

Ezra 4:1-6:12 “Building the City of God in the Midst of This Age” January 20, 2019
Psalm 132
Hebrews 11:1-16

Introduction: Why “Government Documents” Matter for Salvation History

Before I read our OT lesson, I need to explain a little about what you are going to hear!
You might call this the “government documents” section of the book of Ezra!

The author is very clear that this material comes from a wide chronological range.

Verses 1-3 are from the time of Zerubbabel and King Cyrus
(Cyrus reigned from 539-530 BC).

Verse 4 speaks of King Darius (r. 522-486).

Verse 6 speaks of accusations during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes, 486-464).

Verse 7 speaks of letters in the days of Artaxerxes (464-423).

So these verses cover a span of 100 years!

And when you look at the content of the letters,
the letters in verses 7-23 are talking about rebuilding the *wall* of Jerusalem
(which we’ll hear about in the book of Nehemiah).

And then chapters 5 and 6 return to the theme of building the temple
in the days of Darius!

In other words, the letter to Artaxerxes comes from a hundred years *later*
(and the author tells us this – because back then *everyone knew*
that Artaxerxes lived a hundred years after Cyrus!).

That’s why I call this the “government documents” section of the book of Ezra!
“Here are various imperial decrees and correspondence that are relevant to my story.”

Read Ezra 4:1-6:12

This is the Word of the LORD.

I know – it *sounded* like the word of Darius – the King of Persia!

If you think about it, this is like a presidential executive order being included in the Bible!

Perhaps you can understand why one Anabaptist theologian has said that the book of Ezra
is in the Bible as a warning of how the Jews got it wrong!

(Sort of like Luther’s judgment that James was a “right strawy epistle”!)

But if we are going to hear this as the Word of the LORD –
then we need to think about what it means to build the temple of God

in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

Last time we heard how Zerubbabel built the altar and laid the foundation of the temple.
Now we hear about the opposition to the work.

The Kingdom of God will always provoke opposition.

There will always be those who obstruct the building of the temple of God –
because God's temple stands in opposition to the kingdoms of this age –
and *especially* against Satan and his kingdom!

Psalm 132 is particularly interesting in this light.

Psalm 132 asks God to remember David and his afflictions.

Psalm 132 asks God to remember his promises to David –
that David would always have an heir to sit on his throne!

Zerubbabel was heir of David.

And Psalm 132 comes from Book 5 of the Psalter –
the last book – the one that was compiled after the exile.

We sing Psalm 132 in a very different light!

We sing Psalm 132 as those who see the fulfillment of its prayer!
Jesus, the Son of David, sits at God's right hand in glory!

But we still ask God to remember David!

Remember how David would not enter his own house,
until he had found a dwelling place for the LORD.

David had understood that it was not right for him to dwell in a house,
while the LORD dwelt in a tent!

Of course, the LORD responded to David by saying – yup – that's a good thought –
but it's backwards.

You do not build me a house.
I build you a house!

What David had to learn –

what *we* have to learn –

is that *God* is the one who builds the house!

Unless the LORD builds the house, the laborers labor in vain!

Sing Psalm 132

Read Hebrews 11:1-16

Hebrews 11 reminds us that Abraham was looking for a city that has foundations,

whose designer and builder is God.

If we think that *we* will build the temple – the city of God –
then it becomes all about *our* design.

But the designer and the builder of the heavenly city is God.

We are simply called as laborers –

‘God’s fellow-workers’ is the term Paul uses in 1 Cor 3:9.

And Ezra helps us think about what this means in chapters 4-5.

1. “In This World You Will Have Trouble”: 6th Century Opposition to the Temple (4:1-6)

a. Why Not Let the Samaritans Help? (v1-3)

4 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.” ³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”

In verses 1-3 we hear the offer of the Samaritans to help the Jews build the temple.

At first, when you hear their offer, it sounds really good!

“Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do...”

We hear that, and we immediately think well of them!

They are worshiping Yahweh!

Remember the Exodus?

There was a mixed multitude that went up with them from Egypt.

There were lots of non-Israelites who joined themselves to God’s people!

Remember Rahab?

Remember Ruth?

Let them come!

They have blessed Abraham’s seed – let them be blessed too!

But who were these people?

They say in verse 2,

“we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon
King of Assyria who brought us here.”

The Assyrians had sent the northern tribes of Israel into exile,
and replaced them with various Gentiles.

2 Kings 17 tells us that these people started to worship Yahweh –

but also worshiped their own gods.

Are they really as friendly as they sound?

Notice how they are described in verse 1?

“when the *adversaries* of Judah and Benjamin heard...”

They may *say* “we worship your God” –
but they do not serve him only!

As Pastor Joel is working on developing the Elkhart church plant,
what should he do if someone came along and said,

“I want to help with your church plant...
but I don’t believe that Jesus really rose from the dead!”

