

The Power of Faithful Preaching

Ezra 5:1-2

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God chooses to use faithful preaching to bring sinners to Himself through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to equip and send His people forth to bring reformation to the family, church, and nation. **It was through** the faithful preaching of the prophet Jonah that God stirred up the great city of Nineveh to trust in the Lord's mercy and to repent of their abominations, with the result that Nineveh was spared destruction. **It was through** the faithful preaching of Peter and the apostles that the Lord brought 3,000 souls to Christ on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and 5,000 more men trusted in Christ through the preaching of Peter and John (according to Acts 4:4). **During the days of the Reformation**, the preaching of Luther, Calvin, Knox, and many others stirred the hearts of thousands upon thousands to look to Christ alone for righteousness and to His Word alone for their doctrine and worship. **And when the civil authorities** branded faithful covenanted ministers in Scotland as outlaws (because they would not bow the knee to tyrants who usurped the throne of Christ over His church and who disavowed lawful covenants by which they were bound, like the Solemn League and Covenant), it was in the fields under the great dome of God's heaven that many thousands of hungry souls risked their own welfare and lives to hear the gospel and to be encouraged to persevere in trusting Christ and building His kingdom as they heard the fearless and faithful preaching of Richard Cameron, Alexander Peden, Donald Cargill, and James Renwick. And dear ones, let me add this, it was not necessarily the great oratorical skills of these godly ministers that drew the thousands to hear their preaching, but rather it was the faithfulness of God to bless His ordinance of preaching by these faithful ministers. **And I dare say** that it will likewise be by the means of faithful preaching that God will raise up the hearts of His people to promote that future covenanted reformation that will introduce the glorious millennial reign of Christ from heaven, at which time the nations of the world (including Israel) will be joined to the Lord in national covenants.

This Lord's Day we shall observe how the Lord blessed the prophesying and preaching of Haggai and Zechariah to promote the continued rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after the return of God's people from Babylonian captivity. The main points from our text are the following: (1) The Message in the Prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1); and (2) The Result of the Prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:2).

I. The Message in the Prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1).

A. In the previous sermon from Ezra 4:1-5, you will recall that the Holy Spirit gave us an account of certain adversaries (namely, the ancestors of the Samaritans), who came with a proposal to lend a helping hand in uniting with the Jews to rebuild the temple. Even though these Samaritans worshipped Jehovah, they did so with the addition of many superstitions, which God had not authorized in His Word. Thus, Zerubbabel (the governor), Joshua (the high priest), and the chief fathers of Israel rightly rejected this offer of unity with the Samaritans (because it was not a unity in the truth of God's Word). The scorned Samaritans then showed their true colors in discouraging the Jews from rebuilding the temple, and even hired counselors to hinder this good work from moving forward, so that there was no progress beyond the rebuilding of the altar and the laying of the foundation of the temple for 16 years. That is where the previous sermon ended (Ezra 4:5).

B. But when we come to the remainder of Ezra 4:6ff, we briefly must address an issue of chronology.

1. You will no doubt be wondering why I have skipped over Ezra 4:6-23, and proceeded to Ezra 5:1-2 for the sermon this Lord's Day. I do intend to preach from Ezra 4:6-23, but not today. Very simply, Ezra 4:6ff, addresses adversaries that arose in the reign of King Ahasuerus of Persia (who is the Persian king in the Book of Esther), and in addition to that, adversaries to God's people that sought to terminate the work of **rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem** in the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia (who is the Persian king later on in the Book of Ezra and in the Book of Nehemiah).

2. Thus, since this section of Ezra (Ezra 4:6-23) actually occurs later on in the book during the reign of King Artaxerxes, I have decided to wait until we get to that point in our series through the Book of Ezra. At that point we will come back and pick up this attempt on the part of adversaries to bring **the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem** to a halt.

C. We now come to Ezra 5:1, wherein we will consider **The Message of the Prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah** (read Ezra 5:1). We now are going to look a little more closely at these two prophets whom the Lord used to encourage the will and determination of God's people and to strengthen their arms in taking up once again the work of reformation in rebuilding the temple of the Lord (for you will recall that only the altar had been rebuilt and the foundation laid in Ezra 3).

1. Look with me first at the period of time in which Haggai and Zechariah were raised up by the Lord to prophesy and preach in God's name to God's people who had been graciously delivered from Babylonian captivity. Haggai 1:1 states that Haggai began prophesying "in the second year of Darius" (the first day of the sixth month). The second year of King Darius of Persia was 520 b.c. (some 16 years after the Samaritans had effectively frustrated the Jews from continuing the work on the temple). This is also confirmed by Ezra 4:24. Turn with me now to Zechariah 1:1, where we read that Zechariah likewise began his prophesying "in the second year of Darius" (in the eighth month, two months after Haggai), likewise in 520 b.c. Thus, the work in rebuilding the temple ceased until the second year of King Darius, and the reason that it ceased only until the second year of King Darius (and no longer than that) is because the Lord raised up His prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) to awaken the people of God (by their prophesying and preaching) to renew the work that they had ceased to undertake in actively rebuilding the temple of the Lord. Let us now briefly consider a portion of the prophecy of Haggai first, and then a portion of the prophecy of Zechariah second.

