

Lessons From Rebuilding The Temple

Rick Railston

September 13, 2014

When we study the Bible and when we hear sermons, in past years we often tend to, certainly in the Old Testament, look at Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses and the Exodus, and Saul and David, and Solomon. But one of the time periods we don't pay much attention to and don't hear much about is the time period after Judah was taken into captivity and exiled to Babylon, between that time and their return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.

There were three deportations from Judah to Babylon—605 BC, 597 BC, and the final one in 586 BC. Just as there were three deportations to Babylon, there were also three returns from Babylon back to Jerusalem and Judah in 538 BC, 458 BC, and 444 BC. What we want to do in the sermon today is look at a block of 150 years of history from 585 BC when the Jews were taken to Babylon to approximately 425 BC. And we're going to look at this period of time because we don't often investigate this, and yet, God doesn't put anything in the Bible by accident. There's a reason for it. So, what we want to do is investigate this time period, which leads to the title of the sermon,

Lessons From Rebuilding The Temple

God puts things in the Bible so we can learn lessons from what is there. We're going to look into three areas, three major points. We're going to look into the history of the period. That will take the most time—from the time the Jews went into captivity until approximately 425 BC. Then secondly, we're going to look at the parallels between that time and our time today because we're going to see those two time periods are very, very much alike. And then the third major point is we're going to look at lessons we can learn from their experiences that could be applied to us today.

1. The History of the Period

Think about this. For over 500 years Judah was an independent state and a military power. During those 500 years they had a God-ordained Davidic king on the throne. So, the Jews took this as proof that their God was the only true God and that they were His chosen people—king on the throne, military power, independent state for those number of centuries. In 585 BC, as we said before, Judah was taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. You can read about that in 2 Kings 25 or 2 Chronicles 36 if you just want to fill in the details.

But the time we're going to look at today, this 150-year period of time, starting with Judah in Babylon, none of these conditions existed at that time where they were an independent state, a military power and all of that. They were captive in a foreign land. That's foreign to us here in America, but they were captive in a foreign land. They were powerless subjects of a tremendous empire. And the Babylonians believed that

Yahweh was only one “petty god” among many and this “petty god” had authority down in the nation or the area of Judah. And on top of that, there was no Temple. So the conditions starting in 585 were totally different than what Judah had enjoyed in the 500 years previously. Now Jeremiah said it was going to remain that way for 70 years. You can check that out in Jeremiah 25 and 29.

During this time when they were in Babylon, there was a huge temptation among the Jews to surrender their beliefs and just incorporate themselves into the Babylonian society. In other words, there was an encouragement there (We know from where that encouragement came.) to give up their beliefs about an exclusive relationship with God and the fact that God was the true God because they were in this foreign strange land with a totally different culture and a totally different set of beliefs. Now the fact that this did not happen was because of God’s intervention. And God’s intervention is recorded in what are called the “Post-Captivity Books.”

First on the scene was Ezra the priest and Zerubbabel the governor. Then later, Nehemiah became the governor and then the prophecies of Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi were written to encourage the Jews. Finally the actions of Esther and Mordecai were there as an example to encourage the Jews. Despite all the Jews’ sins—and they are well documented in the Old Testament; sin after sin after sin—despite all of their sins, all of their evil deeds, God still looked after them and God encouraged them when they needed encouragement.

So, let’s pick up the history now. Forty-six years after their initial captivity—now we’re talking 539-538 BC—the Persian Empire conquers the Babylonian Empire. Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar’s son, was killed and Babylon fell to the Persian King Cyrus the Great. And in 538 BC, Cyrus the Great issues this famous decree that we’re all familiar with. Let’s go to Ezra 1:1. We’re going to skip our way through Ezra and then skip our way through Nehemiah. So, you might want to keep a ribbon as we go forward because we’ll digress and then come back. Setting the scene here in 538 BC:

***Ezra 1:1.** Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, ... (KJV)*

Now Josephus tells us in his history that what happened at this time was Cyrus was reading the book of Isaiah where in Isaiah 44:28 Cyrus was mentioned by name 200 years before he was even born. Now that would get your attention if you were king. That would make you feel pretty good that this God knew you were going to live 200 years before you were ever conceived. So, in the latter part of verse 1:

*1b) ... [Cyrus] made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,
2) Thus [says] Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven [has] given me all the kingdoms of the earth; ... (KJV)*

Now all of a sudden He's not just a localized God. He says, "He is the great God," in part because he mentioned Cyrus.

2b) ... and he [has] charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

3) Who is there among you of all his people? ... (KJV)

He's asking, "Who among you are will to go back to Jerusalem and build this house?"

3b) ... his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the [Eternal] God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

Verse 5:

5) Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the [Eternal] which is in Jerusalem.

6) And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and [animals], and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered. (KJV)

"Also," notice what Cyrus did.

7) Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, ... (KJV)

Nebuchadnezzar just sacked the Temple, brought it all to Babylon. Now Cyrus is gathering all of that material together that Nebuchadnezzar had in essence stolen and he's saying, "You can take it back to Jerusalem with you."

Now here is the fact. Despite this decree, the reality is that the vast majority of the Jews in Babylon stayed put. They were prosperous; they weren't persecuted; they had families; they had businesses; and they decided to stay put. Only about ten percent went back to Jerusalem. It's ironic, but it's similar to the foundation of modern day Israel. When modern Israel was carved out of the Middle East after World War II, only about ten percent of all the Jews in the entire world went back to Jerusalem to form the Nation of Israel. A similar thing happened at this time.

Now two years after Cyrus' decree, 536 BC, the foundation of the temple was laid (Ezra 3:10). Zerubabel was the governor, who was appointed by Cyrus; Jeshua was the high priest. And, of course, there was tremendous zeal and enthusiasm in Judea to build the Temple. Work got started and everybody was excited. Now, we're going to see a pattern start to develop. So pay attention as we go through this because it starts with zeal and enthusiasm and then things start to change.

Four years later in 530 BC, Cyrus dies. Cambyses, his son, ascends to the throne. Because of that, the adversaries of Judah thought they had an opportunity now. Cyrus is dead, the one who made the proclamation. We can get after the Jews and stop this. So, in chapter 4 now, let's pick up the story in verse 1.

Ezra 4:1. *Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity [built] the temple unto the Lord God of Israel;
2) Then they came to Zerubbabel [the Jewish governor], and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: ... (KJV)*

“We want to help you. We want to cooperate.”

2) ... for we seek your God, as you do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assur, [who] brought us up [here]. (KJV)

“We want to partner with you.” Zerubbabel understood what was going on.

3) But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, [You] have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the [Eternal] God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia [has] commanded us. (KJV)

“We don't need your help. We don't want your help.” And because of that rejection:

*4) Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and 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. (KJV)*

We'll talk about him in a minute. So, they now went after the leaders of the Jews because the Jews had rejected them and work stopped on the Temple because of their opposition. Verse 24:

Ezra 4:24. *Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. (KJV)*

The people that were formerly filled with zeal are now discouraged and, because of that, their morals begin to decay and they drifted away from God.

Then in 522 BC, a civil war erupted and by all appearances the Persian Empire was coming apart. After six years on the throne, Cambyses died and he didn't leave an heir and the civil war started but after much maneuvering Darius the Great became king. In this turmoil, God knew that the Jews needed some encouragement and He inspired, in 520 BC, the Messianic prophecies of Haggai and Zachariah.

You can keep a marker here but let's turn to Haggai 2. We're going to read one prophecy and then I'll give you a reference on a prophecy in Zachariah. They're very similar so for time's sake, we'll just read one, Haggai 2:6-9. You can also reference Zachariah 6:11-15.

Haggai 2:6. *For thus [says] the [Eternal] of hosts; ... (KJV)*

Now put yourself in the position of the Jews in Jerusalem while the Persian Empire is falling apart.

Haggai 2:6. *For thus [says] the [Eternal] of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land;
7) And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, [says] the Lord of hosts. (KJV)*

Now if you were a Jew, what would you think? "This house is going to be built. It's going to be filled with glory."

8) *The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, [says] the [Eternal] of hosts.
9) The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, [says] the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, [says] the Lord of hosts. (KJV)*

So the Jews understandably took this prophecy as applying to them and the house they were building at that time and they were greatly encouraged. Now 2500 years later, we have a different understanding of that prophecy, but we can understand why they believed what they did.

And they were greatly encouraged. And the people began to apply these prophecies of Haggai and Zachariah. There was great zeal and enthusiasm—kind of like the Worldwide Church of God in the latter '50s, and in the '60s and early '70s, great zeal, tremendous zeal. The Jews had it in Jerusalem at that time and so the work began in earnest in rebuilding the Temple because of these encouraging prophecies. Ezra 5:2 tells us that. Now this is twenty years after Cyrus' original decree. Let's pick up the story now in the next verse, Ezra 5:3, but guess what? Satan is persistent. Satan doesn't give up and opposition arises again after the work got started in earnest on building the Temple.

Ezra 5:3. *At the same time [meaning when they started work on the Temple] came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shethar-boznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, ... (KJV)*

So these are the pagans around them. The two governors came and they said:

3b) *... Who [has] commanded you to build this house, and [who has commanded you] to [rebuild the] wall [of Jerusalem]? (KJV)*

We won't read it verse by verse for the sake of time but in verses 4 through 16 what happens is the Jews recount their history, their captivity in Babylon, Cyrus' decree to order them to return to rebuild the Temple, and the fact that they brought back all of the vessels of the Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had taken to put in this new rebuilt Temple.

