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July 18th: Ezra 6 & 2 Timothy 1

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The completion of the rebuilding of the temple. Fan into flame the gift of God.

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Transcript

Ezra chapter 6. Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored, and in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media. A scroll was found on which this was written. A record.

In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree, concerning the house of God at Jerusalem. Let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits, and its breadth sixty cubits, with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber.

Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury, and also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem, and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem,

each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God. Now therefore, Tatanai, governor of the province beyond the river, Sheetharbozenai, and your associates, the governors who are in the province beyond the river, keep away.

Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews, for the rebuilding of this house of God.

The cost is to be paid to these men in full, and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from beyond the river, and whatever is needed, bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require, let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons. Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem.

I, Darius, make a decree. Let it be done with all diligence. Then according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, Sheethar-Bozanai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.

And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel, and by decree of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar.

In the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses. On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover, for the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together. All of them were clean.

So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful, and had

turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Ezra chapter 6 continues and concludes the Aramaic section that began in chapter 4 verse 8. The section ends in verse 18 of this chapter. This section of the book, according to the more widely accepted chronology, moves between several different times, relating a number of different periods of resistance. Chapter 4 verses 1 to 5 recounts opposition during the period of Cyrus from around 536 BC.

Then in chapter 4 verses 5 to 6 and chapter 4 verse 24 to the end of the Aramaic section in chapter 6 verse 18, it recounts opposition or challenges during the reign of Darius I from around 522 to around 515 BC. Chapter 4 verse 6 mentions opposition during the reign of Ahasuerus or Xerxes from around 486 BC. Chapter 4 verses 7 to 23 describes the opposition during the period of Artaxerxes from 465 BC.

This movement backwards and forwards in time can be confusing and somewhat disorienting. Some commentators such as Charles Fensham and Karl Kiel have argued that chapter 4 verses 6 to 23 should be regarded as largely parenthetical. Others, giving more weight to the shift to Aramaic in chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18, have suggested that there is an underlying apologetic source addressed to Artaxerxes, perhaps one ordered by Nehemiah.

Andrew Steinman argues for this, noting 2 Maccabees reference to Nehemiah's possession of a library with a collection of official documents in his archives. Once again, according to the more standard chronology, there are two distinct construction projects. The first is the rebuilding of the temple which occurred over a period of around 20 years from around 536 to 515 BC.

The second is the rebuilding and re-fortification of the city. James Jordan has strongly disputed this treatment, arguing that Artaxerxes and Ezra Nehemiah is actually Darius I and that the wall restoration was completed by 502 BC, something typically dated about 60 years later. In the preceding chapter, Tatanai, the governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates, inquired about the authorisation of the temple rebuilders, although without halting their work.

He suggested that a search be conducted for the decree of Cyrus concerning the temple in the archives in Babylon. However, in verse 2 we see that the relevant records were actually found in Ecbatana, where, according to the history of Xenophon, Cyrus' summer palace was situated. The decree of Cyrus gives a number of distinct instructions.

First, that the house is to be rebuilt on its original site and foundations. Second, that its dimensions should be 60 cubits height and 60 cubits breadth. Presumably, Cyrus was concerned to ensure that it was kept within reasonable limits.

The width, likely of 20 cubits, seems to have been omitted here. Some commentators argue that this is likely the result of a transcription error earlier in the transmission of the text. Third, the materials of the temple should be three layers of stone and one of timber.

Fourth, the project would be funded by the Persian royal treasury. And fifth, the vessels that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar were to be returned. Derek Thomas notes the importance of the fact that the project was funded by a Gentile power, suggesting a connection with Haggai 2.7. The local authorities, their hearts stirred by the Lord, are willingly supporting this project.

Cyrus seems to have supported other similar projects in other provinces, presumably as a means of currying favour with the diverse groups throughout his empire. As Steinman and others note, bricks with the stamp of Cyrus have been found elsewhere in various temples. Darius confirms all of the claims made by the rebuilders in response to Tatanai's investigation.

He instructs Tatanai and his associates not to trouble the rebuilders, but to give them their full assistance, granting them the tax revenue that they need, animals for sacrifices and other necessary materials on a daily basis. Darius expected the Jews to pray to the Lord for him and his kingdom in the temple. While Darius was clearly a polytheist and would have expected prayers for him to be made to various gods, the Lord had also called his people to pray for the well-being of their Gentile rulers and nations.

