest. We don't know when their ministries ended. They were ministering at least to 515 because after the temple's built they're there, and they may have been somewhat time after that. We don't know anything about the Jewish leaders all the way until Ezra in 458, chapter 7.

So the next slide up, please. Okay, this is how that some overlay of the leaders, this is how the chapters relate. Chapters 1 to 6 are up there, the beginning of Darius' reign. The temple is completed in the sixth year of Darius' reign. He really starts around 522-521. So the numbers because...anyway, it's a little complicated. But this roughly approximation, chapters 1 to 6 and then chapter 7 and 10 jump all the way here. The end of chapter 6 to chapter 7, verse 1, jumps from 516 to 458, okay? The original audience knew that. They weren't like you and me, you know, 2,000 years removed where it's so hard to figure out. They knew it. Oh, yeah, of course, they knew because they knew Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes. It would be like us saying as I mentioned before, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President, during his first term. It was during the first term of George W. Bush. This is the kind of thing, it was that familiar to them, of course.

So anyway, it'll help you to familiarize yourself with that. I think we've got one more. Okay, so the first return. There's three returns is basically the way the outline of the book of Ezra works, Ezra-Nehemiah together. The people come back to the land in three installments and so what they're doing, the purpose of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is to show God's people rebuilding their lives as his people for his glory. It happens in three returns. The first to rebuild the temple in 538, and that's what chapters 1 to 6 are about, and they finish the temple. The second return, Artaxerxes commands Ezra to go and to teach the law. He commands them to go teach the law to the people. They need to practice their religion rightly. Isn't that amazing? The Persian king wants the Jews to practice their religion rightly. So he goes and he has some success but then some difficulty, but the walls are still broken down. They're having trouble so Nehemiah in 445 gets permission from the same king, Artaxerxes, to go and rebuild the walls and this is the story, then, of that. So by the time Nehemiah ends, they've rebuilt the walls, they've restored the law, and they've rebuilt the temple, okay?

Is that the last slide? I think I've got... Oh yeah, ministry of Haggai, Zechariah. So that's the prophetic word comes right there, the two prophets, Haggai, Zechariah. So like I said, you'll have all this. That's enough. We can turn off the slides now. Alright, was that helpful? I'm glad. Thank you. Praise the Lord and thank you for Bethany White helping me so much.

Alright, now, that said, let's get back in context, then. We are looking in chapter 6 at the end of the ministry of Haggai, Zechariah, the completion of the temple. The temple is completed in the section we're gonna read today and we're gonna see from that that the Lord is teaching us something very important, and that is that the purpose of the prophetic word is to produce right worship, that is always, that is always the focus of the word rightly understood, it is always the distilled essence of the word rightly understood is to produce in you and me true and right worship of Jesus Christ. We were created for that and the word does that before it does anything else. Now it will help you in lots of ways to rebuild your life but this is the first and essential focus of the word rightly understood is to produce worship.

This is how you should judge, for instance, a church you're visiting. If you leave here and you go somewhere else, you know, how do you know a sound church? Is the church calling you in the preaching and the teaching to worship? Or are they giving you slick techniques to make life work? Slick techniques to make life work from the Bible even, is not what God intends his word to be. He has created you and me to worship, to glorify him.

Sunday morning Bible study this morning, the question was how do you glorify God? The idea is we were created to glorify God. You and I were created, the reason we exist is to glorify God, that is, to live in such a way that we make the radiance of God's value and worth known; that we live in light of the radiance of his worth and that we by living that way, other people see how worthy he is, how wonderful he is, how good he is, how desirable he is. That's what you and I are called to be and to do. When we live that way, he also teaches us how to live and he gives us practical things, but the start is always worship.