Now we pick it up in verse 17. The Jews are talking to these people who oppose them.

Ezra 5:17. *Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so [whether Cyrus gave us this commandment], that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.*

Ezra 6:1. *Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.*

2) And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll [or a scroll], and therein was a record thus written: (KJV)

This is what was written:

3) In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be [built], ... (KJV)

So now there is a record. And if you know anything about the kings of the Medes and the Persians, once they said something, it could not be countermanded even if it happened decades ago. So God intervenes here and, as a result of the search, Darius the new king, issues another decree. Look at chapter 6 and verse 1.

Ezra 6:1. *Then Darius the king made a decree, ... (KJV)*

Jump to verse 6.

6) Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shethar-boznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be [you] far from [here]: (KJV)

Get out of their way!

7) Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in [its] place.

8) Moreover I made a decree what [you] shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, ... (KJV)

What is he referring to? Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown says that the king decreed that the Jews could take the money from his local treasury—the one that Tatnai was pulling money from—they could go in and use that treasury to rebuild the Temple and to rebuild

the walls. In other words, he says, "You guys are complaining. I'm going to take the money out of your treasury so you can watch the Jews build the Temple and the walls." He says:

8b) ... forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered.

Verse 11:

11) I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

12) And the God that [has] caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

13) Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shethar-boznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily. (KJV)

I guess there's a lesson. You better be careful what you complain about because it can come back to bite you and that's exactly what happened here.

Now in 515 BC, the Temple was completed. This was twenty-three years after Cyrus' decree, seventy years after the original captivity just as Jeremiah had prophesied. Now look at verse 14 of Ezra 6.

14) And the elders of the Jews [built], and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah.... And they [built], and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes [the kings] of Persia. (KJV)

Once again, there was great zeal, great enthusiasm after a period that wasn't so great, a period of depression and so on.

So, the Temple was completed. You would think everything would be okay, but fifty-seven years later, 458-457 BC, Ezra comes back to Jerusalem for a second time to see what's going on, fifty-seven years later.

Ezra 7:1. *Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, ... (KJV)*

He came to the throne in 465 BC. Verse 10:

10) Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments. (KJV)

God put it in his mind, “You need to go back down there and teach My Law.” Now what does Ezra find when he comes back the second time? Moral decay that you wouldn’t believe! It just blows him away. Ezra 9:1.

Ezra 9:1. *Now when these things were done, the princes [of Judah] came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, ... (KJV)*

He’s talking about all of the leaders of Judah.

1b) ... have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, ...

2) For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: [yes], the hand of the princes and rulers [has] been chief in this trespass. (KJV)

As we pointed out before, this is not a racial issue. Rather, because of intermarriage, they began to worship these pagan gods. They began to walk away from God and the true religion. They didn’t stay true to God because they were intermingling themselves with these pagan worshippers.

Now what Ezra did is he led a renewal. Look at chapter 10 verse 1.

Ezra 10:1. *Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed [over the sins of Judah], weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept ... sore. (KJV)*

Skip to verse 10.

10) And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, [You] have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

11) Now therefore make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

12) Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As [you have] said, so must we do. (KJV)

And they did. So this started a renewal again.

Now, thirteen years later after this incident, Nehemiah makes a request to go to Jerusalem. He’s up in Babylon. This is now 445-444 BC. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes the King. The cupbearer was the most trusted man in the kingdom because he brought the food and the drink to the king and if somebody was going to get to the king, quite commonly in those days it would be through poison. So, he was entrusted to make sure that the food and the drink that the king ate was not

poisonous. We would say today, “He would be the Chief of Staff to the President of the United States”—quite a high position.

Nehemiah, all of a sudden now, God is putting in his mind that he needs to pay attention to Jerusalem. Nehemiah 1, let’s go there and we’ll read the first three verses.

Nehemiah 1:1. *The words of Nehemiah ... it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace [That’s in Babylon, Artaxerxes’ palace.],*

2) That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.(KJV)

God put it in his mind to ask “What’s going on down there?”

3) And they [Hanani] said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. (KJV)

Now the wall was obviously for physical protection, but the wall also was symbolic. It was symbolic of the fact that the Jews should separate themselves from these pagan nations. They shouldn’t worship God the way the pagan nations do as Moses warned them centuries before.

The people were discouraged. There was moral decay. And you have to ask “Why?” When they made the decision to put away their wives and their children, those wives and children went back to the surrounding area. Now those in the surrounding area had the wives and the children to look after and take care of. The neighbors became quite hostile because of this and they began to attack Jerusalem over those thirteen years and the population of Jerusalem began to dwindle because people were in danger. Morale was low and the people blamed Ezra for all their troubles. Rather than following God, they blamed the guy.

So Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to face more opposition even than this. Look at chapter 2 verse 10. These are two bad guys that come on the scene here and we’ll need to pay attention to them.

Nehemiah 2:10. *When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. (KJV)*

They didn’t like that. Clarke’s Commentary, and I’m quoting now, says:

Nehemiah 2:10

Sanballat ... a Moabite by birth [And Moab was a mortal enemy of Israel. God did not like Moab.] ... and at this time governor of the Samaritans under the king of Persia.

Tobiah the servant ... was an Ammonite [another sworn enemy of Israel] ... and here, under the Persian king, [they were] joint governor[s].

Tobiah and Sanballat were not only joint governors, but they were fast friends.

Verse 17, this is Nehemiah talking.

17) Then said I unto them, [You] see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem [lies] waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that [there] be no more a reproach.

18) Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work. (KJV)

In Nehemiah chapter 3 there is the record of rebuilding the city gates, rebuilding the wall. Now again, we've gone from despair to zeal and enthusiasm and the gates are being rebuilt and the wall is being rebuilt. But, as I said before and as we know, Satan will not give up. He brings oppression again. Look at Nehemiah 4:1. Sanballat and Tobiah were not going to lie down and take this.

Nehemiah 4:1. *But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we [built] the wall, he was [angry], and took great indignation, and [he] mocked the Jews. (KJV)*

So they began rebuilding the wall and then they start overcoming this opposition. Look at verse 6.

6) So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work. (KJV)

They were behind it. There was zeal. There was enthusiasm.

7) But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up [were being rebuilt], and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very [angry],

8) And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it. (KJV)

More opposition. Verse 14, Nehemiah says:

14) And I looked, and rose up, and [I] said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, [Don't] be ... afraid of them: remember the Lord, which

is great and terrible, and fight for [your brothers and sisters], your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses. (KJV)

He was encouraging them.

15) And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us [this plot], and God had brought their counsel to [nothing], that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work. (KJV)

And the wall was completed (Nehemiah 7:1).

At the same time trying to avoid this up and down, up and down, and up and down, Ezra and Nehemiah saw the need for religious reform, for moral reform. Now look at Nehemiah 8; we'll begin in verse 1. This is an account of Ezra reading the law to the people. They had to be taught God's ways.

Nehemiah 8:1. *And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they [spoke] unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel.*

2) And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. (KJV)

This was Trumpets.

Now it's interesting it says "all that could hear with understanding." Because of the intermarriage before, there were people there that could not understand Hebrew. That's how bad it had gotten, but those who could understand were assembled and on the Day of Trumpets the law began to be read.

3) And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. (KJV)

It was the start of a turn around again. Verse 9:

9) And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, ... (KJV)

Now a "Tirshatha" is a title of a Persian governor, which means Nehemiah was governor of Judah and he had the backing of the king.

9) And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day [Trumpets] is

holy unto the Lord your God; [Don't cry, don't] weep [don't mourn]. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.

Verse 17:

17) And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of [Joshua] the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness. (KJV)

It shows you how bad it was.

Now the people were more receptive to the law because they had a wall around them. It had been rebuilt. And, therefore, they felt safer and they could listen to the law. Again we have great zeal, great enthusiasm.

So what Nehemiah did was he stayed there thirteen years and then he returned to Persia in 432 BC. He stayed in Persia for four years and he came back, his second trip. You would think he'd find prosperity, happiness and following God. Uh uh—didn't do that, 428 BC. He comes to find there is a conspiracy led by the high priest with the pagan nations of all things!

Nehemiah 13:4. *And before this, Eliashib the priest [Now he's the traitor.], having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah [the enemy governor]: (KJV)*

What had happened is, as we know Tobiah and Sanballat were co-governors of the pagans around Jerusalem and were enemies of the Jews. Eliashib married his grandson to Sanballat's daughter. He knows better than that! So what that did was it produced a connection between all three—Eliashib the high priest, Tobiah and Sanballat. And he was entering into an allegiance or an alliance with all the pagans around.

5) And he [Eliashib] had prepared for him [referring to Tobiah] a great chamber, ... (KJV)

This was inside the outer wall of the Temple. There was a chamber there and we're going to see what it was for, but he turned it into Tobiah's hands—inside the outer wall of the Temple, this pagan!

5b) ... where aforetime [in this chamber] they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests.

6) But in all this time was not I [Nehemiah's referring to himself] at Jerusalem: ... (KJV)

“I wasn’t there. This was going on. I didn’t know anything about it.”

6b) ... for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king: ... (KJV)

The king gave him permission to go down there with all force necessary.

7) And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. (KJV)

Can you imagine?

8) And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber. (KJV)

He just walked into that room. It was a big room. He just walked in there and started throwing stuff out door, crashing pottery, breaking up furniture, just tossing all of his stuff out in the courtyard. He was not happy.

9) Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and [there] brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense. (KJV)

He put it back to its original purpose.

11) Then contended I with the rulers, and [I] said [to them], Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place. (KJV)

We would say today, “I straightened them out.” And this includes the high priest. He was not happy.

In additional to all of that, he comes and he finds people breaking the Sabbath of all things! Look at verse 15.

Nehemiah 13:15. *In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold [all of this merchandise on the Sabbath].*

16) There dwelt men [there] of Tyre also, which brought fish, and all manner of [goods], and sold on the Sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. (KJV)

It just blew his mind! And in verse 17, he restores the true worship of God.

17) Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that [you're doing], and profane the Sabbath day?

18) Did not your fathers [do this], and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? [And] yet [you] bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath. (KJV)

He says, “What you’re doing was the very cause of our being carried away captive in the first place. And now that we’re back and the Temple is built, why are you going back and doing this?” It was just blowing his mind.

19) And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath: and some of my servants [I] set at the gates, that there should [be] no burden brought in on the Sabbath day. (KJV)

He had to force it upon the people.

Now, Nehemiah finds even more sin, verse 23.

Nehemiah 13:23. *In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: (KJV)*

This is a repeat of the previous sins that had happened decades ago. And the fact is with the carnal mind nothing ever changes. A carnal mind—as the pig will go back to its vomit—the carnal mind will go right back to sin if allowed to do so.

24) And their children [of these intermarriages; here’s the problem.] [spoke] half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. (KJV)

How can you worship God if you don’t understand the language? And, of course, they were now worshipping these pagan gods.

I would like to meet Nehemiah some time. I get the feeling he might be a big guy and fairly tough because of what goes on here in verse 25.

25) And I contended with them, [I] cursed them, [I hit] certain of them, [I] plucked off their hair, ... (KJV)

Now he had the backing of the king so he could do this. And he said:

25b) ... [I] made them swear by God, saying, [You] shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. (KJV)

The sin is the problem. Walking away from God is the problem. Worshipping pagan gods is the problem. It's not a racial issue. It's dragging people away from God.

So let's stop here now. We're at the end of this 150-year period roughly. We ask ourselves the obvious question: "Do we see a pattern here?" Is there something going on that we should pay attention to? Originally they went back to Jerusalem with the backing of the king with great hope, great zeal.

Then God allowed opposition to come. Then, guess what? They became discouraged. They drifted away from God. They went into sin. Then calamity came upon them. And then God sent a messenger down to them to tell them of their sins. And guess what? They repented in a worldly way for a short period. They again got their act together for a short period of time because God had a man there present.

They had worldly repentance and then things began to look brighter. The Temple was built. The wall was built. The gates were built or whatever at the time. And once things got good, guess what? The pattern started all over again. Opposition comes. They get discouraged. They drift into sin. They fall away from God.

Judah's legacy of this 150-year period is zeal to sin—never learning, never growing, repeating the same mistakes over and over and over and over again—never learning and never growing. So that is the history of this 150-year period, the first point.

2. Now what we want to identify and bring out is the problems they had then are the same as the problems the greater Church of God has today—many, many similarities.

2. A. There is opposition within and there is opposition without.

Now Sanballat and Tobiah are types of Satan, trying to work their way in, conquer and divide. There was great opposition then from Satan, just as there is great opposition today to destroy God's people. 1 Peter 5:8, we know that by heart. "Your adversary the Devil, as a roaring lion, walks about seeking whom he may devour;" that is, to gulp down.

And what happens today is Satan, just like then, Satan provokes humans to follow him thinking they are following God. The New Testament calls them "tares," "clouds without water," "wolves in sheep's clothing" that are intermingled with God's people but to cause division and opposition and disruption just like people did back in those days. Satan is attacking as never before—marriages, relationships and even the church itself. And like with Judah, guess what? This opposition will come within the church just like Eliashib the traitorous priest was allied with these two foreign governors. It came from within Judah. The same is happening within the greater Church of God today.

Let's look at Matthew chapter 10; we're going to read verses 34 through 36. Christ is referencing Micah 7:6 if you want to use it for a reference and study later. Notice what Christ says.

Matthew 10:34. *Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: (KJV)*

It's an error to think that everything will be peaceful and hunky dory.

34b) ... I came not to send peace, but a sword.

35) For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. (KJV)

In verse 36, He states a principle.

36) And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. (KJV)

Now that can be taken two ways—should be taken both ways. One's physical household but also in Ephesians 2:19, we're told we're the "household of God." So this tells us that opposition can occur within our physical family, but also it can occur within our spiritual family. Our foes can be they of our physical family or our spiritual family

Now, let's jump to chapter 24; Matthew 24:8-13. We're breaking into the story, but Christ is saying, "Everything I've told you up until this is just the beginning of sorrows." Now comes the real stuff.