2. **The Message of Haggai** (from the Book of Haggai). The thrust of Haggai's prophesying in regard to rebuilding of the temple (not the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem) is found in Haggai 1:2-6.

a. Although the adversaries (the Samaritans and the counselors whom they hired) continued to discourage and frustrate God's people in rebuilding the temple (according to Ezra 4:1-5,24), nevertheless, Haggai does not specifically address those adversaries who are not a part of Israel, but rather addresses the people of God as the adversaries who are preventing the reformation and progress in the rebuilding of the temple.

b. The people of God used the excuse in effect that it was not the right time to build God's kingdom (read Haggai 1:2). Why was it not the right time? We are not told why they thought it was not the right time. Perhaps it was not the right time because they viewed the job of rebuilding the temple to be so overwhelming (such a huge undertaking). Perhaps it was not the right time because they thought their enemies might only seek to discourage and frustrate their plans once again. Perhaps it was not the right time because it would require too much of a sacrifice in time, treasure, and talent. Perhaps it was not the right time because their priorities were now different from before (my family, my home, my job etc.).

c. But then the word of the Lord exposes all the feeble excuses of God's people in Haggai 1:3-4 (Read it). In other words, the Lord declares, "You have enough time, money, and energy for the things you consider to be important (like beautifying and adorning your own homes with cedar paneling). The point is not that it was wrong to do this (to build or to adorn their homes), but that it was wrong to do this to the exclusion of rebuilding God's temple (and God's kingdom). There was God's house with just the

foundation laid (and nothing more), but there were their houses built and paneled with cedar. God's house was in ruin (and nothing was being done to change that, except perhaps mere talk). God's people were excited about their own homes, work, and dreams, but they were cold and indifferent when it came to the house of the God who had saved them and delivered them from Babylonian captivity. Dear ones, the Holy Spirit is searching our own hearts today. Does zeal for God's house and Christ's kingdom consume us? Or have we become so caught up in our kingdom that we have ignored and neglected the advancement of Christ's kingdom and the reformation of Christ's Church?

d. Dear ones, the Lord is able to make the much that we have (when we neglect His kingdom) to be blown away by the wind or to fall through holes in the bags (banks) that hold our money (according to Haggai 1:5-9). But the Lord Jesus is also able to make the little we have to abound to such a blessing for ourselves and others (when we consciously seek to build His kingdom in our life, family and friends, church, neighborhood, and work). Again, let me be clear that it is not sinful or wrong to prosper from our lawful labors in this life. What is sinful and wrong is to forget the Lord who blesses you with prosperity, and to neglect so great a salvation bestowed upon you by the Lord to promote reformation wherever you can—looking, praying (always looking and praying) to advance the kingdom and cause of Christ wherever you can (Matthew 6:33; 1 Timothy 6:17-19).

e. God's people had made a good start at the beginning in rebuilding the altar and in laying the foundation, but they had become discouraged by their adversaries and had shifted their entire focus to their own immediate interests. Dear ones, it is always easier to look to place the blame on others for our lack of zeal in promoting the kingdom of Christ, in standing for the doctrine and worship taught in Scripture, and in living out our profession of faith (it's my husband's fault, he is not taking the leadership in the home that he should take; or it's my wife's fault, she is not submitting to my authority and following me as she should; or it's my parent's fault, they do not always set a good example; or it's the fault of my work, it is such an antichristian place to work; or it's the minister's fault, he has not provided the oversight I need in order to be accountable; or it's the congregation's fault [says the minister], they have not supported me with the finances and prayer that I need; or it's the fault of my physical infirmities or financial problems, I am brought so low by them). Dear ones, there will always be someone or something that we can blame for not fulfilling our own duties to trust and obey the Lord (even when others have failed us in various ways). But ultimately, when we ignore or neglect our own duties in building the kingdom of Christ (through faith in Christ and loving obedience to His commands) in our own life, in our family, in the church, at work, and with friends, our neglect and procrastination is our sin (just as it was the sin of the Jews in Haggai 1 that God addressed in their procrastination to rebuild the temple).

f. And when God's people were convicted and aroused to renew their trust and loving obedience to the Lord in taking up once again their duties to rebuild the temple, the Lord mightily blessed them and the work of rebuilding the temple advanced (Haggai 1:13-14). Thus, we see here in Haggai chapter 1 how the Lord stirred up the hearts of His people to advance the kingdom of the Lord through the prophesying and preaching of Haggai. That, dear ones, is what I pray throughout the week that the Lord will use me to accomplish in your lives and mine. For I must first preach to myself before I can preach to you. I must first turn to Christ and repent of my sins before I call you to do the same.