Jeremiah 29, verses 4-7 We find similar teaching in the New Testament in places like 1 Timothy 2, verses 1-2. The authorities obey Darius' decree and cooperate with and support the rebuilding project, which proceeds rapidly. The project is especially propelled by the ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

Surprisingly, verse 14 mentions not merely Cyrus and Darius, but also Artaxerxes, a detail that seems to be inconsistent with the standard chronology, on the surface of it at least, for which Artaxerxes is identified as reigning some 50 years after the time of the completion of the temple. Joseph Blenkinsop argues that the point of mentioning him here is merely to round out the Aramaic narrative. The author was not unaware of the chronology.

Rather, Artaxerxes is mentioned because he acts decisively in support of the temple and its worship, as we see in the chapter that follows establishing it. Steinman argues that he was included for rhetorical effect. He writes, Fourth, the authors of the Aramaic report were urging that Artaxerxes would, like his noble predecessors, honour the singular and consistent decree of Persian kings to complete the house, thereby aligning himself with both God and his illustrious predecessors.

Thus, the purpose of including the correspondence between Tatanai and Darius and its

results in the Aramaic report was to demonstrate that Jerusalem was no longer the rebellious city portrayed in the correspondence between Reham and Artaxerxes, but was now the obedient, pious and industrious city of the men who carried out the order of Cyrus and Darius. They were obeying both God and the king. This is part of the larger theological message of Ezra 3.6. Most importantly here, it is the decree of the Lord that is the primary decree mentioned.

The Lord is the one who stirs up all of the other parties involved. Without his instigation, no one else would have acted. The temple was completed around 70 years after the first temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, likely on March 12, 515 BC.

The completion is around three and a half years after the time of Haggai's prophecy. The dedication of the temple is then completed, although it pales in comparison with the dedication of Solomon's temple, described in 1 Kings 8.63. Solomon offered as peace offerings to the Lord 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep, so the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord. Hezekiah and Josiah's contributions of animals in 2 Chronicles 30.24 and 35.7 also dwarfed those given here.

They also established the priests and the Levites in their proper appointed offices, according to the law of Moses. Perhaps a particularly interesting detail here is that they offer for all Israel 12 male goats. As Thomas notes, this evidences their continued sense of themselves as the 12 tribes, even after the loss of the Northern Kingdom and the fact that the remnant was largely from Judah, Benjamin and the Levites.

They still retain a strong sense of themselves as 12. The Aramaic section ends at this point. Steinman argues that this should be understood as Nehemiah's report to King Artaxerxes, seeking his support to rebuild the wall.

However, the report also shows the purpose and sovereign activity of God behind all else, even the actions of kings. Everything culminates in a joyous celebration of the Passover and the feast of unleavened bread. The author of this section is likely different from that of the Aramaic section, and not merely on account of the language change.

The month, as Steinman notes, is here referred to by its number, rather than by its name, as in the Aramaic section. Special celebrations of the Passover occurred at various pivotal moments in Israel's history, such as the time of their departure from Egypt, their first entry into the land, and the two great covenant renewal Passovers of King Hezekiah and King Josiah. All of these Passovers recalled that original deliverance from Egypt.

Aptly, having experienced a sort of a new exodus, being brought out of the land of their exile and re-established in the Promised Land, they celebrate another great Passover here. This Passover, then, is one of the great Passovers. It's a time of re-consecration, of a renewal of covenant.

It's a huge milestone in their re-entry into the land, as the Temple is finally completed. Surprisingly, verse 22 speaks of the Lord turning the heart of the king of Assyria to them. The great empire of Assyria had fallen to the Babylonians almost 100 years previously, and then Babylonia's own empire had fallen to the Medes and the Persians.

Perhaps the point here is that the Persian empire is the heir of what once belonged to the Assyrian empire. And the reference to them also recalls the history of Israel and of Judas suffering at the hand of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the two great empires that the Lord had raised up against them. A question to consider.

Verse 22 speaks of the Lord turning the heart of the king of Assyria to them. What are other examples in Scripture of the Lord acting in the hearts of pagan kings to establish his purposes for his people? 2 Timothy chapter 1 2 Timothy chapter 1 2 Timothy chapter 1 2 Timothy chapter 1 2 Timothy chapter 1 2 Timothy was likely the last of the pastoral epistles to be written. It is also one of Paul's prison epistles, quite likely written during his imprisonment in Rome, described in Acts chapter 28 in the early 60s AD.

