

Message Series: The Whole Counsel of God, Message 17
Attempting Great Things for God. The book of Ezra
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Have you ever attempted some great project in your life? Few years ago I watched some boys build a tree-house. With three levels, it was quite a project and even caught the attention of the newspaper, which did a front page story about the builders. In their photo you could see in their faces that they had done something big.

As a Christian, has God ever put it in your heart to attempt something big for Him? Maybe read through the Bible, tell someone about Jesus, or even help start a new church? Whenever God stirs our heart to attempt something big for Him we can approach it with some expectations. These are well illustrated in the Old Testament book of Ezra.

I. Completion of God's Work

Right from the start we find an expectation that we can always count on when doing God's work, the completion of His Word. What God says, He will do. God keeps His promises. See 1:1-3...

In our previous study we finished with the Babylonian Captivity of Judah. As the weeks turned into months and the months turned into years of captivity, don't you think the people of Judah wondered if they would ever get back home again? That's what makes the opening verses of Ezra so encouraging. Notice again in verse 1, "*that the Word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.*" Those words are meant to stand out and catch our attention, God Keeps His Promises!

Jeremiah ministered through the reigns of the final five kings of Judah, and in Jeremiah 29:10, God promised that the Captivity would only last seventy years. That time had now elapsed. How comforting then the words, "*that the Word of the Lord... might be fulfilled.*" God keeps His promises! That's something you and I can always count on.

In verse 3 King Cyrus of Persia asked...

In other words, *“Who is willing to participate in the fulfillment of God’s Word?”* That’s a significant question, don’t you think? Wouldn’t you have thought most of the Jewish captives would have shouted, *“I am!”*? But that was not to be. According to 2:64-65, out of the multitude taken into captivity, only about 50,000 decided to return. Why did the others stay? I can only speculate. Perhaps life had become easy for them and they thought, *“Why deal with the hardship and sacrifices?”* So, they stayed.

However, 50,000 did say, *“I’ll go!”* Verse 5 says, *“Whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord.”* They were the ones that experienced first hand the fulfillment of God’s Word. Can you imagine the excitement they must have felt as they made the 900 mile journey back home? Psalm 126 says, *“It was like a dream.”*

When God stirs up your heart to participate in the fulfillment of His Word, expect its completion! Philippians 1:6 says, *“Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”*

God keeps His promises; He does what He says He will do.

II. Opposition to God’s Work

We also discover in these chapters that when doing God’s work we should expect opposition.

A lot of times we don’t. We like to think when we’re willing to do what God says and willing to make the sacrifices necessary that everything is going to go great, and we’re surprised when the going gets tuff. But the Bible is very clear in this area so you and I will be prepared and not surprised. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, *“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”*

When the people of Judah made that trip back from Babylon, it was *“like a dream.”* Their hearts were filled with expectation of good things to come. Ezra 3:1 says they gathered in Jerusalem as *“one man.”* They were a people with purpose. They were going to re-establish true worship. They set up the altar and began making sacrifices, and they laid the foundation of the Temple once again. That’s when the trouble started. See 3:10-13...

For the young guys who had never seen Solomon's Temple in all its splendor, the laying of this foundation was the most exciting thing of their lives. They were singing and shouting and praising God for His goodness and mercy. Nothing would stand in their way!

But there was another group present, the older men. All they could think about was the way things used to be and they wept just as loudly as the others shouted for joy.

The way things used to be⁴ can leave us terribly vulnerable to the attacks of our adversary the devil. It dampens the spirits of the young, and it keeps the old from looking ahead. Philippians 3:13-14 provides some good advice: forget the things which are behind, reach for the things which are ahead, and press toward the mark of the high calling of God.

When we're trying to do God's will and we're letting the past discourage us, Satan will attack. That's when the opposition started up for the people of Judah. It took two basic forms: cooperation and slander.

First, they were attacked with the possibility of cooperation. See 4:1-3...

Did you notice the deceit? "*Let us build with you, we're in this together!*" But they were not; their belief and practice was filled with error. Rather than companions they were adversaries. The right response was given in verse 3...

We can never build true worship by cooperating with brothers, so called. Their help will only hinder God's work, and therefore it is best to remain separate from the start.

The second form opposition took was slander. See 4:4-6...

