

## **Leave the Workers Alone**

Ezra 6:1-18

I have always been eager to speak to young men preparing for the gospel ministry, particularly as they prepare for the necessary presbytery examinations, and I typically urge them to cherish the opportunity to study and prepare in such depth. I especially urge them to enjoy the opportunity to memorize things like the shorter catechism, for they will likely never again have the opportunity and the motivation to do such intense studying throughout the later years of their ministry. And they should study diligently as they prepare for ordination, so that they can drink upon the fruit of that study for years to come, remembering what they were required to learn for a presbytery exam, as they begin to preach and teach regularly and find themselves under all the demands and time constraints of the ministry.

I certainly have experienced that myself, continuing to this day to benefit from the study I did as I was examined by presbytery for ordination many years ago. Particularly in the memorization of the shorter catechism. And though the words are rusty for a lot of the questions, they aren't that rusty. And a quick review revives my appreciation for the encouragement that such solid doctrine gives.

That is true of many questions, including the question regarding Christ executing the office of a king. An answer I learned many years ago is now even more meaningful and encouraging than it was then, and the answer to that question is this: "Christ executes the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies."

He subdues us to himself. That's salvation! He subdues us.

He conquers us. He rules and defends us. How marvelous. But then the part I want to focus on tonight. "Christ executes the office of a king, ...in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies."

That's wonderful. And it is especially wonderful because we have so many enemies. And our enemies are his enemies. And HE restrains them. And conquers them!

Now, that doesn't always seem to be the case, does it? It seems, all too often, that his and our enemies seem to succeed. There is a lot of oppression and wickedness in the world. Our enemies can really cause a lot of trouble. And sometimes, that's all that we have to focus upon! Yet in that context, we need to learn to focus upon Christ as the king, restraining and conquering all his and our enemies. That is the subject of our text this afternoon.

In Ezra 6, the people of God will accomplish that which God told them to do. The temple will be completed. The work of the kingdom of God will succeed and prosper. We need that encouragement, because often, from day to day, we don't accomplish what we should. Sometimes, from day to day, it might seem that the work of the kingdom will not succeed and will not prosper. And we get very pessimistic. And we forget about the work of Jesus as he is so consistently identified, the king, seated upon the throne at the right hand of God.

So let's look at a great example of God restraining and conquering all his and our enemies this morning. Remember what has happened. King Cyrus issued a decree that said the people of Israel could return to their land after the years of exile. And they did. And they started to build the temple. And then they faced opposition, and were compelled to stop work. They God

told them to start working again, and they did. But again, the trouble makers appealed to the King, King Darius. The conclusion of that letter is found in,

Ezra 5:17 “Now therefore, if it seems good to the king, let a search be made in the king’s treasure house, which is there in Babylon, whether it is so that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure concerning this matter.”

Today, Darius’ response, verses 1-7. The decree was found. v.6 “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Persians who are beyond the River, keep yourselves far from there. 7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site.”

The answer is pretty simple, isn’t it? “Leave the workers alone!” Cyrus had issued that original decree, and for the stability of his kingdom and the security of his reign as king, Darius would not contradict it. All of that proves by example that,

## **I. GOD PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE IN THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM.**

God’s people were to build the temple, and God would protect them. Therefore,

### **A. The work of the kingdom shall go forward under God’s protection.**

It would go forward. It would be accomplished.

v.3 “Let the house be rebuilt.” “Let the foundations of it be firmly laid.”

And with specific instructions for the Samaritan troublemakers, “Let the work on this house of God alone.”

The work of the kingdom would go forward. What a good lesson and great encouragement for us today. The work of the kingdom will go forward. Now, that isn’t to deny that there will be momentary and temporary setbacks. That doesn’t mean that there won’t be troubles and persecution. But in the overall scheme of things, that principle is still true today. The work of the kingdom will go forward. Under God’s protection.

Recall the great commission given to the apostles as the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ, in Matthew 28. Remember the promise:

Matt. 28:20 “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Similarly, we read in,

Acts 1:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. By his father. Therefore we, the church, are to go to all nations with the gospel of salvation, making disciples of all nations. We are to be his witnesses to the very ends of the earth. And we shall succeed! Despite whatever momentary obstacles we may encounter, we shall succeed. We, the church, shall succeed. Under God’s protection.

Remember those familiar words Jesus spoke to Peter.

Matt. 16:8 “...I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it.”

We shall succeed. The work of the kingdom shall succeed. And when Jesus Christ returns in power and glory, he shall hand

the kingdom over to his father. And he will reign. He does reign. And he will put all his enemies under his feet. For all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him.