Now let's look at this. We're gonna read chapter 6, verses 1 to 22, and I remind you that verse 14 is what you want to focus in on about the prophetic word and see how that in the context of this relates. But let's start with verse 1. This is after they started building again, after the ministry in chapter 5 of Haggai, Zechariah. They start building again and they encounter opposition again and the opponents come and say, "What are you guys doing?" And they say, "We're doing what God's called us to do and what Cyrus told us to do with the edict, the decree that he gave, and so we're gonna keep building. You guys go ahead and check it out." So then Rehum sends a letter to Darius. Rehum, an opponent of the building project, not a Jew, one of the Samaritans in the area, the governor of the nearby region comes and says, "Why are you guys building the temple?" They say, "God's called us to," and explain. He then writes a letter to Darius where he says, "Hey, you need to search this out. I'm concerned that they may be doing something really bad here," but he's more diplomatic and he writes it in a fairer way and then this is the reply from Darius the king, the king of Persia, to the governor.

1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. 2 In Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows:

So Darius, first of all, gets the letter and he searches things out. He issues a decree. "Search it out. Let's find the information they're talking about. Has Cyrus issued a decree?" They search all over Babylon and they can't find it, they have to go to Ecbatana, which is a town way out that Cyrus visited one time, the diligence of the search is so good that they find it and this is what they find. "Memorandum," verse 2, and here are the words of the former King Cyrus.

"Memorandum-- 3 "In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits; 4 with three layers of huge stones and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 Also let the gold and silver utensils of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

That's the end of Cyrus, that's what he found, and word for word he sends this in his letter to those who inquired, and now here he picks up, Darius now adds his words to what he just said from Cyrus.

6 "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from there. 7 Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. 8 Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay. 9 Whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail, 10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. 11 And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.

He really means it.

12 "May the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence!"

Isn't that awesome? Then we have what happens afterwards.

13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent. 14 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 command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. 16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. 17 They offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses. 19 The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves. 21 The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover. 22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father, we stand in awe of You and Your great sovereign rule over the nations in Your amazing and unsearchable ways. Lord, Your ways are not our ways and Your thoughts are not our thoughts and they are so much higher, so much more wonderful. Help us now, give us eyes to see, give us hearts to believe. Grant us repentance and let us see what You want us to see and to be what You want us to be. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

The purpose of the prophetic word is to call you to live a life of worship. The purpose of the prophetic word spoken to you when you find yourself in circumstances, in problems, in periods of darkness and confusion, God sends forth his word and the first agenda of his word is for you and me in wherever we find ourselves, to worship. That is his agenda and if you get that right, that is the beginning to everything else falling into place as God will will it. It doesn't mean all your circumstances are gonna change dramatically, the way you want them to. No, but you will change so dramatically that it won't matter whatever doesn't change. You will have joy.

Now what I want us to consider is three points in the time we have left that really speak about worship. I mean, the purpose of the prophetic word is to redirect our focus to worshiping God in our circumstances and we see that as we look at the text, first of all, in the prophetic word we see the first point, the priority of worship. The priority of worship. In the context here, the people in the text return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and they encountered opposition. The opposition was stiff, they were terrified, they were afraid, they quit working, they said to themselves, "It's not time." What were they thinking? I mean, really what were they thinking? Imagine if you were there and you have opponents, you're only 50,000 Jews in the middle of this mass of people in what used to be Israel who are Samaritans basically, they're people from other lands that have been brought back in. Yes, they're worshiping Yahweh but they're worshiping other gods and not all of them are even worshiping Yahweh but they're worshiping all kinds of gods. They're ungodly and they're opposed to the work. They hate the people and they hate the work they're doing. The opposition is so great that they stop working and it would be so natural for them and so logical, they're thinking, "You know, it's not time because what we need to do first is build walls. If we build walls around Jerusalem, then we will be safe to work and build the temple." So a good argument would've been, there were probably people who had this argument regularly, you know, explain, "Well, listen, guys, when we build the walls, we've gotta build the walls, we've gotta get that worked out sometime, but once we build the walls, then we can build the temple. I mean, what good would it do for us to try to build the temple if they're gonna come in and oppose us?" Or someone else might say, "Well, not only do you need to do that, we need to also rebuild our economy before we build the temple because we need to have money so we can support the work of the temple. The temple costs money." I'm back to 536, this is before Darius' recent thing we just read, okay? So this is what the circumstances that led up to them needing Haggai, Zechariah to come and give the prophetic word. "So we need the economy to be rebuilt before the temple. We need to work on our lives before we build the temple. We need to have the basics of our lives cared for, otherwise we're not gonna be alive to come and worship. So we need these things before we need the temple."