Notice how the text describes the “we” in verse 3:

“Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers’ houses *in Israel*.”

In other words, all Israel is portrayed as united.

And why does Israel reject the offer of the Samaritans?

Listen to how they say it,

“You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God;
but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel,
as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”

“You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God” –
that’s not your job – that’s not your place.
We alone will build it...

In other words, they give the same answer that Jesus would give to another Samaritan
hundreds of years later!

The Samaritan woman asked Jesus,

“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain,
but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”

And Jesus replied,

“Woman, believe me, the hour is *coming* when neither on this mountain
nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

You worship what you do not know;
we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”

Notice that: salvation is from the Jews!

Zerubbabel was *right* when he said that “you have nothing to do with us”
in building the temple.

Salvation *would* come to the Samaritans – and to all the nations –
but only *from* the Jews!

It is only *if* the Jews build the temple that salvation comes to the nations.
It is only *if* Jesus – the Jew – goes to the cross and dies for our sins –
that the day finally can come when
“true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:20-24)

Now, if the Samaritans had sincerely longed for that salvation,
then they would have rejoiced in the work of the Jews!

But verses 4-6 demonstrates that they indeed *adversaries* of Judah and Benjamin!

b. Because This Is the Sort of People They Were (v4-6)

⁴ *Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build*
⁵ *and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of*
Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build –
How?

By bribing counselors against them.

Bribery works.

It’s wrong – but it works!

If you want to get in the way of someone,
just grease the wheels – do some favors –
it gets things done!

Money talks.

Sometimes politicians will do things simply because they are right.
But often they will be swayed by money.

And when people are hostile to the Kingdom and the House of God,
they will use their money to “get things done.”

Verse 5 tells us that they continued their bribery scheme for at least a decade –
from the days of Cyrus until the reign of Darius –
and at the beginning of the reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus, verse 6),
they wrote an accusation against Jerusalem.

⁶ *And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against*
the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

And, if you want evidence that Zerubbabel made the right decision
in refusing to work with the Samaritans –

just look at the continued pattern.
I know, it's tempting to say, "but if they had worked together,
maybe they could have created a new dynamic!" –
but our author is pointing out that the opposition was deep-rooted and long-lasting.

Just look at what form it took a hundred years later:

2. "That Rebellious and Wicked City": the 5th Century Accusation (4:7-23) a. The Accusations (v7-16)

⁷ *In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.*^[a]

Because verse 7 tells us about another attack in the days of Artaxerxes
(And as we have seen, Artaxerxes lived a hundred years *after* Cyrus –
indeed, Artaxerxes was the King who reigned in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah!).
Ezra will come to Jerusalem in the *seventh* year of Artaxerxes.
Nehemiah will come to Jerusalem in the *twentieth* year of Artaxerxes.

The point is that opposition from the Samaritans had been coming for over a hundred years!

From chapter 4, verse 7 through chapter 6, verse 18, the text is in Aramaic.
The rest of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah is in Hebrew.
Aramaic was the diplomatic language of the ancient world,
so it makes sense that these documents were in Aramaic.
What's interesting is that the author switches into Aramaic for his narrative as well!

In those days, pretty much anyone who could read and write Hebrew
would also be able to read and write Aramaic –
so most likely, he does this in order to keep the whole section coherent.

Verses 8-10 identify who these people were.
these are peoples from Persia, Erech, Babylon, Susa, Elam –
people who had been deported by Osnappar (usually called Ashurbanipal)
who was the Assyrian king who had conquered Elam and Susa –
so it would make sense that he (following Assyrian practice)
would have deported the conquered peoples of the east
and settled them in the west –
the province that they called "Beyond the River"
(referring to the Euphrates River).
Territory west of the Euphrates was called "Beyond the River."

⁸ *Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:* ⁹ *Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their*

associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,¹⁰ and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.¹¹ (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) “To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now¹² be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.¹³ Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.¹⁴ Now because we eat the salt of the palace^[b] and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king,¹⁵ in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste.¹⁶ We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.”

The logic of the letter is pretty straightforward:

i. They Won't Pay Taxes (v13)

First, once the Jews have finished rebuilding their walls and fortifying their city, then they won't pay taxes or tribute to Persia anymore.

This is a pretty plausible argument.

If you owe tribute – and you don't want to pay it –
then you should probably *start* by preparing your defenses,
so that *when* you stop paying tribute, you can defend yourself!

ii. The King Will Be Dishonored (v14)

And then, second (verse 14), these “loyal servants” claim that they are doing all this out of their desire to protect the honor of the King!

The phrase “because we eat the salt of the palace”
means something very much like patriotic Americans saying,
“because we bleed red, white, and blue.”

iii. Jerusalem Has Rebelled Before (v15)

And then, third, they point out that Jerusalem has a *history* of rebellion! (verse 15)

If you search the records of your fathers –
not just the Persian kings, but back to the Babylonian and Assyrian kings
“from of old” –
you will find that Jerusalem is a rebellious city,
hurtful to kings and provinces.