Matthew 24:8. *All these are the beginning of sorrows.*

9) Then [after the beginning stuff occurs, then] shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and [you] shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake.

10) And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another.

11) And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. (KJV)

This is not a small isolated thing.

12) And because iniquity [meaning: not keeping God's commandments, lawlessness] shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. (KJV)

When you have sin, you are pushing away God's spirit. God's spirit is love. God is love. And so when you go to the dark side, you're pushing away love. And therefore, the love of many will wax cold because they are drifting away from God just as the Jews drifted away from God during this time that we're talking about.

12) And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

13) But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. (KJV)

What Christ is telling us is opposition is going to increase as we get closer to the end because He allows Satan to ratchet up the pressure on God's people as we get closer and closer and closer to the time to marry Christ. And Satan does not want that to happen. He pulls out all the stops and God allows it to a certain extent as a test or as a trial for each one of us. So, we must not allow Satan to divide us or to discourage us as he did with Ancient Judah. We have to learn those lessons.

2. B. The second problem or area that is parallel with Ancient Judah is spiritual lethargy and unrighteousness.

Judah became lax and they sinned greatly going through these cycles of up and down and up and down. They would be all zealous and then all of sudden, things would fall apart. Let's go to Isaiah 30. Now this is a prophecy. It's dual. It applied to Israel and Judah, but it also applies to the greater Church of God today. We'll read verses 9 through 13 of Isaiah 30 and I'm going to read out it of the New Living Translation because it brings out some things in modern English. It doesn't change the message or the intent but it makes them clearer. Isaiah 30:9, referring to Ancient Israel, Ancient Judah and a prophecy for us today:

Isaiah 30:9. For these people [talking about all three of those groups] are stubborn rebels who refuse to pay any attention to the Lord's instructions. (NLT)

It happened at the time of Moses. It happened before the Ten Tribes were taken captive and it happened during Judah's captivity as coming back to Jerusalem in this 150-year period.

10) They tell the prophets, "Shut up. We don't want any more of your reports!" They say, "Don't tell the truth. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies.

11) Forget all this gloom. We have heard more than enough about your 'Holy One of Israel. We are tired of listening to what He has to say.'" (NLT)

Judah did it and it's happening today.

12) This is the reply of the Holy One of Israel: "Because you despise what I tell you and trust instead in oppression and lies,

13) calamity will come upon you suddenly [as happened to Judah] — it will be like a bulging wall that bursts and falls. In an instant it will collapse and come crashing down. (NLT)

Israel went into captivity. Judah went into captivity. It came on them suddenly and what it's telling us is it's going to happen. The United States, the western nations are going to collapse like a bulging wall. The pressure gets too great. It blows the wall out and that's going to happen to us. It's a good analogy.

Now what is happening in the greater Church of God today, what is typical of this prophecy, what is happening in many congregations today, too many of God's people

are being told, “Hey, you’re fine people. Now be quiet and go back to sleep.” That’s happening all too often. “Oh, you’re great.” We just love you. Now don’t say anything. Just go back to sleep and everything will be fine.”

For all too many today, it is too much effort to pray and to study daily, diligently. There is too much competition with the internet and video games and television and movies and all the goodies that people have. And people today, all too often, come to the Sabbath for a social time and to be entertained. They don’t come to learn. They don’t come to look at themselves. They don’t come to change. They just want to have fellowship and be entertained and enjoy a good meal.

It reminds me of Proverbs 6. Let’s go over there. We’ll read verses 6 through 11. Now this grouping of verses is normally applied to hard work and earning for yourself and it draws the analogy to the ant. I’m going to read this out of the New Living Translation because it’s a hoot in many ways but it gets the point across. Apply it spiritually to us today in the greater Church of God.

Proverbs 6:6. *Take a lesson from the ants, you lazybones. Learn from their ways and be wise!*

7) Even though they have no prince or governor or ruler to make them work, 8) they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter. (NLT)

This is our “summer.” We have some relative ease and relative respite. There’s going to come a “winter,” a hard time, and what we’re being told here is “Look to the ant because they’re preparing.” Now they’re preparing physically. We need to prepare spiritually.

9) But you, lazybones, how long will you sleep? When will you wake up?

“I want you to learn this lesson.”

10) A little extra sleep, a little more slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— 11) then poverty will pounce on you like a bandit; scarcity will attack you like an armed robber. (NLT)

Just like the bulging wall explodes, poverty is going to come, but this time if we apply it as it is meant to be (not only physically but spiritually), spiritual poverty is going to come at a time when they need it least, at a time when they need to be spiritually strong. Remember The Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25? Half of them woke up one day and said, “We don’t have enough oil. We don’t have enough of God’s holy spirit. Can we borrow some from you?” And the righteous virgins said, “No, you can’t do that. Go and find it for yourselves.” So they wander off—who knows where. Then Christ returns, comes in, locks the door. Then these five come back and start pounding on the door screaming and saying, “Help us! Help us! We’re spiritually impoverished. We haven’t prepared. We haven’t done what we need to be doing.” So there are

tremendous analogies here between what happened in Judah and what is happening in the greater Church of God today.