And I think you can make an argument logically that they had some reasonable human argument. They thought their biggest problem was security, that was their felt need, but God says to them, the prophets come and say, "You say it's not time for the temple to be rebuilt, we're saying it is time. God says it is time now to rebuild. It was time in 536 when you stopped building. It is time. Build." Why? Because worship is the most important thing, the most fundamental need that must be addressed. What needs to happen is at that point in time, the only way to truly worship God was to offer sacrifices in his temple. This was the way in God's revealing of himself progressively through the Scriptures, the only way you could truly approach God was to offer a sacrifice the priests in his temple offered for you, and so true connection to God, true worship happened in that one place and that place is in ruins and what is most important for a human being is to worship, therefore the most important thing that has to happen is that temple's gotta be rebuilt even though it's counterintuitive to us.

So the prophetic word comes and reorients the people. They're thinking there's other things that are more important. When I look at the mess of our lives, there's other things

we need to address first and they were probably praying regularly to the Lord, "Lord, help us with this, and help us with this, and help us with this, and help us with this," and they thought that all these things, we know from God's word these are not right, they're not what they need to be and God says, "First I want to help you with this. The first issue is your heart truly coming to meet with Me," and for them at that point in time, that meant the temple had to be rebuilt.

This is so important. I mean, you have a problem with anxiety, you have a problem with pornography, you have a problem with irrational fears, your marriage is a mess, the first thing you need to do that God's word is going to call you to do is to worship him truly and regularly in the circumstance you're in right now. He's not going to change your circumstances so that you can worship. He calls you to worship in the moment. The first order of business, and that's what this is saying, the first thing that we need to rebuild is not the wall, the first thing we need to do, rebuild is not the economy, the first thing we need to rebuild is not our houses, the first thing we must rebuild is the temple and that says the first thing I need is not even how to overcome this fear. It's gonna, the Lord wants to deal with that. The Lord wants to deal with your sexual sin. The Lord wants to deal with your pride. But the key issue, the fundamental target that the Lord wants to hit is your heart to call you to worship. That's the priority of worship.

Now secondly, the practice of worship. The practice of worship. The word not only shows you the priority of worship, it comes into your life and speaks into your life and says the issue is are you worshipping, it shows you the practice of worship. The practice of worship. How do you know how to worship? What is worship? How do we know what is worship? How do we know how to worship? We know it from the word. The word of God tells us what worship is, and the word of God tells us how to worship, and the word of God creates worship in us.

We see this in the passage where the emphasis is placed on this in verse 18. After they reestablish the temple worship, we're told in verse 18, "Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses." They looked to the word of God to show them how to worship. We don't make it up on our own. We don't do what seems right in our own eyes. We're to let God show us how to worship, what worship is. His word does that. And when we study his word, we see even from the very beginning, the first chapter of the Bible tells us that we were created for worship. In fact, a couple of subpoints here about what worship is to help us with how we do it.

First point 2A, the practice of worship, A. 2 is the practice of worship and A is what we were created to do. We were created to worship. Genesis 1:26-27 we see this and we see it in a number of places all throughout the Bible but you can see it in the very first chapter of the Bible when we're told that God wanted to make man in his image and according to his likeness, and he makes man to be like him to image him. That is, to be like a replica of him. Somehow man replicates God. That's what the word "image" actually means. It's a word that was used in 1 Samuel 6 where the story of the ark of the covenant getting taken by the Philistines, and I won't go into that in detail, but basically

