

The Wrath of Man Praises the Wisdom of God

Ezra 6:1-12

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We as Christians are greatly encouraged by the truth that the God who created us, the God who loved us from all eternity and redeemed us in time, is the same God who ordains and governs all history in order to glorify Himself and in order to benefit His church. Therefore, the adversaries who war against Christ and His people can do nothing by their wicked schemes and attacks against us that will not ultimately be turned to our profit and benefit in sanctifying us and building us up as His church. For “the wrath of man shall praise thee” (Psalm 76:10), i.e. God by His almighty power and infinite wisdom turns the wrath of men who despise us because we embrace Christ by faith alone and stand for His truth without compromise, God takes those angry attacks as occasions to ensnare the wicked and to save His people in order that the ungodly might fear and in order that the righteous might be bold and courageous as they see the Lord of hosts at work on their behalf.

Dear ones, how our eyes need to be opened to behold this truth in history and in our daily lives, if we would be those who are courageous and not cowering in fear before the wrath of man. Every occasion of man’s wrath is an occasion to behold the glory of God, who causes the wicked to fall into the hole that they had dug for those who are justified by faith alone and rest in the promise of God alone for their eternal salvation.

Let us see from our text this Lord’s Day how the Lord of hosts caused the wrath of man to praise Him and to benefit His church. The main points from our text are the following: (1) The Wrath of Man Is Restrained Against God’s People (Ezra 6:1-5); and (2) The Wrath of Man Is Turned to Praise God and to Benefit God’s People (Ezra 6:6-12).

I. The Wrath of Man Is Restrained Against God’s People (Ezra 6:1-5).

A. Let us briefly review the circumstances that bring us to what is happening here in Ezra 6:1.

1. God’s people were delivered from Babylonian captivity by means of the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia, in 537/536 b.c., and were supplied provisions to return to Israel and to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

2. Within the first year of their return to Judah, the Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel (the prince) and Joshua (the high priest) had rebuilt the altar of the temple and laid the foundation of the temple.

3. It was at that time, just as progress was being made, that Satan stirred up adversaries from within the land who sought to discourage and hinder the plans of the Jews in completing the temple and that Satan also stirred up adversaries from within the very hearts of God’s people to turn their attention away from building God’s house to building their own houses. Thus, God’s people became apathetic and lukewarm to God’s house and did not seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, so that the work on the temple came to a complete halt for 16 years, to the shame of God’s people. Out of fear of enemies within the land and procrastination from within their own hearts to pursue God’s kingdom, Satan was successful in delaying and halting the work on the temple.

4. The Lord then raised up His ministers, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who preached and wrote against the sinful lukewarmness of the Jews and who directed the hearts of God’s people to trust in God’s promises and God’s power to accomplish great things in spite of their many weaknesses and failures. As a result of the work of God’s Spirit in stirring up a renewed faith and faithfulness in God’s people, the work on the house of God was resumed with much vitality and holy zeal.

5. And once again, just as the work in rebuilding the temple was making good progress, Satan stirred up adversaries. This time it was Tatnai, governor of Persia in the provinces west of the Euphrates River, who was used by Satan to seek to hinder the work of building God's kingdom. However, God's people stood strong against the unlawful authority of this prince and rather stood upon the authority of the Lord who had commanded His people to rebuild the temple and who had stirred the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to decree and supply provisions to rebuild the temple. Tatnai then sent a letter to Darius, king of Persia, requesting that search be made to confirm that the Jews were not lying about the decree of Cyrus. That is the point to which we now come in our text. The wrath of these enemies in seeking to delay and to stop the work of building God's kingdom has been leveled against God's people. Will the wrath of Satan and these adversaries be successful or will their wrath be restrained? Let's see what now happens in Ezra 6.

B. As we look at Ezra 6:1-5, we see that King Darius made a decree that search be made to find the decree of Cyrus that commanded the Jews to be set free, and that decreed the rebuilding of the temple.

