

Praise and Opposition in the Work of God

Date: June 29, 2026

Church Name: 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel

References: **Ezra 3-4**, Ezra 3:3; Ezra 3:10-11; Ezra 3:13; Ezra 1:2; Ezra 4:1-7; Haggai 2:3; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Chronicles 15:16; 1 Chronicles 16:4; 1 Chronicles 25:1; Acts 16:16-18; 2 Corinthians 6:14

Introduction: Historical Context and Chronology

And so, good to see you all. Eric has been doing a lot of study, as you can imagine, in the book of Ezra and neighboring books. And he's put together a bit of a chronology of what's going on in the time frame between the details of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. And so, Eric, why don't you start out tonight by telling us a little bit about that time frame?

Eric: Well, I'll make a few comments. I've been following the chronology of the kings as we come down to the carrying away—first of all to Assyria, and then to Babylon, and then the return. And it's rather complicated to piece together so much of that history that is interwoven by the prophets themselves who prophesied during the times of the kings, and especially we're focusing on the return of the captives.

Now, there are seven books that speak about the return and those who are still in captivity. They are three historical books: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. They're historical books. The first two are a story of those who returned—the few, the fifty thousand. The book of Esther is a story of some of those who remained in Babylon and later Persia.

Then you have the three prophets that we'll probably encounter either tonight or next time. That's Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Haggai and Zechariah, they write at a particular time and preach to encourage the people of God to continue building the temple when they had left off building it. Also, the seventh book is Daniel, made up of both history and prophecy. Daniel was one of those who was taken captive in the first removal, and he remained in Babylon and later in Persia as well. He rose to a very high position as Prime Minister of these two nations. So those seven books are interwoven.

We're concentrating particularly now on the return. Cyrus the Great—he wasn't the first king of Persia, but he was the first great king. His uncle Darius was for two years, whereas Cyrus reigned for a number of years, and it was through his edict that the children of Israel were encouraged—they were given permission—to go back to their land and to rebuild the temple.

Host: Thank you. It was a command to rebuild the temple; it was not a command to go back. He left that open to volunteers. So it was beautiful, because it wasn't a command, but just that he granted permission to anyone who wanted to go. And whoever the Lord stirred up their hearts, they went back and began to build.

Now, as we go through Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, we encounter a great number of names of Persian kings, and here is where our difficulties begin. Because the Greeks, who succeeded the Persians after two hundred years of reign—the Babylonians only reigned for seventy years, whereas the kingdom of Persia was over two hundred years—but when the Greeks came and took power, they destroyed nearly many of the Persian records. And when the Muslims came to power later on, they destroyed pretty well the rest. And so nearly all the Persian records have been destroyed, making identifying the list of the Persian kings that we encounter very difficult to identify with absolute certainty.

However, it doesn't affect Bible chronology. The Bible has its own chronology, and it's not dependent upon the lists or the dates that are given that are uncertain of secular kingdoms. No. But the Bible chronology throws light on the secular succession of these kings. And so a chronology has been worked out, which Christians have been struggling for two thousand years—or maybe not two thousand years, but certainly a long time—to sort out the chronologies that we encounter in these three books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

The dates that I'm going to give you are pretty much given by Floyd Nolan Jones, a fairly recent scholar, who has taken all the dates and consulted all the chronologies from Isaac Newton, who was a great Bible chronologist. People don't remember this or don't know about it, but he was as much a theologian as he was a physicist.

Eric: Amen.

Host: And he wrote a lot on Bible chronology, as well as Bishop Usher. And so, Floyd Nolan Jones—the dates that I'm using are his, in the main. Okay. And so that, and the names then of these kings as we encounter them, we know pretty much when they reigned and so on. So we can understand something of the times behind and how long it took for various things—for example, how long it took to build the temple, how long they laid aside the work, and so on; when Ezra came and when Nehemiah came, because the Bible tells us it was during the reigns of certain kings.