the Philistines take the ark of the covenant which represents the presence of God, they take it in battle from the Israelites and they believe they've defeated Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, the God of Israel, and so they take it into the temple of their gods and they put it in their city in their temple, and what happens is the Lord sends plagues upon the city that the ark is in, and they have plagues of tumors. Everybody starts popping up with tumors all over them. And they also had plagues of rats, and that's a pretty bad situation. Everybody's looking really ugly and there are rats everywhere, and so they're like they realize it's a supernatural thing. If all of us popped up with tumors and rats were running all over the place, we would know something was up and so they do and they think, "We've gotta get rid of the ark," and they send it, "Hey, you guys," Gath sends it to Ekron and Ekron to Ashkelon because wherever the ark goes, the tumors and the rats go, and finally they've had enough. After a few months they realize, "We need to get rid of this thing," and they send it back to Israel. Well, when they send it back, it's a great story to read even the way it's sent back. I can't go into it now, but they don't want to send it empty-handed, they make images of the tumors and the rats. Same word, Hebrew word "tselem," and it means "replica." A replica of the tumor, a replica of the rat out of gold. They fill the ark with these as an offering to the God of Israel.

So it's to look like something. So an image would also be a statue. And so say that man is like somehow, even though God is spirit and invisible, somehow man is like a statue, was created to be like a statue or a replica of God, made in his image and according to his likeness. Our spiritual nature, our intellect, yes, all of these things, our moral capability, all of that I think's part of it, our relational dynamic that we can have relationships the way the Triune God can. But we're made to be that. Well, what is an image and a likeness, how does it work? Well, to be like God we need to be connected to God. We were made to know and love God and to replicate or reflect God. Image and likeness. We know God. We're seeing God. And we're as people fill the earth if they had never sinned, they would have filled the earth and they would have been looking at God, loving God, worshipping God, valuing God, and shining with his glory, replicating his glory throughout the whole world. That's what we were created to be.

So you and I are created to live in a relationship, like Ted was talking about earlier, coram Deo, before the face of God, loving God, worshipping God, treasuring God, living for God. From the very beginning it's clear and this is seen throughout the Scriptures. This is what we were made for and to add to that, what are we created to do? We're created to worship. Well, what is worship? Worship, we can say a lot about this. I like John Piper's definition: worship is to gladly reflect back to God the radiance of his worth. It's joyful. It's reflecting. It's seeing the radiance of God's worth. In fact, the word "worship" comes in English from worth-ship. The Hebrew words for glory, mean value. To glorify God means to value him, to treasure him supremely. So glorifying and worshipping are the same thing basically. You're treasuring God. You're valuing God and because you value God, you're living for God and people see in your life the reflection of how God is worth so much.

Another thing you see in Genesis 1:26 is that worship, there's this connection: you're made in the image of God and let them rule over the fish of the sea. The word "rule" is

emphasized in verse 26 and 28 of chapter 1 of Genesis. So "rule" is related to it, that is, God is King over all that he has made and he's made man to worship him, to know him, to love him, and to rule as in a sense, like a co-regent, an under-prince under God. And so if his rule is mediated through our rule, then if we're not under his rule, we can't rule properly. So worship is also obedience and submission to God, and isn't that what really shows God is valuable when you are willing to submit your will to God. You submit what you want to him. This is why the prophet Samuel when he rebuked Saul when Saul offered a sacrifice he wasn't supposed to offer, he said, "Obedience is better than sacrifice." Just offering a sacrifice is not what God is, God wants you to obey him from the heart. He wants you to submit yourself to his will and his word and when you do that, you are worshiping him.

