

Keep Calm and Carry On

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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I've had a lot of time to think about things the last couple of weeks not preaching and, you know, what was on my heart. I wanted to this morning return to the book of Nehemiah, Ezra-Nehemiah. It's been a long time since you're heard me say turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah. Actually, June 28 was the last time I preached on Nehemiah and for seven weeks we took a break from Nehemiah 4 to talk about the armor of God in Ephesians 6, then we spent 13 weeks talking about spiritual warfare as it relates to issues in the culture, and then we spent some weeks talking about Christmas. So anyway, it's been since June 28, over six months and I really feel like the Lord wants us to go back to that book and finish it, Ezra-Nehemiah. Remember those of you who can still remember that if you were here, it's one book really in the original. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Old Testament it's one book. Ezra-Nehemiah is one book. In the English Bible, it's two books, Ezra and Nehemiah. But I think it's because of a lot of the things that the binding of the themes and the fact that the Hebrew, the Jews thought that in the Hebrew Bible it was one book. It is one book and so we've taken it that way.

We started in Ezra 1 and we're working all the way through Nehemiah 13. We're in chapter 4 right now of Nehemiah but I wanted to pick up there this morning but it's going to take a little bit of bridging and I've been thinking about how to reintroduce it to us. Don't worry, some of you who were here back in 2006, may recall that I took a break from the book of Romans, remember this? I was preaching through the book of Romans, I'd preached to like chapter 5, took a break for a number of months to another series, came back and to catch us up, I started back to, I actually preached through the first five chapters again. I mean, I was just going to do an overview but I couldn't help myself. So pray for me that I won't do that again. I really intend not to, although we are going to talk a little bit about, we're going to go back through some of the Ezra-Nehemiah stuff we've already done this morning because I think it helps us to see what we need to see to continue to mine the riches of God's word.

The title of the message this morning. I really got from thinking about a conversation I had with Todd Friel a few weeks ago after I had gotten sick. We exchanged texts and he was sharing with me that, this would have been January 7 or 8, that he's really seeing a lot of people who are really struggling with anxious thoughts and fear at this time because of the circumstances we see in our culture. He basically said at one point, people

are terrified and, you know, what can we do to help them. That's what he's working on in his ministry and something that I've been thinking about as well, you know? And so the title of the message is "Keep Calm and Carry On." Keep calm and carry on. I borrow that title from if you know much about history or World War II history, you'll know, you'll recognize that was the motto of the British people during the blitz in World War II. Keep calm and carry on. They were expecting, they had received just an onslaught of German bombing raids that started in September, 1940 and continued to May, 1941, eight months nightly bombing. London, Liverpool, all over where the population centers of England were, and particularly the industrial complexes. They were bombing the cities and the factories, the Germans were, to try to destroy England and to bring them into submission to the Nazi tyranny.

So each morning, the British people would get up now in the sunlight of the new day to see the buildings that had been demolished, to dig through the rubble, help people reclaim what goods they could out of their homes that had been destroyed. They would put out the fires, treat the wounded, comfort the bereaved, and then they would go back to work. Day after day for eight months, 45,000 bombs dropped on England in that period of time, more than 45,000 deaths, civilian deaths. Another 90,000 casualties, injuries from the bombing. And the British people, that was their motto, keep calm and carry on. It's a grim reality that has to be faced and so let's carry on with what we're called to do, and that motto carried the day and they were able to stand up under that onslaught of bombing that was trying to soften them up for a coming invasion and they continued to withstand it, the RAF continued to fight. They kept calm, they carried on, and then finally Hitler turned his attention elsewhere and invaded Russia, and those who had that resolve were able to eventually experience complete victory over the Nazis and their tyrannical objectives.

So keep calm and carry on. You know, when we look at things today and I think just even a cursory look at American culture sees an increasing hostility against Christian values. It's just, it's obvious. It just takes a little bit of looking to see it. It's been happening for decades as America has valued more and more personal autonomy, individual autonomy. Autonomy means self-law, that is that I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. I will determine for myself right and wrong. That's a value that has come to undergird so much of American thought.