Slander takes many forms: gossip, public lies, or as here with legal threats. They hired legal counselors, lawyers to frustrate the work. Even today the law is often used to frustrate the work of God. Here it had two results: First, it weakened them. Let's face it, even when you're right, legal threats can be very intimidating, and so it slowed their work. Verse 4 says it troubled them in building. But eventually it did much more than that. Verses 23-24, through the command of the king, as a result of the accusations, by the force and power of the law, the work ceased.

For sixteen years nothing beyond the foundation was done. Seemingly, the enemy had won. But the way things seem is not always the way things are. God was still at work to bring His Word to completion. According to 5:1 God raised up prophets to encourage them with His Word, and according to 5:2 He raised up leaders to lead them in the work.

It took sixteen years, but they did get started again. And the moment they did, guess what! Opposition was right there. See 5:3-4...

Satan does not rest. The moment you and I begin to move for God that's the moment Satan begins to move against us. This time though, they did not stop. They continued to work. What made the difference? Had their circumstances changed? No. Their circumstances did not change but their attitude did. See verses 5 and 11...

They had come to believe that with God on their side no one could stand against them, so they stood their ground. That's exactly what God wants us to do whenever Satan attacks. Ephesians 6:13-14 tells us, "*Wherefore, take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand, stand.*"

When doing the work of God by the Word of God expect opposition, but also remember that you are a servant of the God of heaven and earth!

III. Provision for God's Work

We also find in these chapters that when attempting something great for God we can expect His provision. God does not ask us to do what He does not give us the means to do.

Just like today, God's work back then took money. Now, for some reason, we don't like to hear that, but it's true nonetheless. For them to make the journey, get resettled, rebuild, and to put the priests in place, it was going to take lots of money. Where was it all going to come from?

Some of the help came from those who did not go; those who stayed in Babylon. According to 1:4, they gave freely, and according to 1:6 they gave willingly. Maybe they could not go for one reason or another, but they were able to still participate by giving. As you read in the book of Nehemiah you

discover that they continued to give for many years. Let's face it; those who go need those who stay behind.

Some of the help also came from those who went. According to 2:68-69, when they came to Jerusalem and committed themselves to rebuilding God's house they too gave freely and according to their ability. To see God's work accomplished, it takes a commitment on our part to give financially to God's work, if we don't then not much will get done.

In chapter six, when the adversaries were again trying to stop the work of God they wrote to king Darius, only this time the result was different. Searching the records and finding the original decree of Cyrus to rebuild, he not only gave word that it should continue, but also ordered that the funds needed to complete it should come out of the money they were collecting for the royal treasury. What a turn of events! Instead of stopping God's work, those enemies found themselves funding the completion of God's work. What that tells me is that when you and I, as God's people, do our part to support God's work; He will supply the rest that's needed through some of the most unexpected ways. I thoroughly believe that! Don't you?

IV. Inspection of God's Work

We are in the beginning stages of a political campaign for President. It will not surprise me if soon some will drop out complaining about the scrutiny of their private lives. However, such scrutiny should be expected. When doing God's work we need to expect the same thing, the inspection of God's Word.

In chapters seven and following, a second, smaller group of people return from Captivity under the leadership of Ezra. According to 7:10, Ezra had prepared his heart to know, to do, and to share God's Word. That is God's desire for all of us. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, *Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.*"

In 9:1-2, after arriving in Jerusalem expecting the best of news, sin was widespread among the people, the princes, and even the priests. The sin was a lack of personal separation. During the fifty years they had been back many had intermarried with the unbelievers of the land. This was the very

sin that destroyed the Temple and took them into Captivity. Ezra was shocked and moved to a passionate prayer. See 9:5-15...

Did you notice how Ezra did not pray? He did not pray pointing his finger at the sinners instead, he prayed identifying with them. Their sin was his sin; they were all in it together. We're all sinners in need of God's mercy, and that's how we need to treat each other when we fall.

As a result of Ezra's prayer, God gripped the hearts of the people, they confessed their sin, and covenanted together to put away all their foreign wives.

Three things need to be pointed out:

- (1) You and I as God's people can not live like the rest of the world and accomplish His work. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 makes this clear...
- (2) Their solution is not our solution. See 1 Corinthians 7:12-16...
- (3) The best solution is to make choices that are pleasing to god from the start. And when we do sin, to confess it to Him before it gets out of hand.

What we've seen in this book is that God will sometimes stir up the hearts of His people to attempt something bigger than they've done before. It might be reading through His Word, telling someone about Jesus, or being part of a new place of worship. Whatever it might be, keep these expectations in mind: the completion of His work, the opposition to His work, the provision of His work, and the inspection of His work.