It would be easy to dismiss this as prejudice –

except for the fact that it was simply *true*.
For over 300 years (since before the days of Hezekiah)
Jerusalem had been a stubborn little city in the highlands!

In the 720s (nearly 300 years before Artaxerxes)
Jerusalem had resisted the siege of the Assyrian army.
And for more than a century afterwards,
Jerusalem had held out against waves of Assyrians and Babylonians.

If you want a good parallel, think of Afghanistan –
only on a much smaller scale!
A little mountainous country that no one can take over –
and if you take it over, you can never leave,
because as soon as you turn your back,
they rebel!

iv. They Will Take Over the Province (v16)

And finally, in verse 16, they point out that if Jerusalem rebels,
then Persia will lose the whole region.
Judea may be a tiny little insignificant piece of land –
but an independent Judea will prompt instability in the whole region!

That was true in David's day –
that was true in Greek and Roman times –
and it's still true today!
It's partly a matter of geography.
Three continents come together in that one little corner of the world!
Africa, Asia, and Europe –
and so also this is where the Mediterranean connects to the Indian Ocean,
through the Red Sea.

Judea would never be strong enough to rule the region –
but an independent Judea could wreak havoc on the ambitions of empires!

And Artaxerxes takes this seriously,
as we hear in verses 17-23.

b. Artaxerxes Shuts Down the Work on the Wall (v17-23)

The Problem of Nehemiah, chapter 1

¹⁷ The king sent an answer: "To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now ¹⁸ the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. ¹⁹ And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against

kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. ²⁰ And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. ²¹ Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. ²² And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?"

Artaxerxes has a search made in the records, and sure enough,
there is good reason to be wary of Jerusalem!
So he orders that the work on the wall stop – “until a decree is made by me.”
And so Rehum and Shimshai go to Jerusalem and stop the work on the wall.

²³ Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

Now, there is no particular date given for this episode –
so we can't be certain about the timeline –
but Rehum and Shimshai make reference to certain Jews
who came from Artaxerxes to Jerusalem;
Well, in chapters 7-8 we will hear that Ezra was sent by Artaxerxes to Jerusalem.
But Ezra was not commanded to build the wall.
Ezra was charged with teaching the *law*.

Only in Nehemiah chapter 1 will we hear about the wall again!
Nehemiah will hear that the wall is in ruins –
and so he goes to King Artaxerxes and asks for permission
to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall.
And the King grants permission – including orders for the materials.

In other words, Ezra chapter 4 sets up the problem of Nehemiah chapter 1.
The reason why it appears *here* is because this is the “government documents” section!
And our author is giving us a catalog of the opposition –
first the opposition to building the temple,
but also the opposition to building the wall.

So chapter 4 gives us some foreshadowing as to where our story will go –
but verse 24 brings us back to the earlier story about the building of the temple.

3. So Work on the House of God Stopped (Back to Our 6th Century Story) (4:24)

²⁴ Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

So jump back a hundred years back to the days of Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

4. “But Take Heart, I Have Overcome the World” (5:1-6:12)

a. Haggai and Zechariah Preach the Gospel (5:1-2)

5 Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. ² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

Because in the days of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the opposition to the work *also succeeded* at bringing the work to a stop.

Cyrus had commissioned them to go build the temple – and they had laid the foundation in chapter 3.

Now it has been a decade or more.

The foundation is still there – the altar is still there –
but temple building is hard work.

And there is a lot of opposition.

We saw last time that in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul refers to his ministry as “temple building.”

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah would have agreed!

Without their preaching, there would have been no temple!

We know what these prophets preached

(and after we finish Ezra-Nehemiah, we’ll go through Haggai,
Zechariah, and Malachi).

Haggai rebuked the Jews because they were busy building their own houses,
while the house of God lay in ruins.

If the church is the temple of God – as Paul says –

then it is safe to say that the temple of God lies in ruins today!

And too many of us are doing the same thing that Zerubbabel and Jeshua were doing!

We are busy building up our own houses – seeking first our own prosperity –
ignoring the fact that the temple lies in ruins!

And we keep thinking – oh, yeah, we’ll get around to that –
once our own house is in order!!

That’s why I keep reminding you

to seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness!

Our *first* priority must be to build the temple of God.

I have spent the last 3-4 years getting to know a small group of young men
on the west side of South Bend.

There is so much potential there.
Why haven't we seen more fruit?

Honestly, I haven't run into much external opposition.

But then again, the opposition to the building of the temple is not merely external.
It's not just problems "out there" that result in the work being laid aside.
There are also problem "in here" (in our own hearts).
I'm lazy.
I procrastinate.
I tell myself – I'll get around to it later...