Now think about that value and how that value when it encounters anything that resists it, anger and rage and hostility rises up in the hearts of those who are seeking autonomy, and there is nothing more offensive to that kind of thought process than the gospel of Jesus Christ, the offense of the gospel which says God is on the throne, God has made you, not you yourself. You belong to him, your life is not your own. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. He is the one who determines your gender. It's not your own, a construct of your own feelings. You may wrestle with these issues but it doesn't give you the right to determine that and part of the message and this is the loving message of God, when you say to someone, "Listen, I know you're struggling. I care about the fact that you're really wrestling, that you think that your body is not matching up with who you are. I understand that, the anguish that you're having in your soul. I'm compassionate. I care for you but, listen, I'm telling you the answer is not follow your heart. God is God.

His word tells us that we need his word to help us because our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked, and if you follow your heart, you're following that which will lead you to death. There is a way that seems right to a man but the end thereof is the way of death." And so we lovingly tell people, "Listen, I know that you feel that. There are things in my own life. I can relate in ways where I desire things, I want things that are not right and not best because God says they're not, and I've learned that to submit to God is actually freedom and life and joy and peace, and you can do it too through Jesus Christ. He'll set you free." Now that message is the message of love and the message of life but to those who are perishing, it is a message that they interpret as a message of hate. I mean, for another way to look at this, in a world that sees truth as completely relative, that sees truth as not objective and outside of you but subjective and determined by each person, a culture that sees truth that way hates the declaration of objective truth, "Thus says the Lord."

So this has been growing for decades and what's alarming people now is, of course, the emotional intensity that we see, the conflicts that we see, the sense in which in the present there is a, it seems to be a concerted effort to silence speech and freedom of speech. It's not done by the government, it's done really by kind of a coalition of private entities. You've got Hollywood. You've got the educational establishment. The media. Large corporations. Big tech. Which are trying to silence speech. This is completely un-American. America and freedom are based on the fact that you can have your belief, you can be wrong but you're free to express it and you're not going to be ostracized and ridiculed for your belief. You may be disagreed with, you may be, people may think your belief is crazy but you have a right to believe it but that's not the culture now is you can't even express it, and if you express it, they will cancel you. There's a rush to shame all political dissent, to silence all opinions and views that this coalition finds offensive. This is the greatest existential threat to freedom that we've seen in generations. Someone has called it a soft totalitarianism. It's not governmental totalitarianism, it is totalitarianism enforced by big tech and corporations that you're fired, your livelihood is taken away if you hold the wrong view on something. That's a frightening world to live in and as I said, the politics of it is the small stuff. Whatever they think that they find politically offensive, what they will find more offensive than anything politically offensive is the gospel and we cannot comply. We cannot shut up. We cannot go along to get along. That's not love. Love is to speak the truth because the truth sets people free.

So what are we to do in a time like this? We're to keep calm and carry on and I want us to, this is probably going to be a two-week message, part 1 this morning and part 2, Lord willing, next Sunday, and essentially the three points that we're going to work through and I think I want to share these right upfront so you know where we're going, keep calm and carry on because this present circumstance, this is normal. What we're experiencing now is actually normal in history. This is the normal circumstance under which the life of faith is lived out. The life of faith throughout the Old Testament, the New Testament and church history, the normal environment in which people of faith live their lives is underneath oppressive systems which are to varying degrees hostile to the gospel. That is normal throughout church history. It's normal throughout the history of the people of God in the Old Testament. It was exactly what the people in Ezra-Nehemiah's day were living

under. So that's one of the, that's the first point we're going to look at here in a moment. I'm going to unpack that more but that's essentially where we're going. This is normal. Second point, God is sovereign. We're going to see that the Lord seems to manifest his glory by allowing his people to dwell in situations where there's varying degrees of hostility and then he moves the levers of government, he moves the mighty hands that we think cannot be moved, God moves them and bends them to his will as he pleases. So this is normal, God is sovereign, and thirdly, our work is unchanged. Nothing changes. You're still called to do the same thing today you were called to do 10 years ago if you're a Christian.