Look at 2 Timothy 3. We've read this many, many times. The first two verses and then we'll skip to verse 4. We know this one by heart. What does it say?

2 Timothy 3:1. *This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. (KJV)*

And then what is the prime component of that, causes that?

2) For men shall be lovers of their own selves, ... (KJV)

Selfish, paying attention to their own interests. Notice verse 4.

4) Traitors, heady, high-minded, ... (KJV)

Notice this last part.

4b) ... lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; (KJV)

"I'd rather watch TV. I'd rather play with my iPad. I would rather go out and play with my toys than sit down and study about God and about how I need to shape up."

Peter said in 1 Peter 4:18, "If the righteous are scarcely saved, where is the sinner? Where is the ungodly? What's going to happen to them?" he says. So this second area of similarity is spiritual lethargy and unrighteousness. It plagues the greater Church of God today.

2. C. Conflict

In Judah there were divisions. There was politics. There was selfishness. It's the same thing in the greater Church of God today. There is no difference at all.

Let's go to 1 Corinthians 11. Paul is addressing this very issue with the Corinthian Church. We've talked about this set of scriptures many, many times. It can't be over emphasized. We'll read verses 18 and 19. He says:

1 Corinthians 11:18. *For first of all, when [you] come together in the church, I hear that there [are] divisions among you; and I partly believe it. (KJV)*

In verse 19, he tells us why there are divisions. Notice what he says:

19) For there must be ... (KJV)

Not there can be or could be or might.

19) *For there must be also [in addition to the divisions] heresies among you, ... (KJV)*

And he said, "Here's why."

19b) *... that they which are approved [might] be made manifest [or apparent] among you. (KJV)*

That Greek word "approved," we've said before, is *dokimos*. It refers to a legitimate coin in both weight and content of metal. What He's saying, "I'm allowing division to occur so you can see who the legitimate Christians are. It will be plain to anybody who has an eye to see and I'm allowing it." Divisions are necessary to identify legitimate Christians.

But once, then, we come together with like-minded brethren, with brethren who want to humble themselves before God and to please God and to be like God, we have to make every effort to have unity and peace and harmony. Let's go back to 1 Corinthians 1:10. Paul is making an appeal here to be like-minded and to congregate together with like-minded individuals who are legitimate Christians and, obviously, reject the tares and the wolves in sheep's clothing and the clouds without water.

1 Corinthians 1:10. *Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... (KJV)*

It doesn't get any stronger than that.

10b) *... that [you] all speak the same thing, ... (KJV)*

In other words, that you be like-minded;

10 continued) *...and that there be no divisions among you; but that [you] be perfectly joined together ... (KJV)*

How? What's the joining thing?

10 continued) *... in the same mind and in the same judgment. (KJV)*

So he says, "There have to be divisions, but once you gather together with people who have like mind and like judgment, you need to promote unity and harmony and peace." That's what God wants.

So we see these three areas of similarity between Ancient Judah and the greater Church of God today.

3. Now we come to the last point: What lessons can we, as God's people, learn from this 150-year period?

We'll just talk about three very briefly.

3. A. First we need to understand that we are "spiritual Israel and spiritual Judah." We have to understand that.

The Old Covenant, as we know, was a marriage agreement between Christ and Ancient Israel. Israel, because of their sins and their waywardness and their lack of heart, broke that covenant. Because of that, Christ divorced them and then Christ said, as we know, in the New Testament He is going to marry the firstfruits. Not Ancient Israel. Not Ancient Judah, but He's going to marry the firstfruits. Look at 2 Corinthians 11, just verse 2. We need to have this in the forefront of our mind that we are preparing ourselves to marry Jesus Christ. Paul says:

2 Corinthians 11:2. *For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you ... (KJV)*

Meaning it would be like an engagement.

2b) ... I have [engaged] you to one husband [as your pastor, as your elder, as your apostle], that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (KJV)

"My job, as your overseer," he says, "is to help you become a chaste virgin so you are acceptable to Jesus Christ.

Then, let's turn to Revelation 19 and we'll read verses 7 and 8. This is the job that all of us have to do to ourselves and to help one another accomplish this same goal. Revelation 19:7, a joyous time!

Revelation 19:7. *Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife [has] ... (KJV)*

What? Been made ready? Christ made her ready. It says, no:

9b) ... [the] wife has made herself ready. (KJV)

Meaning the wife did the work. The wife did the changing. The wife with blinders off the eyes saw herself and saw that she needed to change to be like Jesus Christ so she could marry Jesus Christ. Verse 8:

8) And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: ... (KJV)

And what is that fine linen?