1. The King Darius mentioned here in Ezra 6:1 was the third king of Persia in legal succession after the fall of Babylon in 538 b.c.: (1) Cyrus; (2) then Cambyses (his son); (3) then Darius (who reigned from 522-486 b.c.).

2. We learn that search is first made in Babylon among all of scrolls in the royal library, but nothing is found there (according Ezra 6:1). Then search is made for the decree of Cyrus at the palace in the royal city of Achmetha, the summer palace of the King of Persia, where the decree of Cyrus is indeed found (Ezra 6:2).

a. God's providence is amazing in directing the course of all these events (and all the events in our lives) to the ends He has ordained. For the enemies of God's people would have been thrilled to have looked in Babylon, and having not found the decree of Cyrus there, to have ended the search and to have concluded that the Jews were lying (which likely would have brought the building of the temple to a complete and total stop). After finding no decree of Cyrus in Babylon, the enemies of God's people needed no further search to be made, for they had the Jews and the temple in their clutches. But God moves King Darius to continue the search for the decree of Cyrus in the royal city of Achmetha ("The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" Proverbs 21:1).

b. Dear ones, I want you to see that it is not Darius or the adversaries of the Jews that control this search, but it is the Lord who controls it. And though the Lord may give these enemies a moment to celebrate (as it were) in their momentary success that the decree of Cyrus was not found in Babylon, the Lord will silence their short-lived victory, will restrain their wrath, and will give them rather reason to fear in the discovery of Cyrus's decree in Achmetha (as we shall see). This is the first indication that the wrath of man will be turned to praise the Lord and to benefit Christ's church.

3. When the decree of Cyrus is found, it confirms all that God's people had said to Tatnai, the Persian governor: (1) Cyrus did decree that the house of God be rebuilt (Ezra 6:3-4); and (2) Cyrus did decree that all of the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, when it was destroyed in 586 b.c., be restored to God's people for use in the rebuilt temple (Ezra 6:5).

a. Dear ones, the truth which we speak may be misrepresented for a time, the truth may be hidden for a time, the truth may be ridiculed for a time, or the truth may be persecuted for a time, but the truth cannot be destroyed any more than God, the God of truth, can be destroyed. God's truth will prevail over lies, misrepresentations, and errors! Sound doctrine, pure worship, and faithful church government will overcome all error (gradually as God opens the eyes of people's hearts to see it, to understand it, to embrace it, to love it, and to practice it).

b. There is, therefore, no need for us to be filled with fear at the lies that are told about us when we stand for the truth, or to resort to unbiblical means of heaping vengeance upon those whose wrath leads them to misrepresent what we say, or to be ashamed of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, or

to compromise that biblical doctrine that is most despised in the eyes of the world (or sadly even despised in the eyes of the church), for the God of truth will cause His truth to shine forth as gloriously as the brilliance of the noon-day sun. Listen to this promise from the Lord (Psalm 37:5-8).

c. Dear ones, we need not fear that so many have not yet embraced and loved the biblical truth of a covenanted reformation in church and state, for the Lord will lead His church from Babylon to Achmetha until the pure gospel of Christ, and the sound doctrine of Christ, and the pure worship of Christ, and the faithful church government of Christ is found, understood, believed, loved, and practiced by His church in all nations of the world (“For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” Isaiah 11:9).

d. Therefore, dear ones, do not despair because the gospel of salvation is not received by your children; do not grow weary in well doing because your family ridicules your stand for the Regulative Principle of Worship, in not celebrating Christmas, and in keeping the entire Sabbath day holy; do not give up hope because Christian friends do not embrace the scriptural truth that the papacy is that antichrist, man of sin, and son of perdition prophesied to come in the Bible; and do not compromise the truth because the moral obligation of civil rulers to submit to Christ and to establish His laws and His one true religion in this nation are not received by most in the church today. We do not determine the truth by counting hands, but by bringing all propositions to the light of God’s Holy Scripture. Beloved, the Lord is not finished with His glorious work by which, in His good providence, He turns hearts (even as He turned the heart of Darius, a heathen king) to seek out the truth until it is found, even if there are detours to and delays in Babylon until the truth is found in Achmetha.