So we're going to look at those three points. I think this morning we'll get through the first two and then we'll see that the third really comes out in the outline of Ezra-Nehemiah and then that will help us get back into the book of Nehemiah. So I want to read for you Nehemiah 4, and as I do, this is really kind of a jumping off point for this message. We've already preached through this passage, actually, so it's just kind of connecting us again, but as we read it, I want to remind, the circumstances are that Nehemiah, the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, these two books that are really one book, they're unified around this theme, what's happening is the nation of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, had been exiled to Babylon. God had judged his people for their continued unfaithfulness and he exiled them to Babylon, and after 70 years of exile, they were brought back to the land in the first return, but what's interesting is this return from exile took place over three different installments. It happens first under, and this is covered in Ezra 1 to 6, the first six chapters, under Zerubbabel, and they go back after the Cyrus edict, Cyrus the Persian issues an edict that says, "You can go back. Jews, you can go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple." And so the first return is to rebuild the temple.

What's interesting, though, is God does it in three returns. I've been thinking about this. Why did it take three returns? I mean, you've got to stop and ask these kind of questions. They leave and then this wonderful thing of them now having the Cyrus edict where the Persian king has in his heart for the temple to be rebuilt. Doesn't make sense. He is not a man of God. Cyrus is just a politically savvy, wise ruler who his basic policy is keep the people happy and keep the gods happy. Don't tread on them. If you keep the gods happy and you keep the people happy, it will be easier to reign over them. So it wasn't a godly motivation but the Lord was working in and through his own ungodly desires, and the Lord was working through him with such clarity that God actually, this is amazing, 100 years before Cyrus was born, God named Cyrus, called Cyrus by name in Isaiah 44 and 45, and God says, "Cyrus, my servant." He called him by name, "My servant. I have called you though you have not known Me." Twice it says that. "Though you have not known Me, I put in your heart to build My house." Written in Isaiah 700 BC, Cyrus is born 600 BC. This happens 538 BC, 162 years after Isaiah wrote it.

That's the first return. They go back to rebuild the temple and there's some stuff that happens. They run into opposition. They run into difficulty. They stop the building process. They lay the foundation and then the building stops for 15 years and the people of God who came back with such joy and excitement are sitting there and the temple is lying in ruins. The foundation is laid. Imagine you start a building, you want to build a

house, you buy a piece of property and you want to build a house and you lay the foundation, and you let it sit there for 15 years. That's ridiculous. Nobody does that. The people of God did and what's the Lord doing with that? Why did he allow that? I mean, he could have made them build it. Well, what ends up happening is he raises up his prophets Haggai and Zechariah to preach the word so that they start the building process again, and then the people oppose them again as they had before, the surrounding people opposed the work. They keep building in spite of the opposition and they say, "Send a letter to Darius," now Darius, Cyrus has died, Cambyses is after him died, now Darius, the Persian, is now leading the kingdom of Persia. They send a letter to Darius, these people think they're going to be able to stop this because nobody wants Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Jerusalem has a terrible reputation. It's always revolted against the kings. And so these guys Tattenai and another guy write the letter and it's in the book of Ezra, Ezra 5, they write a letter in which they basically say, "Listen, we know you want to stop these guys because they are trouble and we're sending this letter so you can tell us and we will put an end to the work." Darius has a search done. He's not thinking about Israel. He doesn't care about Judah. He doesn't care about Jerusalem. He's not a Christian. If anything, he's opposed just like everybody else to the work of God, but he has them do a search to find if there's any documents about that he needs to read about previous decrees of the Persian kings because the Persians, they like to honor their previous decrees. This is just something particularly true of that kingdom, and that he finds the Cyrus edict and he sends a note back and three times in chapter 6 his response is recorded in Ezra 6, three times he says, "I, Artaxerxes, issue a decree," and basically Tattenai, Tattenai is the guy opposing the people who are rebuilding the temple, the Jews that are rebuilding the temple, Tattenai is opposing them along with this other guy, I forget his name. I wish it were John and Bill. I could remember them. It's like Shethar-bozenai, you know, or something like that. Anyway, Ezra 6 you'll see this. So Tattenai and this other guy send the letters, they're the governors of the area around Jerusalem, and Darius says, "Leave them alone! Stay away from them! Not only that, give them whatever they need to finish the work." You see the hand of God moving.