We need that sense of optimism, in order to handle whatever setbacks we might encounter, and to have the motivation to keep working. And to keep praying. We need to know that the work of the church will succeed and go forward, otherwise you won't be willing to work terribly hard, and you won't be stirred to pray very persistently or fervently. The work of the church, which is the work of the kingdom, will succeed, and I approach my work here as a Pastor with that confidence. Because of God's protection which is illustrated for us in Ezra 6.

But notice, it's not only protection which God gives. But prosperity. Success. We see that,

**B. The work of the kingdom shall prosper under God's protection.**

v.8-9

Now, you can't always assume that the church of today will enjoy such generous protection and prosperity, that even the civil governments which oppose us would provide for our well-being. Actually, we can expect quite the opposite, I am sure. But we do still have the vestiges of that blessing in our country, for example, in our exemption from taxation, for the church as a whole and the individual gifts which you give to it. The church pays no tax. Money you donate is deducted from your taxable income. And for me as a minister, the money you give me designated for my housing is also not taxed. All of those are tangible benefits, and there is, therefore, a sense in which the government is subsidizing the work of the church, as it did under the governor Tattenai. And you should realize that such a blessing could be

revoked, but while we have it, we should receive it from God's hand as a measure of his provisions for prosperity. And praise him for it.

The point is that the work of the kingdom shall prosper. And,

**C. The work of the kingdom shall succeed.**

Again, I wish to use this historical example as an illustration, a symbol of the work of the kingdom of Jesus Christ today. The people of Israel succeeded. They rebuilt the temple.

v.14

Again, Jesus' words to Peter. "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it."

Oh, that all of God's people would have such confidence, and gain the assurance that Paul speaks of at the close of that great chapter of 1 Corinthians 15. After speaking about Christ reigning until he has put all his enemies under his feet, and describing Christ's return when he will hand the kingdom over to his father, after describing the glorious victory over death which we shall enjoy with Christ when our bodies are raised from the dead, he says this,

1Cor. 15:57 "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

That's the application of a proper optimism about the success of the work of the church of Jesus Christ. "Your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

And if you believe that, then the exhortation makes perfect sense, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm. Be steadfast.

Let nothing move you. Always abounding in the work of the Lord.”

We need that encouragement in our day, don’t we. We are not a large church. We’re not yet able to have much of an impact upon this community, because few know who we are and what we believe. But despite that apparent insignificance, we need the optimism to be assured that God protects his people in the work of the kingdom, and thus that work will succeed. We should pray for that work to succeed among us. “Always abounding in the work of the Lord.”

Well, what did the people of Israel do as they enjoyed their success? They worshiped!

v.9-10

Indeed,

## **II. GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO WORSHIP.**

The worship of the people of God is a repeated subject of the OT, and I believe that the repetition has a purpose. And I freely repeat that emphasis in my preaching. The subject has come up several times already in our study of Ezra, and it will come up again. And I will keep that emphasis. There is such a high priority that we must give to worship. Especially corporate worship. The worship of the body, assembled together.

That worship is so well described here, as it is in so many places in the OT, where all the OT ceremonies and sacrifices represent the inward worship in spirit and truth that we are to offer in this age of the new covenant.

The description and definition of worship is pretty simple here. It is, first of all,

### **A. Worship by acceptable sacrifices.**

v.10

“Sacrifices of sweet aroma...” “Pleasing sacrifices,” as the ESV translates. Sacrifices with a soothing aroma. Sweet smelling. Pleasing and acceptable to God.

We must view our acts of worship in that fashion, as sacrifices we offer to God. I just can’t say that enough. The measure of worship is not our subjective reaction--whether we liked it or not. Whether we enjoyed it or not. The measure of worship is simply this, was it acceptable to God? Was it pleasing to God? Was it a sacrifice of sweet aroma to God?

What makes a sacrifice pleasing to God? Great question. When your life is a whole burnt offering. When your whole life becomes a living sacrifice, “holy and pleasing to God.”

And so the people of Israel, the people of God in the OT, would offer to God such sacrifices, according to verse 10. But notice the second half of the verse.

v.10b “...and pray for the life of the king and his sons.”

The obvious lesson for us is that we are to,

### **B. Worship by appropriate prayers.**

Prayer is one of the elements of worship. Corporate prayer, that is, prayer offered to God on behalf of the entire congregation.

1 Tim.2:1 “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior...8 I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

Based on that verse, I do believe that in corporate worship, the prayers should be spoken only by the men, and that in that very obvious sense, as Paul writes just a few verses later, that a woman ought to “remain quiet” or “be in silence.” But that’s not really my point here today. Regardless of who actually does the speaking verbally, still our corporate prayer is a sacrifice which we offer to God. And notice what that ought to include.

1 Tim.2:1 “I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority.”

And so we read in Ezra 6:10 that the people were to “pray for the life of the king and his sons.”

So we should pray for the life of our king! We should pray for those in authority over us, and for the process by which they assume that authority. That’s especially appropriate as we wrestle often with frustration with those who lead us and rule, especially in our national government. That is especially appropriate with regard to our president.

