

Obedience to God – An Example from Ezra

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- When God says to do something – He means it
 - 2 Kings 5 describes the story of a man named Naaman who had leprosy
 - Vs 4-7 – In futility, Naaman goes to the king of Israel
 - Vs 9 – Naaman is directed to Elisha instead
 - Vs 10 – Elisha (as directed by God, of course) tells Naaman to wash 7 times in the Jordan River to rid him of his leprosy
 - Naaman did not like this direction – thought he should be healed by doing nothing on his part (vs 11)
 - Vs 12 – he thought he should be able to be healed by his own way – *“Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?”*
 - Of course, the answer is no – through Elisha, God told Naaman to wash 7 times in the Jordan
 - God did not direct Elisha to wave his hand over Naaman and heal him
 - Nor did He direct Elisha to send Naaman to the rivers of Damascus
 - Nor did He direct Elisha to tell Naaman to wash 5 times in the Jordan River
 - God’s instructions were to wash 7 times in the Jordan – that would cleanse him of his leprosy – nothing else, despite Naaman’s frustration with that direction
 - Finally, in vs 13 – Naaman’s servants give him very wise advice
 - Advice that we would be wise to heed today as well
 - *“My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!”*
 - To sidetrack just a bit – today’s society would be wise to heed this advice
 - If the Bible outlined the obtaining of \$100M as a prerequisite for salvation, how many people would be striving to hit that number?
 - But the Bible describes a simple plan of salvation – it makes me wonder why so many people deny it
 - Naaman heeds this advice and he was cleansed of his leprosy (vs 14)
 - He went from having the worst skin in all of Israel to likely the best (vs 14)
 - The point is that despite what Naaman thought – the Lord’s direction is the only way that Naaman was going to be healed

- The Lord said through Elisha to wash 7 times in the Jordan and He meant it
- The same can be said in all situations, but I want to focus on God's direction for the Jews to rebuild the temple in the book of Ezra
- Let's have a brief history lesson before we continue
 - During the Patriarchal Age (specifically under the Patriarch Israel – Jacob), there was a great famine throughout the world (Gen 41:27)
 - Under Joseph's leadership, Egypt was prepared for the famine (Gen 41:41-57)
 - As a result, the Israelites end up in Egypt (Goshen – Gen 47:6)
 - The Israelites grew so large in number while in Egypt, that over time they were enslaved (Exodus 1:11)
 - The Israelites were freed from their slavery in Egypt after the Lord brought 10 plagues upon Egypt and began their journey back to the promised land of Canaan (Exodus 12:51)
 - Under the leadership of God through Moses, the Israelites were able to conquer all of the land to the east of the Jordan River that would be included in the 12 tribes of Israel (Joshua 12:1-6)
 - Under the leadership of God through Joshua, the Israelites were able to conquer all of the land to the west of the Jordan River that would be included in the 12 tribes of Israel (Joshua 12:7-24)
 - After Joshua's death, God sent judges to help keep them faithful to the Lord and guide them in battles (Judges)
 - Over time, the Israelites asked Samuel to provide them with a king (1 Samuel 8:5)
 - So God gave them what they wanted (1 Samuel 8:22)
 - The first 3 kings – Saul, David, Solomon – reigned over a united 12 tribes
 - However, under Rehoboam – the kingdom was split
 - 10 tribes (all minus Judah and Benjamin) secede from Rehoboam and make Jeroboam their king (1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10)
 - Judah & Benjamin = Judah under Rehoboam
 - 10 others = Israel under Jeroboam
 - Eventually, during the reign of Hoshea, Israel was taken captive by Assyria after not having even 1 righteous king (2 Kings 17)
 - Judah was not far behind them though – they did have a mix of righteous and wicked kings
 - Judah eventually became a vassal kingdom under Bablyon after they defeated the united front of Egypt + Assyria in Carchemish (Jeremiah 46:2)
 - While under Bablyon's rule, Judah was constantly rebellious, resulting in the eventual destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36, Jeremiah 52)
 - Side note: one key difference between the first destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC and the second in 70AD is the amount of people in the city
 - Before Bablyon destroyed Jerusalem, most of Jerusalem's inhabitants had actually already been taken out – whereas the second destruction there were Jews from all over

the world in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover (my source here is Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 5, CH 3, vs 1 – **Josephus is a history book though, not Biblical doctrine**)

- The Babylonian Captivity happened in 3 stages, so many lives were spared in this regard
 - 1st stage (606BC-605BC) – 2 Kings 24:1 (under Jehoiakim)
 - Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego exiled during this stage (Daniel 1:1-21)
 - 2nd stage (597BC) – 2 Kings 24:8-17 (under Jehoiachin)
 - During this stage, Ezekiel was exiled (Ezekiel 1:1-3)
 - 3rd stage (586BC) – 2 Kings 25, Jeremiah 52 (under Zedekiah)
 - This is when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem
 - Babylon camped outside the city for 2 years with intent to starve the remaining inhabitants out (2 Kings 25:3, Ezekiel 4, Ezekiel 5)
 - Finally laid siege to it (2 Kings 25:4-25)
- Just as Daniel predicted in Daniel 2:39, Persia overthrew Babylon as the world power at that time
- And according to prophecy in Isaiah 44:28, Cyrus the king of Persia was about release the Israelites from captivity to rebuild the temple