Now, to further complicate the problem—and I have to give you this information—is that the names Ahasuerus, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, and Darius... we run into all of them. All these names in the scriptures, they are not personal names. Darius I, for example, his personal name was Hystaspes. So there was a Smerdis, and so on. These names—Ahasuerus, and we read

there's a number of them—there were four Ahasueruses, three Artaxerxes, and two or three Dariuses. So these are titles, like "the great king," for example; some of them translate to "the great king," "the great conqueror," and so on. These are titles they took upon themselves, similar to Pharaoh, and so on. So that's a complicated thing.

Eric: Further complication.

Host: Further complication. So having confused you completely, I can handle some chronologies that I have here. I think I have enough for everybody here, pretty much. If you're interested, I'll give you one. We might have to share one, right? Okay. One is good? Yeah. I'll give this person one. And we'll give you one, if you don't mind. Thank you. Now, these are provisional. I've got some notes, footnotes to come, and so on. Thank you. Now, Mary, if you can share it with Shirley, we'd be happy about that. Sorry about you on Zoom. You can... I can't hear you on Zoom. Huh? I can't hear you on Zoom. You can? Good. Okay.

Well, really, the portion that we're concerned about here is on page two. There are some additions I want to make, scriptural references. I had to go over them carefully, everything. And you can probably study them at home. But as we go through the study of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, we will encounter some of these kings. And I've identified them here in the chronology that I've given to you. For example, there at the bottom, in 520 BC, we have Darius' decree, or 522, it says Darius I reigns—that's Hystaspes, that's his personal name, but he also took the title Ahasuerus in the book of Esther. So this will help to perhaps familiarize yourself with this very difficult study, to keep in mind these various names. And you can check those references, and if you find any errors, please let me know. As I say, I've got some footnotes I'd like to put in, explanatory notes, and some other details as I go along, as I encounter them. So this is a work in progress. The basic outline, though, I have, as I say, I received from Floyd Nolan Jones, which agrees to a great extent with Bishop Usher's chronology, differing only sometimes by one or two years.

Host: Well, I guess our first comment is thank you very much. And keep on praying for us, Eric, because we're going to have a little trouble comprehending it all. And just as you had a little trouble putting it all together, so we're going to have a little trouble assimilating it all. But anyway, thank you very, very much. I hope I haven't unduly complicated our study. Well, the fact is that we're going to be going over, in the process of time—all other things being unchanged—we'll be going over many of these sections for a while, because we've got Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah next on our schedule. And if we don't change schedule, it'll be a while before we finish Nehemiah, in which case we'll be going back to this chronology often. So if you did not get a chronology, get one when you come to the chapel next time. We'll somehow

get a few printed up. They'll be on the back table. Take one and study it, and it'll help put it into perspective for you.

All right, so any questions on this before we proceed to our verse-by-verse study?

Amir: I just want to mention, Ahasuerus, I can't pronounce.

Host: It's a Persian name, that's why you can't pronounce it.

Amir: I think it's a Greek name, because in my country, they called him Hashayashah. It's another name, but I want to mention, he is the son of Darius.

Host: Okay.

Amir: Just there.

Host: So what page is that on now? Which Ahasuerus are you talking about? There's four different ones that are mentioned.

Amir: The first one.

Host: The first one?

Amir: The first one, yes.

Host: First one is the son of the first Darius. Thank you. For those of you who don't fully understand, Amir is basically agreeing with what Eric says. That's good news. Thank you, Amir, and for explaining it as well. So that's very good.

Okay, let's go back to the book of Ezra, and I think we can probably start in chapter four. There may be some other comments prior to that, but chapter four is sort of next in my line.

Eric: I have one other note to add, and that is that Eric referred to Sir Isaac Newton. Isaac Newton was a great physicist. He came up with many foundational truths of physics that we understand. If you were to ask Isaac Newton what was his greatest accomplishment in his life—gravity. He discovered gravity. That's right, and outlined it very clearly. He did a lot of other things. What would Isaac Newton have said if you asked him what was the greatest work he ever did in his life? And you really don't know the answer unless you listen to Isaac Newton or happen to be able to read what he said. But I read what he said, and what he said was, "My greatest work was my commentary on the book of Revelation." He was an outstanding Bible student as well as an outstanding physicist. Somebody asked him once why he was so great. And among other things, he said, "I tend to think more than other people do." What do you do with your brain? Do you think all the time? Or do you let your brain sort of lie fallow and go from here to there? Sometimes you even sleep with your brain

when your mouth's open, and that gets to be embarrassing, too. But he said, "I try to think more than other people." Good for you, Isaac.

Host: All right. Chapter 4 of Ezra. I don't know if we actually finished Chapter 3. Okay, unless I missed something.

Eric: No, you carry on. If you've got some more work, more to say there, let's go.

The Laying of the Foundation (Ezra 3)

Host: I think we... didn't we finish off somewhere about verse 10 or 11, something? Let's assume we did. Yeah, let's go to verse 10. Verse 10 says, when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord:

[Ezra 3:10-11 NKJV] ¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD:

"For He is good,
For His mercy endures forever toward Israel."

Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

So my simple comments on that are that they went back to the land where there was almost nothing, and they decided that they were going to rebuild the temple, and so they said, "We'll try to lay the foundation." And as they began to lay the foundation, they had a great ceremony. It's marvelous. The priests were there in full apparel. The priests were there with trumpets. The Levites were there. The sons of Asaph had cymbals to praise the Lord. After the ordinance of David, what were they going to do? They were going to do it the way David did it. They sang together, but they sang by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord.

I think, frankly, that they had a pretty good choir. I think that the whole congregation was involved in the choir. Do you get excited when there's a large choir singing with you? Sometimes we get a relatively full house here at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel, and frankly, I like the singing. We sang together this morning down here: "Lord, you've really been good to

me." I like to sing it down here often. Frankly, it sounds really good. The ceiling is low, and the music goes round and round, and frankly, it sounds good, and we praise the Lord.

I was at a meeting in Chicago, I think many years ago, probably sixty years ago, and it was—I think possibly even Billy Graham came to that meeting at one point, it was a conference for a few days—but we sang a few hymns. I think there were maybe a thousand, fifteen hundred people there, and we all started to sing some hymns, and frankly, I didn't sing very much; I just listened. It was absolutely fabulous: a thousand, fifteen hundred voices. Thank you.

I think this was a pretty good-sounding ceremony. They started out—they didn't say, "Well, wait until we finish the job, then we'll praise the Lord." They said, "We're going to start, and we'll praise the Lord at the beginning as well as at the end." I think we should do that more often ourselves. Got a job to do for God? Start out with a good song and praise the Lord, and then get the job done. And when you're finished, praise the Lord and sing again.

So anyway, that's what they did. The people—verse 11, I guess, says at the end, and the people shouted with a great shout, and they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. I think that's beautiful. I think it's a good precedent for us to follow. Don't wait to praise the Lord until it's all done. Praise the Lord when it's begun. Praise the Lord in the middle. Praise the Lord at the end. Keep on praising the Lord.

And then the great contrast in verse 12. But many of the priests and the Levites and chief of the fathers who were ancient men that had seen the first house, when the foundation of the house was laid before their eyes, they wept with a loud voice. And many shouted for joy, so that:

[Ezra 3:13 NKJV] so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off.

Whatever they did, they did with great volume. I guess if you're a Christian, one of the first things you learn is: don't mumble. There's something to say. Look, let them hear it. And they shouted.

One of the things that encourages me about that is these older men who were not shouting for joy, but they were crying. Why were they crying? Well, they'd seen the first house, and frankly, even the plans of this second house were pretty disappointing. All they had was the foundation and the plans, and they could remember Solomon's beautiful temple and this small whatever-it-is. And so they were crying. Were they crying just for sorrow? I don't think

so. I think some of them were crying for joy, recognizing that God was going to do something again.

The thing that encourages me most about this is that if they had seen the first temple, how old were they? Well, between the first and the second temple, there was seventy years?

Eric: No, fifty.

Host: Fifty?

Eric: Because the temple wasn't destroyed until the third captivity, twenty years after.

Host: Okay, all right.

Eric: The first captivity, if you read there on page one in 606, the first deportation, then the seventy years begins then. But then there's a second deportation in 597—Mordecai and Jeconiah, or Jehoiachin, carried away to Babylon. Then there was a third carrying away. So some of them, if they were carried away in the third deportation, it would only be fifty years, from 586 to 536—just fifty years.

Host: Okay. Okay. Thank you. Okay, well, we need that information. Thank you, that's good. Thank you. Because otherwise, to make a trip that far being ninety years old or more, I don't know if there were many who could actually do that. Well, I guess that's the question: how old were they? And they were—if fifty years was there, and if they'd seen the temple when they were fifteen, fifty years—that means that they had been coming back at the earliest age of sixty-five. And frankly, that's a big undertaking when you're sixty-five years old, and many of them would have been older than that. So I think these men and women who were there—and there probably were a lot of them—if they could shout and cry audibly, I think a lot of the people who came back were older brethren.

And so I just want to remind you that many of us are older brethren. Don't be ashamed if you're old like the rest of us. We need younger brethren, but by the grace of God, He's given to 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel a number of older brethren. Praise the Lord for those of us who are older. Thank you.

Okay, so those are my comments on Chapter 3. Other comments on Chapter 3?

The Significance of the Scriptures and Praise

Eric: A few comments. The first is they laid the foundation. They didn't try to rebuild the old one. They laid a new foundation with new plans. And they celebrated the erection of the altar and everything by looking to none other than the word of God itself. We read they offered in chapter three and verse two: they offered burnt offerings on it as it is written. And they kept

the Feast of Tabernacles, verse four, as it is written. And then when they laid that foundation, they didn't lay it on the old—didn't try to reconstruct the old. They had a fresh beginning. And there's a sense in which when we build, we don't try to resurrect something that's gone before. We go right back to the very beginning.

Host: Amen.

Eric: We go back to Christ. "Other foundation can no one lay than that is Christ Jesus." What we're building on is something fresh and new, even though it's two thousand years old. We're not trying to resurrect or reform the Catholic Church or anything like that. We are building; we just go back to the scriptures, don't we? That is our guide. It's what we build from, the scriptures themselves.

Host: It was all built on the same foundation, was it, on the Temple Mount?

Eric: That's right. Yeah, the same place pretty much, but not the same outline of the foundation. It was a different foundation, or the footprint of the building was different. Well, if you go to Haggai chapter 2, verse 3:

[Haggai 2:3 NKJV] "Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing?"

So it was different. The instructions were given; it was smaller, for one thing. Yet it was a replica of the same type that is in heaven. It's a replica of the real in heaven.

Now, when a church is planted, when a group of Christians in any place come to set up an assembly—in Iran, or in Zambia, or in Ecuador, it doesn't matter. It can be in a tribal place in the head of the Amazon, or it can be down by the Zambezi River. It doesn't matter. The idea is not to replicate something that's successful somewhere else. The idea is to go right back to the scriptures themselves. That's where the foundation, it says, "as it is written." And so, the order of service for them was to go back to the original. And that's the only way that there will be success in things. We don't have to replicate what we do here at 16th, because it's different in different places—different demand, different culture, different times, different society. If we go back to the living word of God, God will give the direction that is needed. In 2 Timothy 3:16, it says:

[2 Timothy 3:16 NKJV] All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

It's all there that we need. We don't need a man-pattern in terms of things.

The other thing I note here is that the praise that was done—not only the sacrifices were as it was written in the book of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but also it says here that the praise itself was on a pattern that was laid down by an ordinance by the man, the prophet of God, David himself. Verse 10: "The Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals to praise the Lord according to the ordinance of David, king of Israel." First Chronicles—if you'll turn there—First Chronicles chapter 16, verse 4:

[1 Chronicles 16:4 NKJV] And he appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, to commemorate, to thank, and to praise the LORD God of Israel:

David was a man of many, many gifts.

Host: Amen.

Eric: He had such humble beginnings as a shepherd boy looking after a few of his father's sheep. And from that faithful beginning, God began to use him. First of all, his skill as a slinger. He didn't waste his time; he developed that skill. And in quiet times, he would meditate, and he'd play on his harp, and so on. He was a man that developed his skills under the eye of God. From such a humble beginning, David is raised to the throne of Israel.

So among his many accomplishments as a warrior, a captain of the armies, of his administrative abilities, he also becomes the director of music for Israel. In chapter 1 Chronicles 15 and verse 16, we read:

[1 Chronicles 15:16 NKJV] Then David spoke to the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy.

And then in chapter 25, the whole chapter there is how David organized—later on, he further organized the praise in the house of God.

[1 Chronicles 25:1 NKJV] Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service some of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. And the number of the skilled men performing their service was:

And then we have a long list of these men. So they were under the direction of David, and he appointed them for their service—twenty-four courses of priests and Levites, or Levites that would praise the Lord. And so they remembered that, and they went back to David, and they formed it, perhaps in a more modest sense, but they looked to God Himself and what He had written down for them, and they then praised the Lord according to that ordinance that David had set down before.

And then it's interesting, too, that they—verse 11—that they sang responsively. And that's—or, you know, what does the King James say there in verse 11, chapter 3, 11? What term does it use? We had it before. I've just got to look it up because it was on the wrong page. This is chapter Ezra 3:11, right. "And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks to the Lord." Yeah. Apparently, they would have a response. One would sing, "Oh, give thanks to the Lord for He is good," and another, "For His mercy endures forever." And Psalm 136, if you look at that psalm, it would be something like that which they sang. Psalm 136. So one course would sing, "Oh, give thanks to the Lord for He is good," and then there would be the response of the other course, "For His mercy endures forever." And they go back and forth through perhaps something like this song, or even it could be this very song itself, because we have a brief introduction of that, or a little synopsis of that phrase in verse 11 of Ezra 3.

The response of the old and the response of the new. Was there any antagonism between the two? Those who had seen the old—the glory of Solomon's temple, the old men—and then the new men, the younger men, who once again, their dreams of having the name of the Lord established there in Jerusalem, the city of the king, in all their hopes. They had visions. The old men were dreaming dreams of the glory past; the young had visions of glory future. But it all melded together as one, so that all that the people around about heard was this one combined great shout. In verse 13:

[Ezra 3:13 NKJV] so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off.

So I think that was... we don't find any discrepancy there between the old and the new, in a sense. Yes, there was a sorrow that would have taken place, but I think that a lot of them had already repented, like we have the repentance of Daniel in chapter 9, Hezekiah in chapter 10—or chapter 9, I guess it is, the great prayer of Hezekiah. But the people in the surrounding areas, they heard that unified great shout, that the work of God had been established once again in the land.

The Shift in God's Title: The God of Heaven

One last thought. That has to do with the name that God has. Almost predominantly, God's name has changed in these books. Cyrus is the first to use the name in chapter 1, verse 2:

[Ezra 1:2 NKJV] Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.

Notice: "the Lord God of heaven," "the God of heaven." It's also the name that Nebuchadnezzar uses: "the God of heaven." And it's a name that Ezra and Nehemiah use as well: "the God of heaven." For example, Nebuchadnezzar... we read there in, yes, Ezra chapter 6, Darius uses the same title in verse 9. When he issued his decree to continue the work of the temple, he calls Him "the God of heaven" in verse 9 and again in verse 10. And then Artaxerxes in chapter 7. In verse 12, he is described as the priest, "a scribe of the law of the God of heaven." Verse 23: "the God of heaven." And Nehemiah, chapter 1 and verse 4. So he says, chapter 1, verse 4, that he was praying, fasting, and praying:

[Nehemiah 1:4-5 NKJV] ⁴ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,

And again, in chapter 2, verse 4:

[Nehemiah 2:4 NKJV] Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

And then in chapter 2, again in verse 20, he says:

[Nehemiah 2:20 NKJV] So I answered them, and said to them, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem."

So why this title, the God of heaven? It's the title that the Lord took when His throne was removed from the earth. He's no longer the God of Israel, the God of Jerusalem; He didn't dwell there any longer. He removed His throne from the earth and gave His people into the hand of the Gentiles. In Ezekiel chapters 1 to 10 or 11, we read how the Holy Spirit moved from the temple of Solomon over the threshold and slowly moved away, and went back to heaven. So now, during the times of the Gentiles, He is known as the God of heaven.

Amir: Interesting. We in Zoroastrian, ancient religion in Iran, we use also "God of heaven."

Host: To this day?

Amir: Same thing, yes.

Host: To this day. Yeah.

Amir: Ancient religion, but I read about it, and they all use this phrase, "God of heaven."

Host: The God of heaven. Yeah, Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel, which of course is again... So He's no longer identified with Israel; He's the God of heaven. That's where He is. And when His Son came into the world, Malachi prophesied that the Lord would suddenly appear at His temple, and He came, didn't He? But they rejected Him. But when He comes again, He's going to be known by the prophets as the Lord of the whole earth again. So it's interesting that He's removed Himself out from the place.

The Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, the Shekinah Glory, never came back into the new temple. Whereas the old one, in Solomon's temple, the Holy Spirit came down, filled the place. Remember, Solomon dedicated the temple. But then in Ezekiel, I saw just before the destruction of Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit moving, removing Himself from the presence among His people. And so He's no longer on the earth. He indwells us now, the church, individually. He indwells us. And indwelling among the church, He indwells among us. But

He's the God of heaven. To the Gentiles and to the Jew, He is the God of heaven. To the church, He's our Father.

Eric: Amen.

Host: That's the name. We have a different name. So just a detail that is rather interesting as you come. I count because it wasn't just Cyrus and Darius that used that term; it was also Ezra and Nehemiah. In Esther, of course, in captivity, the name of God is not even mentioned. But we see Him working behind the scenes, though the name of God is not mentioned there.

Brian: Cyrus—do you think that he believed that the God of heaven was the exclusive God, or just a God amongst many?

Host: Well, it would be hard to imagine him not. Nebuchadnezzar had a conversion where he acknowledged in his maturing years the God of heaven. Cyrus, I would have no argument against him that he was a believer in the God of heaven.

Brian: I'm just wondering about the term. Did Cyrus mean that he was the exclusive God, or he was just emphasizing that the God of heaven was a legitimate God to worship amongst other gods that people might worship in different places?

Host: Well, look at what he says in verse 3. He says, "Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God) which is in Jerusalem." So he acknowledges that God was the Lord of Israel and that that is the true God. So I'd be hard-pressed to say that he was not a believer. I think it's hard for us to know for certain.

I find it interesting that Ezra 1 and the earlier verses say that this all took place in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia. So it doesn't sound like he had a conversion later in his life. When he first came to the throne, he made this proclamation, not just for Israel, but in a very unique way for Judah, rather. But he made it for other nations as well. So I think we... I think we're impressed by him. Precisely what his relationship with the Lord was, we don't know, but it looks to us like it was pretty good. What do you think, Amir?

Amir: In ancient history of my country, it is not mentioned about the whole religion followed by Cyrus the Great, but we have in the description and also tablet in one thing, they mentioned Ahura Mazda, the name of Zoroastrian god, one of the names. And some people think maybe Cyrus the Great followed that god. I think... Do you know about that?

Host: Zoroastrian religion, they have only one god and believe that the God of heaven, and they called it Ahura Mazda. And there was nothing I found directly mentioned that Cyrus the

Great followed this religion, but we have that in inscription in one thing, in some places of Iran. The conclusion of which would be that Cyrus was a believer in the God of heaven or not?

Amir: Yes, I think he believed the God, the God of heaven. Okay, we use this phrase in the Zoroastrian religion, exactly this phrase is "God of heaven." So the God of heaven is the God of heaven.

Host: Okay. It's interesting, we mentioned today about this, there is maybe some relation between these. You know, Cyrus the Great has a cylinder in, and I think it's famous in history...

Amir: I need more of a caption here, I can't find... Sorry, I need to check the dictionary.

Host: That's fine, we understand, we understand. I think the conclusion is that Cyrus was used of God, and probably had a great respect for God. Precisely the nature of his relationship with the God of heaven, we're not sure, but he certainly is portrayed in the Bible as a man who respected the God of heaven.

Amir: I want to mention the cylinder writing part by Babylonian language.

Host: Okay.

Amir: All the cylinders. But in my country, we didn't use this language in that time. And it's, I think, strange. Same as the God of heaven, there is maybe some relation between them, but I don't know.

Host: Yeah, the language issue is also very interesting. I'm jumping ahead, but chapter four and verse seven says, "And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions unto Artaxerxes, king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian language." It doesn't say Persian tongue, doesn't say Babylonian, it says Syrian—it doesn't say Assyrian. So I don't understand that, but there were different languages then. I believe it was Aramaic; we call it Syrian, too. Aramaic we use a lot in Persian history.

You might ask that same question, going back to Brian's question, might ask the same question about the wise men who came from the East. They probably came from Persia, and we don't know that for sure, but they said, "We have come... Where is He that is born King of the Jews? We have come to worship Him." They didn't just come for allegiance or just to pay respects; they came to worship. And so in order to worship, I think there has to be a belief in Him. So there was, from ancient times, I believe there was—whether it survived up to the

present time or not—but there was the belief in the true and living God, for them to be able to make that decision and travel so far with that purpose in mind.

It's very difficult for us to say. You know, you have men like Melchizedek who suddenly appear on the scene, who is a priest of the Most High God. Where was his background, right? We're not given it, of course, as he's a type of the Lord Jesus and His unending priesthood, without beginning or end. So his record is purposely shrouded in darkness and mystery. But there are people like that. In the Book of Job, the profound knowledge that those men had about the living and true God. We tend to think that all the knowledge of God had been erased, but in fact, not. Even in all those lands from the time of the Assyrians, the Jews went everywhere, all throughout Assyria, all through the world, and wherever they went, they must have taken the scriptures with them. And the same with the Babylonian Empire: we find Daniel and his friends and so on, and their witness. So God never leaves Himself without a witness.

And apparently, according to Josephus—that Jewish historian who is not always to be relied on—but he said that Cyrus was shown the prophecy of Isaiah, where he's named over two hundred years before his birth, that he would be, that he would come, that he was His servant. And he was so impressed with that. Whether or not that's true, we don't know, but it sounds like it could be very, very likely that some Jew in that kingdom would have shown him this prophecy of Isaiah. Daniel—he was probably very aged at that particular time, having spent seventy years now, before Cyrus came on the scene, seventy years in Babylon, a very aged man, but he would still be living at that particular time. So we don't know precisely all these things, but I have a sneaking hunch that he was a believer.

Facing Obstruction (Ezra 4)

Chapter 4, Ezra chapter 4:

[Ezra 4:1-7 NKJV] ¹ Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the LORD God of Israel, ² they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' houses, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." ³ But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us." ⁴ Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of

Judah. They troubled them in building, ⁵ and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. ⁶ In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. ⁷ In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, and translated into the Aramaic language.

So we get a description now in these verses of the adversaries to the work of God. Eric gave us last week a little summary of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. He said, Ezra is the restoration of the people of God, and Nehemiah the reconstruction of the work of God, and Esther the preservation of the people of God and the work of God. So he's got three words: restoration, reconstruction, and preservation.

And in my opinion, the book of Ezra starts out with an invitation to go to be involved in the work of God. And then, following that, there's an implementation of that invitation, and they go down to Jerusalem and they begin to implement the work of God. But they haven't been there very long before there is obstruction to their work for God. And chapter 4 gives us considerable detail regarding their obstruction to the work of God. It's not surprising that there was an obstruction to the work of God; there is almost always. You go to the book of Acts, and you can see that the work of God began, but there was obstruction and obstruction, both in Jerusalem and then, as the gospel went around the then-known world, there was obstruction and obstruction.

Interesting to me that when, in modern times, the missionaries went to countries where there was very little knowledge of the Lord, initially there was great objection. Just not sure which country to give you an example of—Judson of Burma. Went to Burma. He had terrible obstruction to the work of God in his early days, but then revival broke out and there was great work accomplished. Fraser went to, I call it Lisu land in southwest China, the mountains of southwest China, and he labored there for many years without any effective results. I think in his eighth or ninth year there, he basically said, "Lord, if I don't see something happening, I'm going to go back to England." When Sloan went to the Faroe Islands, he labored for many, many years with very little result. Obstruction every time he turned around.

And so here you have obstruction, and there's a lot of it. And so I want to go back and just look at some of the specifics.

What do you do if you're Zerubbabel and the other men of God who had gone down to rebuild, and you meet opposition? What do you do? So here's some of the opposition. I want to go back to the first movement of opposition, and we read about that in chapter 3 and verse 3:

[Ezra 3:3 NKJV] Though fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening burnt offerings.

Analyzing the Enemy's Strategies: Fear and False Alliance

So the first opposition they ran into, when they had first put together the altar, they found that the people caused them to be afraid. You ever been afraid of telling other people about the Lord Jesus? You say, "Well, I'm not sure, I don't know." And I think that very often we are just afraid. We're afraid because of the opposition that's there. We might not have spoken; we might not know it for certain. But we are often afraid to go ahead because of the opposition. It says, "because of the people of those countries." And the people who were there had come, they were Samaritans; they'd come from other parts of the world, being brought there by the Assyrian conquerors. And they didn't love the gospel, they didn't love the Lord. They haven't done anything other than just make the people afraid.

So I think there are several movements in this logic. Movement number one is **fear**. They were afraid of the work that could be done, and we get that a lot. I'm trying to think of some illustrations. I think that Gideon was pretty much afraid, wasn't he, when he was commissioned by the Lord to tear down the altar of Baal? He did it in the middle of the night, scared silly. Fear is often a major opposition sent to us by the enemy.

I think of modern-day... Mrs. Lou's granddaughter is Coco, and the story of Coco is that she went to Trafalgar School a couple of years ago, and after school she mentioned a little bit about the Lord to one of the students in the school, just in a casual conversation outside of school. And that student went to the teacher, and the teacher went to the principal and the vice principal, and they hauled Coco, a grade five student, into the office and said, "You can't do that." Coco said, "Well, all I was doing, I was chatting with my friend on the way home from school." And the result was that Coco was extremely traumatized by the whole experience, and has been... well, she hasn't recovered yet. Another terrible thing. And why the teachers and the principal in that school did what they did, who knows? They've probably

been rebuked, but they did it. We live in an age where fear could very well keep a lot of us from opening our mouths for Jesus' sake. So that's number one: **fear**.

Number two: they come, the same people, they come and say, "We'll build with you. We'll work along with you. Everything's fine. You want to do work for God? That's good. We believe in God, too. We'll work with you."

And Zerubbabel and Jeshua basically said, "No, we're not going to do that." You remember what happened when Paul went to Philippi, don't you? And this girl, whatever she was, she called out after them... probably we should read the verse. It's Acts chapter 16, verses 16 to 18:

[Acts 16:16-18 NKJV] ¹⁶ Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour.

Are those good words? Are they accurate? So, what does Paul do? Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, "I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out the same hour. Why? And the answer is that Paul knew he didn't need the devil to support his message. And Zerubbabel and Jeshua knew that they didn't need these wicked men, who pretended to be servants of the Lord. You didn't need them working with you.

Very often, the opposition comes from an apparently friendly source, apparently a source that is agreeing: "We're with you. Everything's fine." And we say, "No, no, you're not truly born again. You're not on the Lord's side. We're not going to work with you."

We had a situation arise here at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel many years ago. And whoever she was, I don't know, but she came and she said, "We want to rent the church basement during the week, and what we want to do is have some exercise classes for women. Not necessarily yoga classes, but just exercise classes." And she said, "It'll probably be good for the church, you know, because if we did that, the people will start coming to the building and they'll get friendly with you, and who knows, they may come along on Sunday, and that

would be good. We'd like to work with you. Let us do that. We'll do the ladies' exercises program."

And so, what should we have done? Some of the older brethren said, "Doesn't sound very good to us. We're not in the business of physical fitness; we're in the business of spiritual fitness. And we don't want people coming to us because of physical fitness. We want them coming because of the love of the Lord." So we never did say yes to those people. Maybe not a bad thing.

"We'll work along with you," they say. We've got to be very, very careful who we work with among the people of God.

[2 Corinthians 6:14 NKJV] Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

It is so in many aspects of life. It's in marriage, it's in business, it's in all manner of relationships, and it's even in the preaching of the gospel. Don't depend on the devil's people to get the work of God done.