2. **The Message of Zechariah** (from the Book of Zechariah). There is much that might be said about the prophecies of Zechariah that are found in the Book of Zechariah in encouraging God's people, but I would like to focus upon what is found in Zechariah 4:6-10.

a. I want you to see how the thrust of Zechariah's prophecy here emphasizes not so much the duty of man (as did the prophecy from Haggai 1), but rather emphasizes more the faithfulness and power of God to advance and complete the work of rebuilding the temple of the Lord. For the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel (the governor) is that this work of completing the temple of God (or advancing the kingdom of Christ) is not by human strength, nor by abundant wealth and resources, nor by the wisdom of

man, but is rather accomplished by the might and power of God's Spirit (who lacks absolutely nothing by way of strength, resources, or wisdom), as we read in Zechariah 4:6.

(1) Dear ones, we are so prone to trust in the resources of man, or to look to the degrees behind the names of men, or to go over the number of members we have on our church rolls (and to think because we have these qualifications, we can do the work of the Lord; or because we do not have these qualifications, we cannot do the work of rebuilding the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ that is broken into so many pieces due to divisions and schisms). But the almighty God speaks through His prophet, Zechariah, and encourages Zerubbabel (and all who trust in the Lord) that the promise to repair the temple (or to reform Christ's divided and broken church) is not to the mighty, but is rather to those who trust in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth (Psalm 33:16-21).

(2) Remember the words of Jonathan to his armor bearer when they were greatly outnumbered by the Philistines: "For there is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few" (1 Samuel 14:6). Dear ones, the Lord of hosts (i.e. the Lord of armies) will fight for His own cause (and the reformation of church and nation is indeed the work and cause of Christ, who is the Prince of the kings of the earth), and He cannot lose, no matter who the adversaries may be that are opposed to a covenanted reformation, even as the Lord of armies fought for Elisha when the Syrian king and troops surrounded the city of Dothan in (2 Kings 6). You will recall how Elisha prayed that the Lord would cause the eyes of his servant to be opened to see the myriads of fiery chariots that surrounded the Syrians. We too need the eye of faith opened to see the myriads of angelic forces that Lord has sent to promote the reformation of His church in these days as well. Let us not forget that the work and cause of a covenanted reformation is the work of the Lord of hosts (i.e. the Lord of armies).

b. Furthermore, Zechariah prophesies that no great mountain (ruler or nation) shall stand in the way of the Lord rebuilding His own temple (read Zechariah 4:7). By God's amazing grace, the temple that has been begun in the laying of the foundation will be finished, and it will be finished by Zerubbabel (read Zechariah 4:9). Yes, even that greater Zerubbabel, the Lord Jesus Christ, has promised, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Dear ones, it is not a time to be afraid, nor a time to be discouraged because of the entire leavening of society with godlessness, or to fall into despair over the manifest backsliding of so many Christians and churches, nor is it a time cling to our doubts as to how the reformation of entire nations will yet occur. It is time to cling to the promises of the Lord God, who made heaven and earth.

c. In light of these promises found in Zechariah 4:6-9, who cares how seemingly small and insignificant our numbers and resources might be? For the Lord says through Zechariah, "Who hath despised the day of small things?" That is a great question. Who has despised the day in which there is no great reformation of church or nation happening? I might sinfully despise the day of small things. You might sinfully despise the day of small things. The adversaries of a covenanted reformation may sinfully oppose the day of small things. But dear ones, the Lord of hosts (i.e. the Lord of armies) will certainly not despise the day of small things. Whether it be Gideon's 300 who faced 130,000 Midianites and destroyed them, or a youthful David who faced an overwhelming giant and slew him, or a lowly Zerubbabel who faced a powerful Persian king and yet rebuilt the temple, or a few disciples of Christ who faced the might of the Roman Empire (and yet went forth in all of the world to disciple all nations), it is never by our might nor by our power, but it is always by "my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts."