- **Ezra 1:1-4**

- Though Isaiah mentions Cyrus by name (Isaiah 44:28), vs 1 points to a prophecy of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:10 tells us that God promised a return back to Jerusalem after 70 years, Jeremiah 25:1-14 also speaks to this)
- As we just mentioned, Jerusalem was destroyed in 586BC by Babylon under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36, Jeremiah 52)
- In the first year of the reign of Cyrus, he makes this proclamation
 - Cyrus had already been established as the king of Persia for 20 years or so by this point, but it's clear that the "*first year of Cyrus king of Persia*" referenced in vs 1 here points to the first year that he reigned over what once was Babylon – otherwise he wouldn't have the authority to make such a proclamation concerning the Jews
 - The Persians under the reign of Cyrus got involved in a conflict with Babylon in 540BC and in 539BC – the Persians ran right over the Babylonians in the battle of Opis (just North of Babylon)
 - Persia and Babylon must have arranged some sort of a compromise after this battle, because it wasn't long after that Persia marched right into Babylon with little to no resistance
 - So the year referred to in Ezra 1:1 is 539BC
 - Given the fact that we know the Israelites were in Babylonian captivity for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:1-14, Jeremiah 29:10, Daniel 9:1-2), that leads to 2 possibilities

- The 70 year captivity that God refers to began in 609BC when Babylon conquered Assyria and became the new world power at the time (609BC – 539BC = 70 years)
 - Or the more likely in my mind – though Cyrus made this proclamation in 539BC, the majority of the populace of the Israelites did not make it back to Jerusalem until 536BC (we can read in Ezra 1:5 that not all of the Jews went back to Jerusalem in 539BC) – giving us the 70 year period of 606BC – 536BC (going back to the first stage of the Babylonian captivity)
- So this brings me to point that there are no contradictions in God’s Word
 - Several locations prove to us that the Bible is from God
 - 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - Hebrews 1:1-2
 - 2 Peter 1:20-21
 - Titus 1:2 – God does not lie
 - When God said that the Israelites would be in captivity for 70 years due to them not heeding the words of God (Jeremiah 25:8-11), that’s exactly what happened
 - The Greek word translated into “*Word*” in John 1:1 is “*Logos*” where we get our English word “logic”
 - Though worshipping God is a very spiritual thing, it must also be logical and in accordance with God’s Word
 - John 4:24 – “*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship **in spirit and in truth.***”
 - If we worship God in spirit alone and do not follow the guidance of the Bible in relation to how God wants us to worship, we are wasting our time (Matthew 15:8-9)
- My next point: God delivers on His promises
 - Jeremiah 29:10 tells us that when the 70 years are up, God would bring them back to Jerusalem
 - And again, this is exactly what happened
 - So when God says that He will save His people in Matthew 1:21, He will do so
 - But notice this promise is only to His people – to become His people, we must follow His guidelines
 - Hear (Romans 10:13-17)
 - Believe (Mark 16:16)
 - Confession (Romans 10:8-10)
 - Repentance (Luke 13:3)
 - Baptism (Galatians 3:27, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:1-7)
 - Faithful living (Revelation 2:10)
 - Anything less will not lead to salvation
- So Cyrus makes this proclamation for the Jews to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of the Lord (vs 3)

- Ezra 3:1-6

- The Israelites begin by building the altar
- Notice vs 1 though – “...the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem.”
 - The Israelites were united at this time
 - Ephesians 4:3-6 – “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is **one** body and **one** Spirit – just as you were called to **one** hope when you were called – **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism; **one** God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”
 - John 17:20-23 – “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”
 - Jesus prays for unity. There is 1 body (church – Ephesians 1:22-23), Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God and Father of all
 - If there is 1 of basically everything in the Lord’s church – if there is a disagreement amongst brethren over critical matters such as salvation, worship, etc. (not disputable matters such as the color of the carpet, etc – Romans 14) – then either 1 is wrong and 1 is right, or both are wrong
 - In a difference of opinion in critical matters – there cannot be 2 right answers
 - As members of the Lord’s church, we must make sure that we are united, else we are not the Lord’s church (1 Corinthians 1 forbids divisions)
- So the Israelites were united and start with the altar – why?
- To have the ability to offer sacrifices (vs 2)
 - In our terms today – they did this to be able to worship
 - Today, we worship on the first day of every week
 - Christ was resurrected on the first day of the week (John 20:1)
 - We have an example of the Lord’s Supper being partaken of on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7)
 - We have the example of Paul and his companions waiting 7 days in Troas to worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:6-7)
 - We have the instruction to give on the first day of the week in accordance with what we’ve been prospered (1 Corinthians 16:2)
 - So though we are not directly told anywhere “WORSHIP MUST BE ON DAY 1” – we have the death and resurrection of Christ to remember via the partaking of the Lord’s Supper and we have the instruction to give – so we take the opportunity of the assembly to perform all the “formal” acts of worship
 - Prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

- Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7)
- Giving (1 Corinthians 16:2)
- Preaching (2 Timothy 4:2)
- Singing (Ephesians 5:19-20)
- The worship is ultimately for the praise of God, but it is also a benefit to us
 - Hebrews 10:25 – *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but **let us encourage one another** – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*
 - We get encouragement from others by being in the assembly
 - Colossians 3:16 – *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”*
 - As we're singing, we are teaching and admonishing
- Worship is necessary – and the Israelites realized this
- Notice vs 3 – *“**Despite their fears of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.**”*
 - In this case – despite what was going on around them, they served the Lord by building the altar and using it
 - In the same manner today, we must not let the cares of the world stop us from serving God
 - Matthew 7:13-14 describes 2 roads
 - 1 is narrow but leads to life
 - 1 is broad but leads to death
 - Regardless of how difficult it may be to stay on the narrow road, if we want life, we must stay on it
 - In Daniel 3 – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not let the pressure of the king to worship his image stop them from serving the Lord
 - Vs 17-18 – *“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. **But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.**”*
 - These 3 were ready to face death if that's what it meant to remain faithful to the Lord – and we must have the same mindset (Revelation 2:10)
- Ezra 3:10-13
 - The people began building the temple and rejoiced at the completion of the foundation
- Ezra 4:1-5
 - The enemies of the Jews heard that the temple was being rebuilt and discouraged progress
 - If we are living as Christians, people will notice a difference in our lives

- 1 Peter 4:4 states that the world thinks it strange that Christians do not participate in the same flood of dissipation that the rest of the world does
 - If they think it strange, then they've certainly taken notice
- Sadly, there are people who will try to persuade Christians to stop being Christians
 - 1 Corinthians 15:33 – *“Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”*”
 - As Christians, we must not allow this to happen – lest we be lost (Hebrews 10:26-27)
- Unlike when they were building the altar (3:3), this time the Jews gave in to peer pressure and ceased work on the temple (4:24) despite the instruction from God through Cyrus to rebuild the temple (1:3)
 - 2 Timothy 4:3 – *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”*
 - Sadly, this time had come for the Jews

- Ezra 5:1-2

- Between 4:24 and 5:1, the time lapse is on the magnitude of 10-16 years
 - There is a significant amount of time that the Jews allowed outside interference to prevent them from continuing the Lord's work in rebuilding the temple
- Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Jews in the name of God – so let's find out what they said

- Haggai 1:1-8

- To summarize, God is saying through Haggai: “Why aren't you building the temple? It's not time to build the temple, but you have time to build your own houses? **Consider your ways.**”
- God is not going to speak to us in this fashion today when we are disobedient (in Luke 15, when the young son wanted to leave with his inheritance, the Father allowed him to), but we do have His word to refer back to for the consequences of disobedience
 - Revelation 20:14-15 describes a lake of fire that awaits those whose names were not found written in the book of life
 - So if you are in a state of choosing to be disobedient today – **consider your ways**

- Zechariah 1:1-4

- To summarize, God is saying through Zechariah: “Repent of your ways – turn back to me and I will turn to you”
- Another NT principle that is taught in Luke 15 – when the young son came back, the Father welcomed him
- The preaching from Haggai and Zechariah worked
 - Haggai 1:12-15, Zechariah 1:5-6 confirm what is told to us in Ezra 5:2
- Preaching works today as well – as long as that preaching is from sound doctrine

- Galatians 1:6-9 tells us that there is only 1 gospel
- Paul tells Titus in Titus 2:1 that he must teach in accordance with sound doctrine
- And Acts 2 gives us an example of how preaching the 1 true gospel (the 1 true sound doctrine) can have a positive impact on those who truly want to hear and obey

- Ezra 6:14-16

- The rebuilding of the temple was complete and a celebration followed
- Similarly for us, we have a reward waiting for us if we do God's work while we are on this earth
- Hebrews 4:9-11 – *“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”*
- Again though, notice this rest of for God's people only – to become one of God's people, you must follow His plan of salvation
 - **Step 1: Hearing the gospel** – *Romans 10:13-17*
 - Gospel = Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, arose, and appeared to many – *1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Romans 1:16*
 - **Step 2: Believing the gospel** – *Mark 16:16*
 - **Step 3: Confession that Jesus is Lord** – *Romans 10:8-10*
 - **Step 4: Repentance of sins** – *Luke 13:3*
 - Repentance: a turning away from sin, disobedience, or rebellion and a turning back to God. Change of mind that produces a change in action.
 - **Step 5: Baptism into Christ** – *Galatians 3:27, Acts 2:38*
 - Baptism: immerse or submerge
 - **Step 6: Live faithfully** – *Revelation 2:10*