That Romans 12:1 is another verse that gives insight into this. He says, "I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God," and he uses the language of worship. This is what Christian living is, Romans 12:1-2 is a great summary of the Christian life. Looking at the mercies of God, looking at the glory of what Christ has done and Paul says that in chapter 12, verse 1, thinking back on the first 11 chapters of Romans where he's unpacked for us the glory of the work of Jesus Christ in saving sinners, the work of God in saving sinners. God loved us. While you were yet sinners, Christ died for us. At the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. You and I are sinners, we're ungodly, and yet God has loved us and given his Son for us, and in light of that, in light of his glorious death on the cross and his glorious resurrection and salvation that he's made known to you, now in light of that, in view of God's mercy, I urge you to offer your lives, offer your bodies a living sacrifice. He says what true worship is is to continually sacrifice your whole self to God. I urge you to offer your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service of worship. It's the only reasonable thing for a person who's been born again, bought by the blood of Christ, saved from the power of darkness, delivered to the kingdom of light. The only reasonable thing for you and me to do in response is to live a life of complete surrender and worship to God out of gratitude for what he's done. It's not to earn anything back. It's merely out of gratitude and love and adoration that we surrender ourselves to him.

"When I survey the wondrous Cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest Gain I count but Loss,  
And pour Contempt on all my Pride.

Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,  
That were a Present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All."

Worship is the only reasonable thing and it is what we were created to be and so worship, then, what God is always interested in is calling true worship, true worshipers to himself. This is what evangelism is, you're calling someone who's worshiping themselves, worshiping the things of this world, to now worship the one worthy of worship, the Lord

Jesus Christ, to liberate them from the misery of worshipping themselves and to come into the freedom and delight of knowing the true and living God through his Son.

So we invite them to that even as we live that and seek to live that. So worship is obedience, worship is what we were created to do, so the practice of worship then means when the mess in my life as I look around me, I want relief, I want to be better, I want to feel better, I want things to work better. That's my natural disposition and that's yours. So we want strategies, principles, techniques and this passage is saying to us, "Stop making your priority to make your life work." This is the first thing God's gonna say, "Stop making your priority to make your life work. Stop making your priority to change your spouse. Stop making your priority to even get your child saved. Stop making that your priority. That's not your first priority." Those are all good things, actually. I mean, your spouse being godly, not your spouse doing what you want them to do. Your child getting saved certainly, but that's not your top priority. In fact, those things are all in the hand of God and you release them and you stop fighting for that and you stop seeking that and what you do is you seek to worship God no matter what happens, and if you get that right, everything changes. It's like the light floods in. Now it's a daily battle to keep getting that right but this is the purpose of the word of God. The first purpose of the word of God is always to produce true and living worship in the heart of God's people.

Thirdly, the product of worship. We've seen the priority of worship, the practice of worship, the word shows us how to worship, but now the product of worship, joy. We see it in the passage in Ezra 6:16, "And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy." And then again in verse 22, "And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy." Why? "For the LORD had caused them to rejoice." The reason you have so much joy in worship is you're finally doing what you were created to do. There's nothing more joyful than doing exactly what you were made to do.

There's a sense in which our natural dispositions, our gifts, spiritual gifts, you get a sense of this when you do it. Some of you are artists and when you do art, you feel a sense of joy, right? Some of you are good with your hands and when you do stuff and you build stuff, or you're good at figuring things out or you're a computer programmer and you do it, and there's a joy in doing it. What God is saying is the first thing that we need to have joy in doing is worshipping him, and then if you bring all of those other things underneath that, in line with that, it makes everything, it catches all of our life up into worship, and that is living. It's not getting your life to work. It's not getting people in your life to change. No. It's not making you happy in the world's standards. It is giving you true and eternal joy. It's changing your soul. The structure of your soul is being restructured fundamentally. Mountains are moving in your heart and that which was obscured, you couldn't see God, now you see him and now you love him.

That's what God has called us to and as we reorient ourselves, and so the people of Israel, they wanted to deal with their lives, they wanted to build the wall, they wanted to do other things first and God said no and the prophetic word came and said, "No, focus on worship," and they did and they got joy, and they got joy in seeing, what really gave them