So this is what, this book is designed to show us those things, that it's normal for the people of God to experience trouble and opposition in the work that God has given us, and at the same time we find comfort in his sovereignty. So that's where we're going. Now we're going to do the remainder of the time is I'm going to talk about those points, those first two points in a little more detail after we read chapter 4. "Now it came about," listen for the opposition that we hear in this,

1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard [Nehemiah 4:1] that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.

Sanballat is the governor of Samaria, the kingdom to the north. We're going to meet also a guy named Tobiah the Ammonite who is the governor of the Ammonites, which is the kingdom to the east of Israel. And then there's another guy, Gesham the Arab who's the governor of the region to the south. Well, to the west is the Mediterranean Sea. They're surrounded by enemies who oppose the work. These guys, and Sanballat is furious and

very angry because why does he care? They're rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This is the third return. The second return under Ezra that happens in chapter 7 to 10, the Lord sends them back to, I mean, to restore the law. And the third return under Nehemiah, they come back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. So it's rebuild the temple, restore the law, rebuild the walls. Three installments of this return. Why not do it in one? Why not do all of that in one? Well, the Lord wanted us to see it happen this way so we could see his hand at work in his people's lives. He could see, we could see that it's normal to live against opposition.

Now he goes on to say in verse 2,

2 He spoke in the presence of his brothers [this is now Sanballat] and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?" 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building--if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!" [Now Nehemiah prays,] 4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders. 6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. 7 Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. 8 All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

It's really irrational hatred. Why do they care? They care because evil hates the light. It's irrational but it's real.

Verse 9,

9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night. 10 Thus in Judah it was said, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, Yet there is much rubbish; And we ourselves are unable To rebuild the wall." 11 Our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work." 12 When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn," 13 then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows. 14 When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people: "Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses." 15 When our enemies heard

that it was known to us [that is, their plots], and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work. 16 From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. 17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon.

Basically the message of this chapter is keep calm and carry on. Don't be afraid of them. Don't be perplexed. Don't be overcome. Don't be overwhelmed. God is at work. We don't want this kind of situation, though, do we? I mean, we just want things to be easy. We were made for a perfect world. In that sense, we were made for a world where there was not evil. We didn't have to battle sin. But the reality is we live in a world where this is normal. There will always be opposition to the people of God. Jesus said, "If they hated me," he said, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they hated Me, they will hate you also." There will always be opposition to the people of God and so the normal life of faith is a life lived under opposition and hostility to varying degrees.

It's because this is the Lord tells us this. This world is still under, 1 John 5:19 says, "We are children of God and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." The whole world lies in his power. Jesus called him the ruler of this world three times in John 12, 13 and 14. Satan is the ruler of this world. 2 Corinthians 4:4, he is "the god of this age who has blinded the eyes of unbelievers. He is the prince of the power of the air that rules in the sons of disobedience," Ephesians 2:2. He is the father, Satan is the father of everyone who has not been born again by the Spirit. He said in John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil." He said that to the Jews who were opposing him because everyone who is a sinner and we're all born in sin, everyone who is a sinner is a child of the devil because the essence of sin is to want to be your own god, is to want to be autonomous, it's to want to live your life your way, for your purposes, and that's the essence of what Satan's rebellion was. He wanted to be like the most high. And what did he say to Eve when he tempted her? "If you eat of the fruit, you will be like God."

So it's a fabric of humanity, fallen humanity to want to be like God and the good news of the gospel is you're not God, I'm not God. There is one God and he reigns, and the good news is he's made a way for sinners like you and me, rebels like you and me to be restored to peace with him through Jesus Christ. This is the day of salvation but to experience that salvation you have to humble yourself, you have to bow the knee to Jesus Christ like Ted mentioned from Philippians 2. Bow the knee now and experience freedom.