Here at the beginning of chapter 5,
it is the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah that get things moving again!
And so after 10-15 years of dilly-dallying –
procrastination –
Zerubbabel and Jeshua get back to work!
Isn't this a big part of our problem?
We're lazy.
We procrastinate.
We think that we'll get to it – someday...

Of course, as soon as Zerubbabel gets back to work – what do you know –
the governor shows up!

b. The Questions of Tattenai the Governor (5:3-17)

³ *At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?"* ⁴ *They also asked them this:^[c] "What are the names of the men who are building this building?"* ⁵ *But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.*

And the governor says, in effect, "Your building permit has expired!"

This will often happen to us!
Just when we get around to doing the work,
some external hindrance will arise to convince us that it's too difficult!

But notice that verse 5 says that "the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews,
and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius..."

They keep going!
Remember that!

Because the eye of the LORD is upon those who fear him!

He sees.

He knows.

And he will act.

We just need to trust him – and believe that he will do what he promises!

Now, Tattenai's letter does not appear *quite* as hostile as the later one that we saw in chapter 4. Tattenai gives a faithful report of his conversation with Zerubbabel, and asks for King Darius's verdict.

⁶ This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the governors who were in the province Beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. ⁷ They sent him a report, in which was written as follows: "To Darius the king, all peace. ⁸ Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. ⁹ Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?' ¹⁰ We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. ¹¹ And this was their reply to us: 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. ¹³ However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. ¹⁴ And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; ¹⁵ and he said to him, "Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site." ¹⁶ Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.' ¹⁷ Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter."

Verses 11-12 are especially important for understanding the exiles perspective on themselves:
'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth,

They speak plainly – but politely – that they worship the true God.

*and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago,
which a great king of Israel built and finished.*

They remember Solomon – and how they are simply rebuilding his glorious temple.

*But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven,
he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean,
who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.*

They also remember that their sin had resulted in the destruction of their temple –
and their own exile!

Think about how they are “witnessing” to Darius – and to Tattenai!
They declare their faith in the true God of heaven and earth.
They connect their present situation with the story of salvation (Solomon’s temple).
And they confess the sins of their fathers –
they acknowledge that ‘we got ourselves into this mess’!

God, the story of salvation, sin –
it's a very basic evangelistic message!

c. Darius Finds the Decree of Cyrus to Rebuild the Temple (6:1-5)

6 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. ² And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record. ³ In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits^[e] and its breadth sixty cubits, ⁴ with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. ⁵ And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.”

Verses 1-5 then give us the decree of Cyrus – as it was found in the imperial archives –
for the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the temple vessels.

d. Darius Issues His Own Decree in Support (6:6-12)

⁶ “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your^[f] associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. ⁷ Let the work on this 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 make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. ⁹ And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, ¹⁰ that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life

of the king and his sons. ¹¹ Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.

¹² May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

And then verses 6-12 give Darius’s reply to Tattenai.

Tattenai had been careful not to betray his own prejudices in his letter to the king,
but Darius is very blunt in his reply!

First, leave them alone – and don’t interfere!

But no, don’t leave them alone – I am going to insist that you supply whatever they need
(out of the royal revenue from the province of Beyond the River).

What that means is that it comes out of the portion of the revenue
that is designated for the king.

In other words, whatever you pay for the help of the temple in Jerusalem
may be deducted from the amount you owe the King.

Why?

So that “they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven
and pray for the life of the king and his sons.” (v10).

Paul takes up this theme in 1 Timothy 2 and urges us to pray for kings –
and for those in authority.

Darius was a Zoroastrian (a worshiper of Ahura Mazda).

In Paul’s day, the emperor Nero was also an idolater.

We are called to pray for our rulers – no matter how personally wicked they are –
because our well-being depends on our rulers!

Whether you think that the current president is doing well or poorly –
whether you think that he should be impeached or re-elected! –
you *must* pray for him!

You must pray for his welfare!

But also notice how Darius warns Tattenai – and everyone else –
not to oppose the work:

“if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house,
and he shall be impaled on it,
and his house shall be made a dunghill.”

Notice that the punishment fits the crime!

If you oppose the building of God’s house,

then you shall be impaled on a beam from your own house!

and *your* house shall be turned into a public toilet!

That's fitting,

because when someone opposes the building of the house of God,
they are actually destroying their own hope of salvation!

If the church is the household of God –

and if salvation comes through the preaching of the gospel,
and the administration of the sacraments –

so that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside the church –

then those who oppose the building of the church of Jesus Christ
are tearing down their only hope of salvation!

Pastors can be just as guilty as anyone in opposing the building of Christ's church!

Every time a pastor focuses on his "own" turf –

or gets jealous about his own ministry –

we oppose the building of *Christ's* church!

TPH 342 "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted"