

Making Sense of Setbacks

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now and then, something happens that we regard as a true answer to prayer. We hoped and prayed our child would get accepted to a certain university, and then this happens, and we feel so grateful; but then the child attends that school only to have a long time of struggle and difficulty and uncertainty. It makes you want to say to God: Why? Why did you answer our prayer so wonderfully only to then kind of drop the ball? Well, the remnant of Israel that returned to Jerusalem after the exile knew all about this. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore why. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this program now is the second program of a four-part series we are doing on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah are kind of contemporaries. They are the two books which used to be...I think, in some of the earliest Jewish Bibles it was called 1 and 2 Ezra, but eventually they got separated out, but they track the same timeline; and so, as we saw in the first program, the people of Israel had been in exile for a very long time—for quite a few decades—when the Babylonians who captured them were themselves conquered by the Persians; and then God raises up this unlikely hero named Cyrus, a pagan, Persian king; but Cyrus decides to let the people go back to Israel.

DAVE BAST

Right; we have tried in the course of this series to help people understand the chronology of all this. It can be a confusing time in Bible history. Even sometimes the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not exactly clear on what happens when, and we will probably point that out along the way—we will go into that a little more; and then there are these events of world history that many of us are not that familiar with; the idea of the Babylonians, maybe that comes through quite clearly in the Bible. We read a bit about Nebuchadnezzar and how he conquered Jerusalem, but the Persians are a little more foreign, and so we start with this King Cyrus, who, as you pointed out, Scott, is mentioned in Isaiah, astonishingly, in a prophetic passage of Isaiah, saying he will be the Lord's anointed—the Lord's messiah—in order to accomplish God's purposes in setting his people free from bondage; and that happened, actually, in the year 538 BC, about fifty years after Jerusalem was destroyed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so then eventually as part of the people returning from exile, we hear about a man named Ezra; and then about a dozen years later another man named Nehemiah will return, and they become key leaders in the rebuilding of the temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem; but, the point being, Dave, when King Cyrus suddenly appears on the scene and releases the people from captivity, surely people said: What an answer to prayer! We have been praying for years to get out of this captivity; and so, God answers that prayer, raises up Cyrus, some people get to go back; and then, lo and behold, what happens? They have years, and even decades, of a lot of struggle—a lot of setbacks. It doesn't go smoothly once the people come back and sort of say where did God go?

DAVE BAST

It's not a Cinderella story, you know, where they live happily ever after. So, for starters...and by the way, Scott, not only was it probably an answer to many prayers of God's people for many years, it was, as it is announced, according to the Word of the Lord. That is how Ezra begins, that in order to fulfill the Word of the Lord by the prophet Jeremiah, God raised up Cyrus in order to send his people back to Jerusalem. So, this is the hand of God who is doing this, and yet, things don't go well...things don't go smoothly. So, as we read the story...and some of it is told in other parts of the Old Testament, too, especially the book of Haggai, a man named Zerubbabel leads the people back. He encourages them, not only to start rebuilding houses and places in the city, but especially the temple. So, we come to this passage from Ezra 3 that describes the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, they have now just gotten as far as laying the foundation: ^{3:10}When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and trumpets, and the Levites with cymbals took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord, "He is good. His love toward Israel endures forever." All the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord because the foundation of the house was laid. ¹²But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads who had seen the former temple, they wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid. While many others shouted for joy, ¹³no one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of the weeping because the people made so much noise and the sound was heard far away.

DAVE BAST

I am always moved by that passage because it is so true to life. So, now we should point out we are in the year 536 [BC], as you said, Scott; but now they are going to get after the big project of rebuilding the temple—the focus of worship—and the place where God would dwell among his people again; and as they do so, there are a few real old folks who could still remember as children fifty years earlier what the great temple of Solomon had looked like in all its glory and splendor, and when they see this, they cannot help but weep at the contrast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is kind of like, you know, watching an athlete in their declining years, and you can remember how good they were, and glorious in their prime, and now it is just a shadow; or maybe a mentor that you especially appreciated, or a professor, and now they are going into sort of feebleness and mental decline, and it makes you cry, you know?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I like how the text of Ezra 3 says that, in a way, you couldn't even distinguish the shouts of joy from the weeping; and I think we all know that sometimes the difference between laughing and crying...that borderline...can be a little bit fuzzy. Sometimes one can actually give way to the other. You weep for joy at the birth of a child, and then you start laughing with joy; or maybe the other way around, right? But I like also what you said, Dave, is that we all kind of know what this is like, and I think it is something we remember every week when we gather for worship, that we are always a mixed gathering. Some people who have had a really good week or they are in a really good season of their life and they are shouting for joy; and we gather with others who are in a really bad season of their life, who have had a terrible week—had great losses, and they are coming with tears in their eyes. We are always kind of like these people. It is a good thing for pastors and worship leaders to bear in mind, and be sensitive to. It is just sort of how it goes. Things with God don't always proceed smoothly for everybody at the same time.

DAVE BAST

I just...you know, Scott, you conjured up a picture...a memory in my mind. I must have been about 10 or 11, and one Sunday morning we were having communion, which didn't happen all that often in those days...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And it was always very solemn; and I remember looking at an elderly lady in our row with tears streaming down her face as she is weeping, and you know, who knows? Maybe she was remembering her husband, who had worshipped with her for so many years, and now he was gone; or maybe she was moved by emotion, but it is true. Tears can be near the surface, especially as we grow older, but joy and laughter can mix in with them, too; and one minute you are laughing and the next minute you are crying, or vice versa; and that is what our congregations are. I think every worship leader and preacher needs to remember this. If you are the type who is relentlessly cheery and upbeat, remember there are some people who are brokenhearted; and vice versa. If you are a doleful person, just remember in your congregation, don't quench the joy of others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but as we will see as we move a little farther into Ezra, Dave, those who were feeling a little discouraged that day, those who were weeping because this just doesn't look like the old Jerusalem and the old temple, it turns out they are going to have some more reasons for discouragement as time goes on, and in just a moment we will pick up the narrative of Ezra and see how that happens.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the book of Ezra and the story that it tells about the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and then some of the consequences that followed. So, we have seen just now that there was a mixture of joy and sorrow in this great project as it is being launched. That is only going to lead to some more problems—they are going to have more challenges beyond the mere building—and so, let's listen to some verses from Ezra 4.

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, ²they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build, because like you we seek your God, and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." ³But Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building the temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴Then the people around them set out to discourage the people of Judah, and make them afraid to go on building. ⁵They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of King Cyrus of Persia, down to the reign of King Darius, king of Persia.

We are told up front that these people are enemies of Israel, and yet, they offered to help. Why would somebody who is opposed to you offer to help? Well, maybe they were going to sabotage the work from the inside, or you know, do something to hinder the work. In any event, it looks like the leader Zerubbabel...it looks like Zerubbabel kind of saw through them, and said; Thanks, but no thanks; we don't need your help. So, that looks rude on the surface of it, except that we were already tipped off. These are not well-intentioned people; so maybe Zerubbabel was just being savvy in saying: Yes, we will just do it ourselves; thanks.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is something else that is interesting here, and it is kind of deep background. These are, in fact, the Samaritans who were resettled in the northern kingdom after that was destroyed; not by the

Babylonians, but by the previous empire, the Assyrians; and this is really going to be the beginning of a longstanding rivalry and hostility between Samaritans and Jews.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Now, we have to tell you, because here on *Groundwork*, we dig into scripture, and so, to help you dig into scripture, we have to note that at this point, the book of Ezra gets very, very confusing, because right after we read that Zerubbabel turned down those people, then in verse 6 already of this same chapter, we read:

⁶At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, Israel's enemies lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem; ⁷and then in the days of Artaxerxes, (that is the next king of Persia) they wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes.

So, they write a letter to Artaxerxes saying: Look, if you let these people rebuild their temple in their city, guess what. They are going to declare independence and they won't pay you taxes anymore. You won't get any tribute money from these people. If you want them, you know, to stay in your pocket, you better stop the work...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Artaxerxes then says: Okay, I am declaring a ceasing of this work.

DAVE BAST

This is, in effect, a political dirty trick that they are pulling. They are absolutely kind of distorting the facts, trying to get the king in faraway Persia, who is, you know, not really aware of what is going on on the ground back in Jerusalem...kind of an insignificant province of his great empire...these people try to poison him against what is happening and get him to issue a decree to stop the work cold; and he does so!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he does so...

DAVE BAST

But, where is the problem, then?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the problem is, if you keep reading Ezra...this is Chapter 4...when you get to Ezra 5, you read about another king of Persia named Darius, who the people...the enemies of Israel...ask Darius to stop the work, and he refuses. The problem is, Darius was king before Xerxes and Artaxerxes; so, we are telling the story out of order. If you didn't know better, you would think Artaxerxes came before Darius; so, it would be like thinking that Ronald Reagan was president before John Kennedy because Reagan was mentioned first, and then you got to John Kennedy. So, you have to, you know, wonder what is going on here. Was Ezra just a really bad historian? Did he not realize that Darius came before Artaxerxes?

DAVE BAST

Well, and you will find plenty of scholars who say: Sure, yes; that is exactly the problem. Look, you cannot trust the history or chronology of the Old Testament, you know, and they will extrapolate from there; which always makes me a little nervous when I think...you too, Scott...to take that approach and say: No, we kind of throw out the Bible's history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; much more likely is something other commentators think, and that is that Ezra purposely told the story out of order. He jumps ahead to Artaxerxes, who will eventually order the work stopped, as a way to say: Remember back when, when Zerubbabel turned these people down? He was smart to do so, because they are

going to stick with this for years and even decades, and eventually they are going to succeed. So, Ezra purposely tells the story out of order to jump to the day when these enemies finally succeed in convincing a king of Persia to not let Jerusalem or the temple be rebuilt; and then we backtrack to Darius, who actually came before, where they didn't succeed. So, you have to just kind of have that in mind when you read Ezra.

DAVE BAST

But, you know, the deeper question maybe is, what is going on here? It is a bunch of royal decrees and a bunch of strange names...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Politics, politics...

DAVE BAST

And dirty tricks. Why is this in Bible?

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, I think it shows two things, Dave, that we can take away from this: One, it shows that the enemies of God are relentless; and Jesus himself, in the New Testament, said: Look, the world hated me, it is going to hate you. Things are not going to go easy. You are going to be persecuted. The world is going to be relentless, but the good news of Ezra is God and God's people can be more relentless, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have quoted this line on *Groundwork* before, that somebody once observed that the Church is like an anvil that has worn out many of the world's hammers. The world has tried to pound down God's people...Israel...and now the Church; but God is faithful, and God's people persist longer; and the Church...the people of God...Israel, and now the new Israel of the Church...we keep on keeping on.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think there is another message for us here, pretty clearly too, and that is that it is hard. There is opposition. The life of faith is hard; trying to serve God is hard; and if it were easy, you know...I have often said if it were easy, we would have reached the world by now, you know, and Jesus would have come back. It is difficult, and makes me think of an incident early in *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian sets out and a friend of his named Pliable wants to go along, too; and no sooner do they start than they fall into this slew of despond and they are stuck in the mud; and Pliable manages to get out and says: Go ahead; you can have it. I don't want any. If this is what it is, you can occupy the city for me. You know, that is a temptation when we realize just becoming a Christian or just coming to age is only the beginning of what we face; and, as you said, Scott, the need for perseverance; but, as we come toward the end of Ezra, what we will look at next is the note of hope that helps us to do exactly that...to keep on keeping on.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, let's dig right back into scripture...jump ahead to Ezra Chapter 7, as it moves us to a new part of the story that introduces the key figure...the title character of the book...Ezra.

DAVE BAST

^{7:8}Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. ⁹He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month; for the gracious hand of his God was on him; ¹⁰for Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Ezra arrives, and he even arrives with a letter in hand from the Persian king, Artaxerxes. Now, we just said in the previous segment, Dave, Artaxerxes is going to turn against Israel eventually. He is going to turn against them, he is going to be convinced by the enemies of Israel to stop the work...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But he doesn't start out as a bad guy; he starts out as a good guy. In fact, he sends this letter. So, here we are in Ezra 7:21:

Now I, King Artaxerxes, decree that all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates are to provide with diligence whatever the priest may ask of you; ²⁵and you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of the Trans-Euphrates, all who knew the laws of your God; and you are to teach any who do not know them.