But this is normal. This is what the people of God have always experienced. It's interesting in the flow of the Old Testament, once they are sent into captivity, the Babylonian captivity which begins 606 BC, Nebuchadnezzar captures the first group of Jews and takes them back to Babylon. Daniel, his friends were a part of that captivity. Israel will never again be a nation like it was before. They expected after the captivity that they would be because they misinterpreted some of the promises. They didn't see that

God was doing something different, that he was actually moving from the physical and external kind of kingdom to a spiritual internal kingdom where Jesus would say as he stood before Pilate representing the Roman Empire, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." He was creating a spiritual kingdom, delivering people from the dominion of sin and darkness and preparing them for the kingdom that is coming when he returns and this is made clear even in the history because they expected after they came back from Babylon to be their own nation again but they were not. They exchanged the Babylonian hegemony, that is, the oppression of the Babylonians ruling over them for the Persians ruling over them. Babylonian hegemony was 606 to 536. The Persian hegemony was 536 to 331 BC, 205-6-7 years. What happened after the Persians? Well, the Persians were defeated by the Greeks, and so then they were under the Greek tyranny from 331 to about 145 BC. There was about a 70-year period where they had relative freedom after the Maccabean revolt but it quickly evaporated into an even greater tyranny of the Romans which began 70 BC.

So it was Babylon, it was Persia, it was Greece, it was Rome. Israel was underfoot all of that time. The people of God who were living the life of faith were under the oppression of ungodly rule and it was into that Roman oppression that Jesus Christ himself came preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Those words were being preached about 100 years into the Roman hegemony that would last 470 years. He didn't liberate from Rome. That wasn't his purpose. His purpose was to liberate from sin. So they lived under that all the way through it and then the Jews, if you just follow their history, then they live under Muslim tyranny. The tyranny of Islam begins in 600 and continues for 1,000 years.

But look at church history. As the gospel goes forth, Acts 8:1 tells us that right after the gospel begins to spread, persecution breaks out, a great persecution broke out in Acts 8:1. This is after the killing of Stephen, the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. And the Jews spread out and fleeing the persecution but as they flee the persecution they're taking the gospel to more and more places. Eleven of 12 of the apostles were martyred. They died for their faith. The only one to live to die of natural causes was John on the isle of Patmos. And tradition tells us they tried to kill him but God did not allow him to be killed. They put him in a pot of boiling oil but that didn't kill him. God wasn't finished with him.

The first 300 years of the church basically were periods of hostility from Rome, like I said, varying degrees, times of intense persecution under people like Nero, Domitian, Diocletian, and then it changed in 313 AD with the conversion of Constantine, whether his conversion was genuine or not we don't know, but he claimed to convert to Christianity and he legalized Christianity and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. That lasted about 80 years because around 400 BC the Barbarians came and sacked Rome.

So Christianity had about an 80-year period of being again on the inside and then it was over. The Dark Ages began. Going into the Middle Ages, and what you have in the Middle Ages was the Christian church was perverted so badly the Roman Catholic

system became so perverted that the Roman Catholic Church became more and more powerful, more and more established but it was not where the gospel is. It was not where the life of faith was being lived. The Roman Catholic Church became the main persecutor of true believers. The Inquisition. The murder of people like Jan Hus, Thomas Becket. The people of faith were continually hounded by those above them. Then the Reformation came and there were some wonderful things that happened but out of the Reformation so many people were killed by the counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church where they put people to death for preaching the gospel. It spread as the gospel went into England and Scotland, periods of intense persecution. Bloody Mary is called Bloody Mary because she killed so many Christians. That's Mary, Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIII. Henry VIII killed William Tyndale for the horrible crime of translating the Bible from the originals into English.