II. The Result of the Preaching of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:2).

A. I simply want to note here that the prophesying and preaching of Haggai and Zechariah were mightily used by the Lord to awaken his slumbering people to go forth and complete the work that they had begun 16 years earlier in rebuilding the altar and laying the foundation of the temple. Here we see once again

the important role and duty that both the civil magistrate and the ecclesiastical minister have in working together to promote reformation within a kingdom. This is not simply the duty of Zerubbabel within Israel (it's not just a Jewish duty), but was the duty of the Gentile king of Nineveh (Jonah 3), and is the duty of every Gentile ruler in his official capacity (Psalm 2:10-12a), and if Gentile rulers fail to do so, they will be crushed by the Lord (according to Psalm 2:12). This is the same word of the Lord to the civil rulers of this nation (and all of the nations of this world). There is coming a time when the power of God's Spirit will so anoint the preaching of the gospel to the hearts of mankind that nations that have been notorious adversaries to God's people will engage in national covenants to be the Lord's people (according to Isaiah 19—Egypt, Assyria, and Israel). Then the kingdoms of this world will become in history what they are already legally, the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (in fulfillment of Psalm 2 and Revelation 11:15). This is our biblical hope. Without biblical hope, we will be cast to the ground in utter despair and hopelessness in regard, not only to the conversion and reformation of the nations, but also in regard to our physical afflictions, our financial problems, the salvation of our children, and the adversaries we face in standing for the truth of Christ. Without the promises of God in which to hope, we are doomed to despair and defeat. But with the promises of God, we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.

B. In closing, I would like to leave with you what must be clearly understood as the foundation to all reformation in rebuilding the temple (or advancing God's kingdom in the family, church, or nation). Turn with me to Zechariah 3:1-5 (read it).

1. Dear ones, this vision of Zechariah in looking at the unworthiness of Joshua to serve as the high priest precedes the promise of victory made to Zerubbabel (which we just considered in Zechariah 4). Dear ones, without this vision of unworthy Joshua, there will be no victory to Zerubbabel. The gospel must be faithfully proclaimed and lived before there will be reformation in the church of Christ and in the nations of the world. There is no biblical reformation or transformation without the pure gospel of Jesus Christ (which is what we find in the vision concerning Joshua here in Zechariah 3:1-5).

2. Very simply, we see in this vision that Joshua stands to minister before the Lord as one who by nature is an unworthy sinner, clothed with natural pollution and with personal sin. If this was true of Joshua, it was true of Israel, whom Joshua represented before the Lord (and is true of us all as well). Joshua appears before the Angel of the Lord (i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ who is the angel or messenger of the covenant according to Malachi 3:1), and there appears Satan (our arch adversary) who accuses Joshua, pointing to his filthy garment of natural pollution and personal sin. Joshua no doubt senses the same pollution and sin, for he cannot say that it is not so, when he is accused. He cannot defend himself by saying he is by nature pure and has no personal sin. In that sense, Satan's accusations are true. But the Lord Jesus (the Angel of the Covenant) comes to the defense of Joshua, and as Joshua's advocate before the throne of God's justice rebukes Satan and his accusations against Joshua. The Lord also recognizes that Joshua is clothed in filthy garments and deserves to suffer the fires of hell, but the Lord says that Joshua has been plucked from hell as "a brand plucked out of the fire." And the Lord out of His infinite supply of grace and mercy for this sinner, Joshua, takes away the filthy garment (forgiveness) and clothes him in the absolute purity of the Christ's own perfect righteousness (imputation of Christ's righteousness and obedience). And only after this is the mitre of service placed upon Joshua's head to go forth to promote reformation in rebuilding God's house and serving in God's house.

3. What are we to say to such a vision? Dear ones, I know what it is to be overwhelmed with a sense of my own unworthiness and sin when I appear before the Lord to preach to you. The accusations of Satan and the battles I face in preparing sermons at times are almost overwhelming. Were it not for the objective truth that in spite of my natural pollution and personal sin, Jesus Christ is my advocate before the throne of God's justice and that by faith in Jesus Christ I know and am persuaded that He has clothed me in the absolute purity of His glorious righteousness, I could not stand here before you as a minister for one

second.

4. Dear ones, this is true of each of you as well. How can you serve the Lord in seeking to bring reformation to family, church, and nation, if you do not have before you daily that glorious vision of Christ as your only hope and righteousness before the throne of God's justice? For it is a throne of justice—and Christ fulfilled all of God's justice for us. And as a result of that, it has become a throne of mercy and grace to undeserving sinners like you and me. Whatever the accusation that the enemy brings against you, dear child of God, whether it be that your faith is not perfect, whether it be that you have doubts that you are a child of God, whether it be that you have fallen time and time again into the same sin, admit and confess this to be true (do not deny it), but look in faith to Christ who declared, "Take away the filthy garments from him. . . Behold I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with the change of raiment." You will never win a debate with the devil. Your only appeal is to the promise of the Lord who cannot lie. As you daily reflect upon this vision, you will daily be prepared to go forth to serve the Lord and to advance His kingdom in the family, church, and nation. And remember that God sends us adversaries (like Satan) in order to cause us to flee to the bosom of Christ in order to find our rest and peace.

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