So, here we are, seventy-eight years now, by the way...by the time we get to Artaxerxes, we are seventy-eight years on the other side of King Cyrus sending the first people back, and Artaxerxes again starts out as a good guy, and authorizes Ezra to do the work of the Lord.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and as we saw in an earlier program, where Ezra is introduced at the beginning of the book...although he doesn't show up physically here until Chapter 7...he is not only a priest—a descendant of Aaron, and therefore, a high priest—but he is well-versed in God's Word—in God's Law—and he is a preacher and a teacher; and so, he is given this authority by the emperor—by the king—to do that, and to set things to rights in Jerusalem; and Ezra's great calling is going to be to spark a spiritual revival, as we will see in our last program in this series, a revival based on hearing once again God's Word, and the people open themselves to it and embrace its message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In fact, Ezra indeed speaks like a priest here, in Ezra 7:27, where Ezra says to all the people: Praise be to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way, ²⁸and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisors and all the king's powerful officials, because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

So, it looks great...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ezra arrives full of optimism and hope; and for now, anyway, with the support of the Persian king; but as we said earlier, the story doesn't unfold in straight lines. There is going to be a lot of struggle and a lot of causes for discouragement coming up, including a dozen years later after Nehemiah arrives, which we will see in the next program.

DAVE BAST

And the enemies are still there and the enemies kind of redoubled their activity during Nehemiah's work, which will involve rebuilding Jerusalem's defenses. So, this is true, really, to our Christian experience. This is how our lives go. We dedicate ourselves to God; like Ezra, we take courage and we kind of plunge in...and incidentally, I thought it was striking...it took them four months just to get from Babylon back to Jerusalem. That must have been...that was kind of like the people on the Oregon Trail, you know, walking across that great desert. So, the journey itself was not easy, and when he got there, he would find more challenges; but that is how it is. Scott, just this morning in my devotions I read a prayer...an ancient prayer from the Church that said: Help me to run to the promises of God...not just cling to them...not just kind of cite them, but run toward them. Part of the secret, I think, for us as followers of Jesus is to focus on those promises when things get tough and not give up, you know?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ezra arrives praising God for answers to prayer, that he put it on the king's heart to send him back, and we all have that. You know, there is a couple in your church; they struggled with infertility...they prayed for years to conceive a child, and then they do; and it is an answer to prayer, and everybody praises God...and eight years later the little boy dies of leukemia...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you say: What gives? Was that an answer to prayer or is it just all a crap shoot? Is it all just blind luck? Where is God in all of this, because when a prayer seems to be answered, as for Israel, and then there is just so much hardship, you sort of wonder: Is it true? Is providence true? Is the love of God true? Does prayer really work? These crises in our lives, as for Israel in Ezra and Nehemiah's day, kind of force us to ask some very, very hard questions.

DAVE BAST

Well, especially when it is not what we expected, you know? We ask for these things...we long for them. We think this is the secret to my future happiness and contentment. God, if you only do this for me, then I won't ask for anything more; and when he does, it doesn't always turn out as we had expected or hoped. It is really the story of Israel, certainly, from beginning to end. You think of the Exodus, you know, how they cried out to God in their bondage and he raises up Moses, and Moses comes and delivers them through the Red Sea, and the next thing you know, they are grumbling in the wilderness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because they don't have enough to eat or drink. What is this?! And so it goes with us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but what we know about Israel in Ezra and Nehemiah's day...and it is true of us, too, today, Dave, in the Church...we are imbedded in the larger story of God; and even here in Ezra and Nehemiah, when things go badly, when there are setbacks, God is still moving his chess pieces around on the board, and he is still moving things forward, and we know that at the end of the day, the Messiah...the promised Messiah comes; the Son of David who will sit eternally on the throne of Israel; and in the end, God does give us the victory. We are tempted to lose sight of that along the way...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But thanks be to God that God is relentless. He helps us to stick with him through his Holy Spirit; and indeed, in the end God always brings forth the victory.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with us today on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to study the rebuilding of Jerusalem by looking at Nehemiah's wisdom and leadership in how to rebuild even as the pressures of life persist.

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