And the church, the true church experienced a lot of difficulty in England as you had things like the Act of Uniformity where the Church of England was pressing down upon those who were truly the people of faith, and so really only the last 300 years or so has, and particularly in the United States, has the gospel experienced a time of peace and acceptance. I mean, it's still not universal. It's ebb and flow. It's not like it's all been a bed of roses here either but relatively speaking it's been pretty good. But it's the aberration. And so if we are coming back into a time where the gospel is going to be again the object of hostility, then more official hostility and more intense hostility, then we are just returning to the new normal. The new normal is actually the original normal and that's not an encouraging thing on the one hand, and yet on the other hand it is because this is how God has always blessed his people. I mean, the church thrives when the church is afflicted.

And it's true, even though, listen, none of us likes to suffer. I really, I hate suffering and we all should hate suffering. There's something wrong with you if you like suffering. That's not godly. But you can still hate suffering but you can value what God does through suffering and God has a way of purifying faith through suffering, through difficulty, through challenges. Big sufferings, physical sufferings, afflictions of the body, relational issues, painful circumstances in our lives. He can use that to do great things, and so it's a normal thing for the people of God to experience opposition, hostility and even tyranny. This is normal.

Now the second point which is the more encouraging part is this, God is sovereign. God is sovereign and I think one of the main reasons that he lets us go through the difficulty is so we can see his sovereignty. I mentioned, you know, why are there three returns? I mean, seriously, think about that. Why not get it right the first time? It's like, "Lord, you know, if You'd just sent Haggai, Zechariah with that material, then they wouldn't have stopped the work. Why did You wait when they went at 538, they're released, they get back to the land 536, they lay the foundation, and then the work stops because of opposition. Well, why didn't You raise up Haggai, Zechariah right then? Go ahead and get this right, get that temple built." He didn't do it. He let 15 years elapse, then he raises up Haggai, Zechariah. They preach. The people realize, "What are we doing with paneled houses when the temple of the Lord is in ruins? We've got to build the temple." They start

building. The people oppose, Tattenai and that other guy I mentioned, Shethar-bozenai whatever. They oppose. They send a letter to Darius. Darius sends a letter saying, "Listen, not only you leave those guys alone, help them get the work done." And the people of God sit there and say, "Look how God moved the heart of Cyrus. Look how God moved the heart of Darius. We were faithful, we prayed and God bent the hearts of the, he moved the levers of power."

So that's the first return, that's the first six chapters of Ezra. Then Ezra 7 to 10 is the second return under the namesake of the first part of the book, Ezra. He's a scribe. He's a priest. He knows the word of God. He is sent by the Persian Emperor, alright it's mind-blowing. We know when we read the work, what happened is Ezra went to the Persian Emperor and appealed to him and basically said, "Listen, things are not good in Jerusalem and I need your help." What does the Persian Emperor care about Jerusalem? I mean, the province that Jerusalem is in is called the land beyond the river. That's the title of the whole area. That's where Sanballat and Tobiah and all of them are little sub-rulers of the land beyond the river. It's like that land way over there that nobody cares about. Ezra goes to Artaxerxes and he makes some kind of appeal, we don't know what he said to Artaxerxes but we know how Artaxerxes responded because in Ezra 7, we have the letter that Artaxerxes sent Ezra with.

It starts in verse 11 of Ezra 7,

11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel: [And here it is,] 12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.

Now what's happened is, I'm not going to read all of it. I encourage you to read it this week. What's happened is the temple worship is not like it should be. Ezra's gotten word of this back in Persia that the temple worship is not as it should be, they're not offering the right kind of offerings, the temple doesn't have the kind of funding it needs, and they don't have the right people there who know what they're doing. It's like the church has nobody who knows the word of God. This is what's happening and he's asks this pagan king, "Can I go back? Can we take some of your people who are captive and who are not free to go wherever they want to go, can I take some of them back?" And the king says, "Take them back." And listen, when you read all through this, he basically says, "Take them back. Make sure... We're sending a lot of money with you. I want you to get the temple worship right for your people. I want you to make sure that you buy all the right stuff to make sure that that temple is what it should be, in fact, I'm sending a letter with you that tells those other guys," this is now 60-70 years after the previous Tattenai and the other guy I was mentioning, "Go and take this letter to the people over there beyond the river and it's going to tell them to give you whatever you need to finish the temple and to make it right." It's like, what in the world? How does this happen? And it's like,

"And if anybody opposes you, I'm telling you they're going to have to deal with me," the Persian Emperor. In fact, the same thing, Darius said the same thing. Remember the one I told you about a little while ago when he tells them to get back to building the temple? He basically says, "If anybody opposes you, he is to be impaled on a pole from his own house." They had a way of expressing themselves.