II. The Wrath of Man Is Turned to Praise God and to Benefit God’s People (Ezra 6:6-12).

A. Now if it wasn’t enough of an embarrassment and egg on the faces of these enemies of God’s people that the decree of Cyrus was found (by God’s good providence) in Achmetha (thus, silencing their accusations and restraining their wrath), God’s good providence moves King Darius, a pagan king, to warn and threaten these adversaries of God’s people that they dare not impede or hinder in the least the building of God’s house and kingdom (in Ezra 6:6-7).

1. King Darius now addresses Tatnai, the adversary of God’s people, and his fellow Persian officers with this word of warning in Ezra 6:6: “Be ye far from thence.” In other words, Darius orders these adversaries of God’s people in the strictest terms, “Don’t even go near Jerusalem at all. Stay far away from Jerusalem.” From these words, it may be inferred that the king knew of their sinister designs in going to Jerusalem in the first place in order to delay and to terminate altogether the building of God’s house in Jerusalem. And for that reason, Tatnai and his officers are commanded by King Darius even more clearly in the next verse: “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 in his place” (Ezra 6:7). Here the reason why Tatnai and his officers are not to even get near Jerusalem is because they are not to impede, hinder, or frustrate in any way the building of God’s house in Jerusalem.

2. Is it not an astonishing turn in God’s most wise and most merciful providence to see these adversaries who thought they would use their civil authority to instill fear in God’s people and to cause the work of building God’s house and God’s kingdom to be terminated once and for all, to now see them cowering in fear before King Darius and His warning against them? Oh dear ones, so often all we see with these natural eyes on this side of the door of God’s providence is the hostility of the enemy, the threats of foes, and the overwhelming opposition that stands against us, as we cling to Christ and His promises that He will build His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). However, on the other side of that door of God’s providence, which we cannot see, is the good and gracious plan of the Lord, who is working all things out for the good of those who love and who are called according to

His purpose (Romans 8:28). By faith in the promises of God, beloved, we can be assured that on the other side of that door of God's good providence is our glorious King working to turn the wrath of men unto the praise of God and unto the benefit and salvation of His church, even as Christ prays for us without ceasing before the Father.

B. Now it is not easy to keep from smiling at God's good hand of providence in turning the wrath of men to the praise of God and to the good of His people as we continue with our text in Ezra 6:8-10 and see what King Darius decrees next that Tatnai and his fellow enemies of God's people and God's kingdom be required to do (read these verses).

1. Talk about turning the tables on God's enemies and causing them to fall into the pit that they had dug for God's people, here we read how the hand of the Lord turns the heart of this heathen king to require Tatnai and his fellow adversaries to God's people and to God's kingdom to pay for all that is needed for the temple and for the worship of God (even for the daily sacrifices) out of the royal treasury over which they were overseers in the provinces to the west of the Euphrates. So not only did these adversaries in their wrath against God's people and against God's kingdom fail to prevent the building of the temple, but now they must be (as it were) servants to the people of God for whatever the Jews need in constructing the temple and in whatever they need to carry out the pure worship of God as God has ordained it in His Word.

2. These civil rulers that were enemies of God's people thought they were the rulers and God's people were their servants, but the Lord almost humorously causes the ruler (Tatnai) to become the servant of the church. But note that just as the Holy Spirit gives warrant (by way of this approved example) for Gentile rulers to be nursing fathers to the church of the Old Testament (as we see here in Ezra 6:8-10), so likewise for the same moral reason are Gentile rulers ordained by God to be the ministers of God for good to the one true Church of Christ, according to Romans 13:4). Dear ones, if this scriptural and moral pattern is presented to us by a Gentile ruler within a heathen nation where the gospel has not widely been proclaimed in caring for God's church, how much more this becomes the duty of a Gentile ruler within a nation where the gospel has been widely diffused by distribution of Bibles and the preaching of God's Word.