It is the second letter to Timothy, who here he describes as his beloved child. Timothy functioned as Paul's shaliach, his apostolic emissary. Functioning as Paul's son, Timothy could represent Paul in various situations.

We see Timothy functioning in this way in Corinth and also in Ephesus, for instance. Paul had first encountered Timothy during his second missionary journey. Timothy is introduced to us in the text of Acts in Acts chapter 16 verses 1 to 3. Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.

A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places.

For they all knew that his father was a Greek. Paul's introduction to the epistle of 2 Timothy is fairly typical. He begins by introducing himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus and refers to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus.

By this life he probably means what he speaks of in Titus chapter 1 verses 2 and 3. In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began, and at the proper time manifested in his word, through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour. Verses 3 to 5 constitute a single sentence, and it's not immediately clear how the clauses hang together. Does Paul, for instance, explain the reason for his thankfulness? Looking more closely at Paul's statement, we can follow the logic as it works through.

First of all, he expresses his giving of thanks. Such expressions of thankfulness are a

common feature of the openings of Pauline epistles. Subordinate to this expression of thankfulness, he speaks of the way that he serves the Lord in common with his ancestors.

Then, he describes the occasion for his giving thanks. As he remembers Timothy, constantly in his prayers night and day, he fills this out, talking about the tears of Timothy that he remembers, perhaps the tears of a painful parting. Remembering those tears, he longs for a reunion, a reunion that would be a great cause of joy to him.

In verse 5, we come to the reason for Paul's thanksgiving, which is his remembrance of Timothy's sincere faith. Paul had begun his statement by speaking of the commonality that he had with his ancestors, in his service of God with a clear conscience. And in verse 5, he also describes the way that Timothy stands in a family line of faith.

Perhaps in this case, in contrast with Paul's description of himself, not just a faith that straddles the divide with the old and new covenant, but a faith that is explicitly a new covenant faith. Gerald Bray argues that given the fact that women married so young within the ancient world, Timothy's grandmother Lois could well have been no more than 40 when Timothy was born. It is quite conceivable that she could have come to faith before Timothy's mother, and that they both could have taught Timothy in the Christian faith from his early to mid-childhood.

However, given the fact that in 2 Timothy 3, verses 14-15 we read, But as for you, continue in what you have learned, and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It is possible that Paul is referring here, not to new covenant Christian faith, but to the faith of a devout Jew. In Acts 16, verse 1, we learn that Eunice was a believing Jewish woman.

Timothy, like Paul, stood in a line of believing people, and one of the things that Paul is doing here is reminding him to continue in that tradition, to take those lessons that he learned from his mother and his grandmother, and to run with them himself. Paul has earlier spoken of Timothy as his child in the faith, and in verse 6 he reminds Timothy of the role that he himself has played in Timothy's spiritual formation. It was through the laying on of Paul's hands that Timothy received what he calls here the gift of God.

Elsewhere, in 1 Timothy 4, verse 14, we have another account of hands being laid upon Timothy. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy, when the council of elders laid their hands on you. This verse raises a number of questions.

Is it referring to the same or some different event from that described in verse 6 here? Also, what is the gift in view? Is this the gift of the Holy Spirit more generally? Is it the gift of a particular vocation, or is something else in view? My inclination is to see these as two different events. 1 Timothy 4, verse 14 relates more to Timothy's vocation in the

context of the church at Ephesus. The verse here concerns Timothy's role as Paul's shaliach, his apostolic emissary.

My suspicion is that the gift of God being referred to in both cases is the gift of the Holy Spirit for that particular form of ministry. In both cases, Timothy is charged to fan into flame or not to neglect the gift that he has been given. The gift is something that has to be exercised responsibly.

There's a danger of quenching the spirit that has been given to us. Paul's description in verse 6 makes us think of tending to a lamp to ensure that it does not go out. We might also remember the image of Pentecost with the divided tongues of flame descending upon the disciples.

This gift of the Holy Spirit is not to be taken for granted. There is always the danger of grieving the Holy Spirit, as a flame needs to be given fuel in order to continue to burn. So the gift of the Spirit needs to be given the fuel of actual service and activity.

