

## EZRA 5

## A LETTER TO KING DARIUS

King Cyrus of Persia gave his decree for the rebuilding of the Temple in 537 BC; and the work began soon after the Jews' return, in the year 536. For 13 years, however, the people were slow and sluggish in this work; and then their enemies compelled them to stop work entirely in 522. For two whole years, absolutely nothing was done toward the construction of the Lord's house; but in the year 520, that changed. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah arose and motivated their brethren to get up and get working. This was in the second year of the reign of King Darius Hystaspes.

Remember that King Cyrus' son and successor, Cambyses, died in 522 BC, as he was on his way home to put down a usurper of his throne, named Pseudo-Smerdis. This Pseudo-Smerdis held the throne of Persia for a short time; but in 521, a group of seven Persian wise men formed a conspiracy against him. After removing him from the scene, the conspirators selected one of themselves to be the main ruler of Persia; and that man's name was Darius (although he is also known in other places of the Bible as Ahasuerus). Nevertheless, an arrangement was made whereby each of the other six conspirators took turns sharing power with Darius. In the second year of this Darius' reign (520 BC), work on the Temple began again. And in the year 519, a letter was written to him, requesting verification of King Cyrus' original decree. Shortly after Darius' reply to this letter (which is found in chapter 6), he contrived a way to rid himself of the yoke of sharing power with his fellow conspirators. Consequently, he threw a large six-month-long celebration in 518 BC, in order to celebrate his sole authority over the kingdom of Persia. This was the feast that is spoken of in the opening chapter of the Book of Esther, where Darius is called by the name Ahasuerus. This was the beginning of the events that led to Ahasuerus' deposing of Queen Vashti (who was King Cyrus' daughter, by the way), and his subsequent marriage of Esther in the year 515 BC – which happened to be the same year that the second Temple was completed.

But now let us return to the section of the narrative that is here before us in Ezra chapter 5. Shortly after the people returned from Babylon, the people had built an altar to the Lord. But the counselors who had been hired by the enemies to hinder the work (chapter 4:5) told them that the right time had not yet come for the building of the Temple (Hag. 1:2); and thus the people were made to feel easy and comfortable in building themselves fine houses, while God's house lay in ruin. But now life was put back into that good cause which

**Outline of the chapter:**

- ❖ *The Lord warms His cool-hearted people, and moves them to start working on the Temple again – verses 1-2*
- ❖ *He cools His hot-headed enemies, who treat the builders a little more mildly, and write to the Persian king a little more fairly in this matter – verses 3-17*





seemed to lie dead. Two faithful ministers – Haggai and Zechariah – were raised up in God’s name, and they earnestly persuaded the people to put the wheel of business in motion again. It is a sign that God has mercy in store for a people, when He raises up His servants among them to be their helpers and guides in spiritual work. The people also had two good leaders who were zealous and active in the Temple project – Zerubbabel their chief prince, and Jeshua their chief priest. The first chapter of the prophecy of Haggai is the best commentary on the first two verses of this chapter; they show us the great things that God does by His Word, and by His Holy Spirit working with it.

The Jews’ neighbors – Tatnai, Shetharboznai, and their friends – soon took notice of the reviving of this good work, and they immediately set to work to hinder it again. The inspired historian provided us with a copy of the letter that they sent to King Darius. In the meantime, Divine Providence took good care of this good work; “the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews,” verse 5 tells us, “so that their enemies could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius.” When we are employed in God’s work, we are under His special protection. And this fact encouraged the Jewish elders, notwithstanding all the opposition they met with. If we remember that God’s eye is upon us, we will find encouragement when our difficulties discourage us.

A large portion of this chapter contains the letter that Tatnai and his friends sent to King Darius, containing an account of what transpired between them and the leaders in Jerusalem. Finding the Jews both busy and prosperous, they asked them, “By what authority do you do these things, and who gave you that authority? Who set you to work?” To this, they answered that they had sufficient warrant to do what they did, for they were the servants of the God of heaven and earth. They also told Tatnai and his friends that they had the royal decree of King Cyrus to justify them in what they were doing. He had not only permitted and allowed them to do this work; he had actually commanded them to carry it out. It must be confessed that Tatnai and his friends represented this matter more fairly to King Darius than the enemies in chapter 4 had done to Pseudo-Smerdis. They told him truly what was being done – not stating, as the others had done, that the Jews were fortifying the city as if they intended war. They left it to Darius to consult the Persian records and find out whether or not Cyrus had indeed made a decree concerning the Temple, and then to give directions as he should think fit. Let the cause of God and truth be fairly stated and fairly heard, and it will keep its ground – as we shall see, Lord-willing, in the next chapter!

*Thank You, Lord, for raising up faithful ministers to encourage us in the work of building Christ’s spiritual Temple – the Church. We pray for grace to be encouraged in our life’s calling by the assurance that Your protection is upon us! Amen.*