So that's the second return. Ezra comes back with this incredible blessing, all of this money given by these people who should not care and who do not know God, but God is bending the will. Now they get back and you're like, "Okay, surely now we've got it all right. For some reason the Lord wanted us to take two times of everybody coming back." And this is 458 BC. This is 60 years after they finished the temple God sends the second installment. Ezra after he gets back and he starts looking at things, then he finds out things are a mess in Judea. They're intermarrying. They're not being pure and holy. They're not pursuing righteousness. He's broken-hearted by the wickedness he sees. And the book of Ezra, that part of it ends basically on the note of the people beginning to repent but, man, things were way worse than we thought.

Nehemiah picks up the third return. It's like to get this right, it's got to happen in three installments. Now God is not a God who does Plan A and then it doesn't work out and he says, "Oh, I'd better do something else." Whatever happens is always God's Plan A. He doesn't make any mistakes. He willed to do it this way because you and I are so hard-headed that we can't see it without this kind of in-your-face sort of predicament, predicament, predicament. We need that. I need that. So the third return, Nehemiah gets word at the beginning of the book of Nehemiah, he's a faithful Jew still over in Persia. Why are these guys still over there? That's the kind of question I'm asking, "Why aren't you already back in Judah, Nehemiah?" Well, the Lord didn't let him go back. He didn't let his parents go back. He's born there and he's the cupbearer to the king and because God has a mission for Nehemiah. God doesn't make any mistakes.

So Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king and Nehemiah sees that things are terrible and hears that they're terrible in Judea and so he is brokenhearted, he fasts and he prays, he's grieved that the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, that its gates have been burned with fire, that basically the enemies regularly raid Jerusalem and they make it a laughingstock, and so the people of God are not a city set on a hill shining with God's glory, the worship is messed up and Nehemiah is brokenhearted and he's willing to risk his life by going to the Persian king uninvited, unannounced as his cupbearer. He's invited to be cupbearer, he's not invited to be sad in the king's presence. He's sad in the king's presence which was a death sentence to Persians. They liked everybody to be happy all the time in their presence. You didn't feel bad, you didn't tell the king about it. If you feel bad now, you're going to feel a whole lot worse if you tell the king about it.

But he knows he's got to intercede for the people of God and so he goes in the king's presence sad, the king says, "What's this sadness of heart?" Nehemiah tells him what happened. This is the same Artaxerxes that sent Ezra there 13 years before. I would think if I were Artaxerxes, I'm like, "Man, I rolled out the red carpet for you guys. If y'all can't get it right, that's just too bad. Move on. Nehemiah, you're out. Give me another

cupbearer. I've got better things to do, bigger things to do as the king of Persia. I mean, I am the ruler of the known world." The Persian Empire stretched from Egypt to India, Greece, elements of Macedonia, all of Turkey, all the way. Bigger in scope than any other previous empires.

But you see, God has his hand on the Persian Emperor. God has worked through Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a godly man, he's a cupbearer, he's trusted by this king. This king has an affection for him. When he says what he says, the Lord moves his heart to say, "What do you need?" "I need to go. I need to go back and rebuild the walls." "How long will you be gone?" God moving the heart of the king. He's controlling it, doing whatever he wants. Here we are looking at, if you lived at that time like Nehemiah did, or you lived at that time like the people in Judea before Nehemiah comes and you see how messed up things are, and how oppressed we are by people like Sanballat and Tobiah and Gesham the Arab, and all the people around us, and the Ashdodites to our west, and all these people who hate the worship of God and hate us because we love God, and we don't know what's going on, and yet we see the hand of God continually from time to time as he deems fit to move mightily and unmistakably, and the message for us is, trust him. He's on the throne. Yeah, we live in the world where Satan is the ruler of this present world, the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, but our God reigns.