And perhaps, above all else, the person exercising this gift needs to return to its source again and again. God is the one who ultimately gives the Spirit, and the person who has the gift of the Spirit that they are tending to will constantly return to God in prayer. In verse 7, Paul describes the manner of the Spirit that has been given to Timothy, a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

We might remember statements like Romans 8, verse 15. We might also think of the way that Moses charged Joshua, his successor, in places like Joshua 1, verse 9. Timothy, perhaps struggling with timidity, needs to be reminded of the character of the Spirit of God, a Spirit of God that gives even the weak power, that burns with a divine love and delivers us from the bondage of the flesh, enabling us to exercise self-control. Living by this Spirit, Timothy will find resources that he lacks in his own human flesh.

It is to the power of the Spirit that he must look for the resources that he needs to perform his ministry. Paul isn't encouraging Timothy to develop his own internal virtue here, so much as to receive a gift that God has given him, and to live in terms of that gift, a gift that empowers him to act in ways that he would not be able to by the natural human capacity of his flesh. In contrast to a spirit of fear is boldness and not being ashamed of the testimony that he has.

Acting in the power of the Spirit, Timothy will be able to boast in the sufferings of Christ and in the sufferings of his servant Paul. He will be able to share in such sufferings himself. While the surrounding society, which glorified a false form of power, would look down on this and see it as pitiable, Timothy would know the power of God in it.

Just as his master Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God, so Timothy, living by the Spirit of Christ, will be able to know power even in his weakness

and suffering. Although Paul isn't identifying the Gospel with the power of God here, some readers might still discern slight echoes of Paul's statement in Romans 1.16 For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. Verses 9-10 are another one of Paul's dense statements of the Gospel message.

Philip Towner observes that there are a series of pairs and contrasts. The first is a pairing, saved us and called us. Then there's a contrast, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace.

The next pairing is one to do with time. The grace was given in Christ Jesus before the ages began. The grace has now been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus.

The final pairing concerns the nature of his salvation. He abolished death. He brought life and immortality to light.

Once again, Paul is highlighting that the initiative for salvation is found in God's action, not in ours. And this initiative is one that dates back from before the ages began. It's something that's grounded in Christ, not in us.

God's purpose before the creation began was to form a people in his Son. Now, in the fullness of time, with the revelation of Christ in the Gospel, that purpose is coming to pass. Many might see here a reference to the election of particular individuals, but I think that would be to miss the redemptive historical force of Paul's point.

What has really been elected is Christ. The fulfilment of this purpose is not the salvation of detached individuals, so much as the formation of the people of the Church in Christ. From this eternal divine purpose, Paul draws a straight line to his own ministry.

He was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of this, and he suffers for this reason. He is not ashamed, whatever men may think of him. He is serving the God of the universe, and he can stand before him on that great day, accepted and blessed in Christ.

He also enjoys a confidence in his labours. A great ministry has been committed to him, and Paul knows that despite the limitations of his own powers, his master who committed that charge to him can guard the converts that have been converted through his ministry, and the churches that have been founded by him. When thinking about Paul's ministry, we can focus upon his preaching and travelling, if we're thinking about the Book of Acts, or we can think about his letter writing, if we look at the epistles.

But when we look at the beginning of the epistles particularly, and at the end, we get a sense of Paul's ministry as one of prayer for the churches. He constantly commits the churches that he is serving, and his brothers and sisters and fellow ministers, to the charge of the Lord, trusting him to complete in them what he had started. In Philippians

chapter 1 verse 6 we have a window into this.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Paul has entrusted things to Timothy. He has given him a pattern of sound words, a model of teaching that Timothy is to follow, something that was communicated in a pattern of life, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowers the entire mission.

Having encouraged Timothy in these various ways, Paul ends by giving him some cautionary examples. A number of people formerly associated with Paul had now abandoned him. The reference to all who are in Asia is probably not a reference to every one of the Christians in the Roman province of Asia, nor is it a reference to all of the church leaders even, but rather presumably to Paul's former associates.

Paul is left without anyone that he can trust in the region. Recognising the way that people can fail or fall away should encourage Timothy to steel himself all the more for the times of testing. As one of the few remaining associates of Paul, he needs to learn from the example of those who have failed in that regard.

Against the backdrop of these disheartening betrayals and abandonments, Paul presents the example of Onesiphorus as akin to a light in his very dark place. Even when Paul was in prison, Onesiphorus was not ashamed to be associated with him. Indeed, he went out of his way to seek him out.

The example of such a man is definitely one to follow. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can fan into flame the gift of the Holy Spirit within us?