C. And if what King Darius decreed up to this point is not sufficient to lift your spirits in hope at God's good providence in turning the wrath of man to the praise of God and to the good of His people, let us see what sanctions and what penalties were attached to the decree of King Darius in Ezra 6:11-12 (read these verses). Those who dare alter a word of this decree, they would suffer the most extreme punishment of being hanged and their homes destroyed. Darius also calls for God to destroy all kings and nations that should destroy God's temple.

D. As we bring the sermon to a close this Lord's Day, let us consider some representative biblical examples of the wrath of men being turned by God to His own praise and to the good of His people.

1. Daniel (Daniel 6) was hated by high ranking officials in the Persian kingdom, whose wrath against Daniel and the one true religion he embraced was manifested by proposing a law to the king that no one within his realm pray to anyone except to the king for 30 days. The king wickedly assented and decreed his own worship for 30 days. Daniel refusing to cower in fear at the wrath of man, and refusing to compromise his scriptural faith and practice, continued his practice of praying to God in the direction toward Jerusalem at his opened window. The wrath of man leaped upon Daniel, who was cast into a den of hungry lions, but who was delivered by the hand of God, who closed the mouths of the lions. The Lord then turned the wrath of these enemies of the true religion of God against themselves as the king cast them into the lion's den to be destroyed. The wrath of man was turned to praise the Lord and to benefit His people.

2. Likewise, in the book of Esther, we read of godly Mordecai who would not bow the knee to Haman, the wicked official of the king. Therefore, Haman devised a plan of wrath and hatred against God's

people to destroy all Jews who were in the empire on a particular day, and built a gallows 50 cubits high (about 75 feet high) upon which to hang Mordecai. However, Queen Esther (herself a Jew who was raised from childhood by Mordecai) revealed the plot to the king, who took Haman and hung him on the gallows upon which he had prepared to hang Mordecai. The plot to destroy God's people was discovered, and God's people wondrously defeated those who sought their lives. The wrath of man was once again turned to praise the Lord and to benefit His people.

3. But most importantly, consider how Satan's wrath to destroy Christ was manifested throughout Christ's ministry, and how Satan was deceived into thinking that he had now overcome Christ when Judas betrayed Him, when the Jewish Sanhedrin in wrath condemned Him, when the Roman court unjustly condemned Him in order to appease the wrath of the Jewish leaders, and when Christ was cruelly crucified and buried in a tomb for three days. The wrath of Satan and the wrath of man seemed to have achieved victory over Christ. But the wrath of Satan and the wrath of man was turned to praise God and to benefit His people in whose place He suffered. And that seeming momentary victory for the wrath of Satan and the wrath of man became the very means by which death, sin, and the wrath of Satan and the wrath of man is forever conquered through the glorious bodily resurrection of Christ. The wrath of Satan and the wrath of man against Christ and against His people were once and for all condemned and once and for all turned to praise God and to benefit you, His people.

4. Dear ones, you need never fear the wrath of Satan or the wrath of man in standing for the free gospel of Jesus Christ and for the sound doctrine, pure worship, and faithful church government of Christ, for He who overcame the wrath of Satan and the wrath of man is our helper ("The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" Hebrews 13:6). In fact, dear ones, your immovable and unshakeable courage in the face of opposition to the truth of Jesus Christ is an evidence of your salvation and an evidence of the destruction that awaits those who seek to terrify you (Philippians 1:28). Dear child of God, are you only looking at one side of the door of God's providence in fear of the wrath of man, or are you looking with the eye of faith and the eye of hope to the other side of the door of God's providence wherein God has promised that the wrath of man shall praise Him? It is not "might praise Him". It is not "once in a while will praise Him". But it is rather, "the wrath of man SHALL praise Him", without exception.

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