Pray for all men. And, as a specific example, pray for those in high positions. We should be praying when we meet for worship. Not merely prayers which invoke God’s presence as the beginning of worship. Not merely prayers of confession. And not limited to prayers of praise and adoration. But prayers of petition. Prayers of entreaty. For all men. A worship service without such an extended time of prayer is incomplete.

Finally, that worship is described here as,

**C. Worship by joyful celebration.**  
v.16-18

And what are we to celebrate? The work of God! The protection of God. The providence of God. The praiseworthy deeds of God. The prospering and success of the kingdom of God. In other words, God. We are to celebrate with great joy in the work of God.

Our celebrations of worship are not to be man-centered nor focused upon our pleasure or comfort! Our celebrations are to honor and glorify God and his work. And in that, we should have great, great joy.

Sometimes, I must say, we get so focused upon God and the need to express ourselves with appropriate reverence, that we forget the element of joy. Now, as a matter of conviction, I will seek to set before you an example of reverence, and I will structure every worship service with that in mind, as we approach God to offer him our acceptable sacrifices. But don’t let that cause you to neglect the sense of joy. Indeed, we are to enjoy God. To delight in him. To take pleasure in him. As we surrender ourselves to him in the sacrifices of our worship. Reverence and joy, joined together perfectly! As God calls his people to worship.

Let me tie all this together, and get back to the actual historical events of Ezra 6 with this third and final point.

### **III. GOD’S PROVIDENCE GOVERNS ALL THE AFFAIRS OF MEN.**

There is a marvelous interplay in these verses, an interplay between the sovereign decree of God and responsible decrees and actions of men, especially the leaders of men. What we discover quite obviously from these events is that,

#### **A. Human rulers are God’s servants to accomplish his will.**

I want you to see that, and I want to say it completely. Nothing is said about Cyrus or Darius actually believing in God, in the

sense of salvation. They were not Jews. They did not submit to circumcision. They were pagan, heathen leaders. But as leaders, they were servants of God fulfilling his purposes.

v.13-14

Surely, God's will, his secret will, the eternal purpose of his providence and sovereign decree, his plan was for the people of Israel to return to their promised land, to rebuild the temple, and to be reestablished as a nation with the throne of David renewed.

And how did God cause that to happen? By human rulers. Cyrus. Darius. They were servants of God. That's an important concept, because it makes you realize that everyone who rules is God's servant, in the sense of accomplishing his will, that which God determined would happen. And that doesn't contradict either the sovereign authority of God or the responsibility inherent in the actions of men.

Remember the prophecy of Isaiah, written long before this time, which so eloquently proves this point, that the leaders among men are used by God as his servants to bring to pass his will. It is a glorious description of God's sovereignty. Cyrus is identified by name. So God sovereignly determines all that comes to pass. And he uses human rulers to do it. Indeed,

**B. The decrees of men serve to accomplish the secret will of God.**

The actions of men. The decisions of men. The laws and decrees of men. They all serve to bring about what God has predetermined will come to pass.

Note how that works in our text. Notice how the decree of Darius ensures, humanly speaking, that the temple would be rebuilt.

v.11-12

Darius issued the decree. But it was God's purpose that was accomplished. Even more significantly,

v.14-15

The temple was finished. And notice what Ezra records in verse 14. "...according to the commandment of the God of Israel." "...and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia."

The word commandment there could be translated "decree." Purpose, or plan. It came to pass, in other words, according to the decree of God. That's called predestination. God's sovereignty. His eternal purpose, "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

But in the same sentence, in the same breath, we read that it came to pass by decree of the Persian king. And so it did, at least from a human perspective. It came to pass because a human king issued a decree.

Again, my point. Every decree, every determination of human leaders are directly and governed by God, he "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

Those decrees will sometimes violate God's revealed will. Sometimes, those decrees may be wicked and sinful, rebellious and hard-hearted. But God is still God. And he is still in control. He is still governing and directing all the affairs of men. And his secret will, the predetermined plan which he brings about by what we call providence, that secret will is accomplished through the means of the decrees and decisions of men.

And so the temple was built, the work was finished, “according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.”

So where does that leave us? With the assurance that God’s eternal purpose will come to pass. And he has told us some of what is included in that eternal plan. It includes the proclamation of the gospel to every nation, to the very ends of the earth. It includes the spread of the kingdom and the reign of Christ in heaven until he puts every enemy under his feet. And it includes the triumph of the church, for the gates of hell shall not prevail against us.

So pray that we as a church, pray that we can go out in our city with that confidence. Pray for the work of the gospel among us with that confidence. Pray that we can approach the work of our church with that confidence and enthusiasm.

1 Cor. 15:58 “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”