One of the images I love from the book of Job when God comes down and talks to Job and straightens Job out. I remember Job had relatively speaking, Job was fantastic. I mean, he was way better than his friends. God basically tells his friends, "You guys are going to die. You need to ask Job to pray for you because you've not spoken to me truth like Job has." But then he goes over to Job and he says, "Listen, Job, though I told them that about you, I've got some issues with you." And he really lays down the law to Job. But in part of what he does is he says to Job, "Listen, you who were going to try to judge me in what I'm doing." Essentially he's like, he says, "You who know so much, you know so much about justice and righteousness and what should be done because you were there when I created the morning star, weren't you, Job? Have you ever commanded the morning, Job? Have you ever told the mountain goats when to have their young, Job?" He says, "Listen, you tremble at behemoth and leviathan," apparently dinosaurs when you look at it carefully, describing mighty animals. He says, "I have a ring in leviathan's nose." This is like a monster crocodile. It's like, it must have been, you know, 40 or 50 feet long. It was a sea monster. It was something that could just devastate and destroy that no man could tangle with and God tells Job, "I have a ring in his nose." And scholars believe that this is a reference, leviathan, the dragon, things like that are things that were real but that were used metaphorically also to speak of Satan, and God is saying to Job, "I have a ring in Satan's nose and I lead him wherever I want." And you read Job 1 and chapter 2, and you'll see God leading Satan wherever he wants. He says, "Have you considered My servant Job?" And Satan takes the bait because he's a fool and an idiot compared to God. He's a lot smarter than me and you but compared to God he's an idiot. God says, "I have him, I have a ring in his nose."

So the god of this age who is too much for us, our God, our Father, has got him completely under control. Our Savior has conquered him. Our Savior was bruised on the

cross, bruised on the heel and he crushed the head of the serpent on the cross. And so now God is glorified by people who trust in that glorious Savior in the midst of a world where there's still the remnants of evil all around us, opposition to God, opposition to the gospel, yet this is the victory that overcomes the world, even your faith. You believing the promises of God, you being faithful to what God has called you to do, when we do that, we overcome the world and we magnify the glory of God. We magnify the majesty of God, the goodness of God so that unbelievers begin to see it and even the demons in hell see it and tremble.

This is what we're called to do. We're called to keep calm and carry on. This is normal. God may change it. It may get better, I don't know. But if it doesn't, it doesn't matter ultimately because my God is the one who is pulling the levers. He's the one that's in charge. Let's keep calm, carry on, and then next week we'll look at what our duty is, what our responsibility is. It hasn't changed.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we praise You that You are the living God, that You reign and You rule, there's none like You. You know the beginning from the end. You call things that are not as though they are and they become. You made everything that exists out of nothing and You did it by the word of Your power, and You continue to sustain all things, to uphold all things by the word of Your power. And You are worthy of all worship. You are worthy of everything in our lives, everything in our hearts being laid before You. Lord, You are the most lovely of all beings. You are good and righteous and holy in all Your ways. We are sinful and yet You have found a way to make sinners right with You through the blood of Your Son. You have found a way to remain just, perfectly just and righteous and at the same time justify ungodly people. Lord, how marvelous are Your works. You raised Your Son and You have raised him now to the right hand of Your throne and You will make all of His enemies a footstool for His feet, and You lead Your people in the train of Your triumph. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Lord, let us learn to be content and joyful and to have Your peace that passes understanding. Let us encourage one another with these things. And Father, for those that don't know You, may they turn to You now, repent, and place their faith in Christ and may You give us the privilege of seeing many people turn from darkness to light. In these days where the light and the darkness are becoming more and more pronounced, distinct, use that to magnify the glory of Your Son, the true and rightful King. We pray in His name. Amen.