joy was when you get this right, you see God. Look at what he says in verse 22. What was their joy from? "They observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." That's kind of a summary of what we heard about Darius with all that stuff, "Leave them alone. Let them go. Not only that, I'm telling you guys to start supporting them, and if anybody does anything about this, I'm gonna see that they're impaled." I mean, they were like, "This is incredible. How could this possibly be?" They think God moved the heart of Cyrus. In fact, verse 14 says, this word "decree" is a key word in the passage, "they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes." Actually the word "command" in verse 14, I'm reading the New American Standard Bible, I think maybe in the NIV or definitely the ESV it says "decree," the same word. Verse 14 "command" is the same word as "decree." It says literally they finished building according to the decree of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, king of Persia. That is, their decrees were God's decree and God decreed their decrees, and they got to see this because they obeyed. They surrendered their will and obeyed and started building what God wanted them to build out of order in what they wanted. They stopped doing what they wanted and they saw the glory of God and they would not have seen it if they had still be over there thinking and doing things their way.

I love how he says, too, did you notice that he said, "had turned the heart of the king of Assyria"? Scholars talk about that because the king was not the king of Assyria, the king as we see in verse 14, Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes are all kings of Persia. Is this an error? Of course not. What's he saying? He's reminding them that the opposition they've had, remember before, remember Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and Babylon the southern kingdom? Those kingdoms came and went and now Persia is in the line of those kingdoms, you know, lording it over God's people, at times being harsh with them, and he says God turned the heart of the king. If he had said the king of Persia, they had better feelings about these guys, they had been more reasonable. The ones that were really the most unreasonable when you read back in the Old Testament is the kings of Assyria, but he's saying basically the same thing. He's magnifying the wonder of what God has done. "God has taken the most hateful opponents of yours, who hate what you're doing, who hate your desire to live for God, and God will bend their hearts and move them out of the way and line them up with His purpose if you submit to His purpose to worship Him above everything and to obey Him above everything."

There's no limit to what he'll do. When you get on God's agenda, a better way to say that is when your agenda becomes, when your agenda is submitted to God's agenda, that is God's agenda becomes your agenda, amazing things will happen. His word will not return void. Little by little he will move mountains in your life but you have to get the main thing right.

You know, I love the story of Job. This is a wonderful picture of this. You might meditate on this this week as a way of applying this. What happened? Remember Job, he's a guy, he's so wealthy, he's a godly man, he's not doing anything wrong. Scripture acts like, I

mean, I'm sure he was a sinner, of course, everybody are sinners, but he was a relatively speaking an incredibly righteous man. He loved God. He has all kinds of possessions and Satan comes to God and says, "He doesn't worship You for nothing. He only worships You because You bless him. Let me touch his things and he'll curse You to Your face." And so in a moment Job loses all that he owns and he loses all 10 of his children, and remember it's rapid fire. He has a servant come in and say, "They stole your camels," all 500 camels, whatever it was, "They came and they stole them away and they killed all the servants that were there. I alone have survived." And another one comes, "And they stole the sheep or lightning struck from heaven and killed all the sheep and I alone have come back to tell you." And another one comes to say, "They stole all your donkeys and I alone..." It says as soon as he finishes speaking, the next guy comes in and then finally the fourth guy comes in and says, "I was there at your son's house. He had a banquet for all of your children. They were in the house celebrating and a great wind came, blew the house over. They all died, all the servants, I alone have come to tell you." Job tore his robe. Do you know what he did? He tore his robe, he fell on his face and he worshiped. He knew the first business is to know God is in control and my calling is to worship. The second chapter when he said, "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." And he worshiped. Second chapter, his health. He worshiped. He praised God.

That's what you and I were created to do and if we get that right, there's no limit to what God will do.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, we praise You for the glory of who You are. We pray that You would help us to be true worshipers of Jesus Christ. We pray for those that are here that do not know You truly, have not repented and placed their faith in Christ. Lord, grant them salvation. Help them to call out to You even now. If any man calls on the name of the Lord, he shall be saved. We thank You for that free offer, the Gospel. Lord, we pray that those who belong to You, that we might live our lives for Your purpose; that we might realize that eternity is all that matters and that the things of this life, they have a measure of importance but it pales in comparison to what we're here for which is to give praise to such a great and glorious God, such a wonderful Savior. Help us, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*