8b) ... [it's] the righteousness of saints. (KJV)

We have to become righteous in order to marry Christ.

So we have to understand that we are spiritual Israel, that we will marry Christ. We also need to understand that we are the temple being built. Now the one physical temple that they were struggling to build (and they rebuilt it) was destroyed in 70 AD. Today, God is building many "spiritual temples." That's a concept we need to get across. God is building today many spiritual temples.

Let's go back to 1 Corinthians, this time chapter 3 and we're going to read verses 16 and 17. We have to understand that we are the "temples" being built by Jesus Christ and through the power of the holy spirit.

1 Corinthians 3:16. Know [you] not that [you] are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God [dwells] in you? (KJV)

Paul is saying, "Don't you understand that? How can you behave the way you're behaving?" he was to them and to us today. Verse 17:

17) If any man [defiles] the temple of God, him shall God destroy; ... (KJV)

Those are scary words!

17b) ... for the temple of God is holy, which temple [you] are. (KJV)

So the first lesson is that we're spiritual Israel and we're building a temple, each one of us.

3. B. The second lesson we need to learn is we have to avoid this "sin, and then worldly repentance, and no real change cycle."

I see it all the time among God's people. People sin. They become sorry in a worldly way and they repent in a worldly way for a little bit of time, shed a few tears. And then they start sinning again. Over and over and over again just like the Jews!

We saw the pattern in Ancient Judah. They started with zeal. When opposition started, they became discouraged. They drifted away from God. They started sinning. Calamity came upon them. They were forced to face themselves. They repented in a worldly way, not a godly way. And then, after the pressure was removed, guess what? They got lax and it started all over again. They had zeal and sin, but never learning, never growing because they didn't have the heart. And there was no godly repentance.

The same occurs today in all too many of God's people. They get in a pattern of sin. They repent because of the hurt that's coming on them. They repent because they got

caught, but there was no godly repentance. If you want a personal study, look at 2 Corinthians 7 verses 8 through 11 which talks about godly repentance. We need to repent from the heart to avoid this cycle that Judah went through as an example for us today.

3. C. The third lesson we can learn is the following: The only obedience that really works, long term and forever, is obedience because we love God with all our heart and we want to make Him happy with us. We want to please Him.

It's not about avoiding sin and pain. It's because we obey God because we love Him with everything we have and we want our Dad to be happy with us and pleased with us.

The return to Jerusalem was anything but that. It was a series of ups and downs and nothing ever changed. The reason was they didn't have the heart (Deuteronomy 5:29). They just didn't have the heart. You can check in Jeremiah 9:26 where Jeremiah says, "The whole house of Israel is of an uncircumcised heart." And they didn't have it.

So there is a lesson for us today. We don't have the lack that they had. Let's look at a prophecy for us today in Deuteronomy 30:6. We are the forerunners of this. We are the firstfruits of this. Israel didn't have it. Judah didn't have it. They failed. They went through this horrible cycle and nothing ever changed. This is a promise and we are experiencing this promise today.

Deuteronomy 30:6. *And the Lord [your] God will circumcise [your] heart, ... (KJV)*

That happened at baptism.

6b) ... and the heart of [your] seed, to love the Lord [your] God with all [your] heart, and with all [your life], that [you may] live. (KJV)

Judah didn't do that. We have the opportunity to do that. And this is happening in our lives right now. We have the opportunity to show God we love Him with all our heart and to show God above all else we want to please Him and make Him happy with us as His children.

We do have the heart. Look at Ezekiel 36:26. Ezekiel repeats this twice in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel 36:26, you can also check chapter 11 and verse 19. It says the same thing. We are the forerunners of this, the pioneers of this.

Ezekiel 36:26. *A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, ... (KJV)*

That's what Judah had—a stony heart, a hard heart. They didn't want to submit to God. They wanted to do their own thing. We've seen that in the greater Church of God today. "Nobody's going to tell me what to do. Not even God."

26b) ... a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. (KJV)

A soft heart, a pliable heart, a moldable heart and that is what is happening to us today. We must have the heart and the mind of Jesus Christ. We must exercise that mind and exercise God's holy spirit in us.

So, let's conclude. Despite their sins (horrible sins) and their evil deeds (all the evil that they did), God despite of that looked after Judah. He encouraged them when they needed encouragement. He was patient and longsuffering and sent people to help them.

And he does the same for us today. He treats us the same way—encourages us, looks after us, provides for us. So we have to learn the lessons of this very traumatic and this very unstable period of time. We have to commit ourselves not to repeat the sins of Judah in their effort to rebuild a physical temple. We are building a spiritual temple and that spiritual temple will turn into a glorious body that will marry Jesus Christ. So let's learn the lessons from rebuilding the Temple.