

not obeying the Spirit's prompting, it's time to obey and walk by faith. If God has not stirred some of your hearts to be a missionary, because it's true, not everyone is called to be a missionary, I think there is an absolutely valuable application in this text concerning this:

Before the 50,000 Jews left with Zerubbabel, what did their fellow Jews who stayed back do?

(Ezra 1:6 And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered.)

When you know a missionary. And now let me expand this. When you know someone is walking in obedience to God's word. When you know someone is taking steps of faith and doing what God's Spirit is leading them to do, a wonderful thing to do is:

Encourage them and support them.

And on that note, let me say this: The more you encourage and support people into fulfilling God's plan for their lives. When people take steps of faith in a particular direction and you pray with them, give them a financial gift, God will reward that. And check this out too: When you become that encourager and supporter to people, that will come back to you: when you take risks; when you take steps of faith, you will see people rally around you and support you with prayer, encouragement, and finances. In the positive way, "you will reap what you sow."

(Proverbs 11:25 A generous person will be enriched, and the one who gives a drink of water will receive water.)

Chapter 3

Introduction: Animal Sacrifices

The first thing I want to do is remind us concerning the animal sacrifices:

Before the New Covenant, in which Jesus Christ became the sacrifice for our sins, God required that His people worship Him by the sacrifice of animals, a shadow of the coming Lamb of God, Jesus, as the final sacrifice.

Let me refresh you or teach you **why the animal sacrifices were needed**. God designed atonement for sin only possibly by the shedding of blood. The shedding of the blood of animals was a temporary foreshadowing of Christ's future atonement. Every year, the Jews were reminded of their sins; and learned again, that only blood can atone for sin. And it was clear that animals could not atone. The blood of Christ, God in the flesh, was required to completely and fully atone for the sins of mankind.

(Hebrews 10:1 For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.

Hebrews 10:2 For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins.

Hebrews 10:3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

Hebrews 10:4 For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.)

- One of the good things to come was the final sacrifice in Jesus Christ.
- The Law, the sacrifices, and the Old Covenant were only shadows and images. From the beginning with Abel and throughout all the Old Testament, salvation was only made possible by the shedding of blood.
- The Law, the sacrifices of animals, or anything in the Old Covenant in and of itself could not cleanse the heart and conscience; it could not deliver a person from sin and death. In essence, the Old Covenant could not save. Only faith in the Lord can save. And for the OT saints, they were awaiting the prophesied Messiah who'd bring the New Covenant, where no longer was the law written on ink but written on the heart of man.
- When Jesus' Christ's blood was shed on the cross, He was the final sacrifice. There no longer was a need for yearly sacrifices foreshadowing Christ. He accomplished redemption once and for all:
 - *(Hebrews 7:27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, **for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.**)*

What the Old Testament makes clear and what Hebrews 10:3 also refreshes our minds with is:

Animal sacrifice was a form of worship in the Old Covenant. It was the appropriate response to those who believed in Jehovah. With that foundation, we can move forward into the text with better understanding:

Verses 1-2: Doing the Job!

(Ezra 3:1 And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

Ezra 3:2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.)

These two verses just grab our attention! They are rebuilding the altar to worship the Lord! It's verse 3 that is extraordinary:

Verse 3: Reacting to Fear

(Ezra 3:3 Though fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening burnt offerings.)

I like how the CSB puts this verse: "Even though they feared the surrounding people..."

The Point: "Even though they feared the surrounding countries and enemies, physical and spiritual enemies, they decided to worship the Lord."

The 50,000 returnees with Zerubbabel are **INSPIRING**.

There's a famous quote with no real author to claim it. I'm sure you've heard of it. And it really describes the returnees here:

"Courage is not lack of fear; it is the will to act in spite of fear."

The Principle: Regardless of what you think or how you feel, choose worship and choose obedience.

(2 Corinthians 5:7 For we walk by faith, not by sight.)

(Proverbs 29:25 The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.)

For the returnees, the safest place was at the altar in Jerusalem near the foundation of the Temple. That was the safest place to be. No matter how afraid they were to be in a country without borders or without sufficient military protection, they made a stand and worshiped regardless of their fears.

When I meditated on this portion of scripture again, I thought: “When I’m afraid, what do I do?”

- Do I still pull out my guitar and start singing to the Lord?
- Do I still obey God’s word and plan for my life?
- Do I still move forward by faith rather than listening to and obeying my emotions, such as fear?

When you are afraid, do you still move forward with the Lord?

When you are afraid, do you still worship Him and obey Him?

- **May we follow their example to be courageous in our worship and obedience to the Lord.**

Verses 4-6: No Hesitation

(Ezra 3:4 They also kept the Feast of Tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings in the number required by ordinance for each day.

Ezra 3:5 Afterwards they offered the regular burnt offering, and those for New Moons and for all the appointed feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and those of everyone who willingly offered a freewill offering to the Lord.

Ezra 3:6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, although the foundation of the temple of the Lord had not been laid.)

There’s a thought tucked in here that I find worth pointing out. It’s in verse 6. To summarize: “they worshiped by sacrifices although there was not even a foundation of the temple.”

Contemporary Application:

The cynical person who is walking by sight says, “Well, I guess we won’t worship the Lord just yet because the temple has to be built first. Worship will be possible once the appropriate things are in place. And by the way, all the surrounding nations will hear about it and they’ll come and attack us. We have no protection!” In stark contrast,

A courageous person who is walking by faith says, “Our worship and obedience will not be hindered whether we have everything in place or not (whether the temple is here or not); whether we are safe or unsafe. The building is not what matters; our supposed security is not what matters. It’s worshipping the Lord from the heart that matters; it’s obedience that matters!”

For the Jews who came back in that 1st return with Zerubbabel, they did not let a building or lack of it define their worship. They did not allow their fears to cripple them from walking by faith. Worship was not linked to an external resource (building) or a genuine emotion (fear). **Worship was the right thing to do; worship was the best thing to do. Think about this:**

W. Shakespeare: “Cowards die many times before their death; but the valiant never taste of death but once!”

ESV - (2 Corinthians 3:17 *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*)

Only by walking by faith, only by worship, only by obedience will you experience the fullness of the freedom God destined for you!

Application 1:

The obvious application for us today is gathering despite persecution. If we live to see persecution come and someone or something legally or physically hinders us from meeting here, is that going to stop us from gathering? NO! We will go back to house churches. The early church was built on house churches.

- It’s important to remember that the church of Jesus Christ is not linked to a building; nor is the power of a local church linked to sufficient resources.

Application 2:

That you and I will be tempted not to take steps of faith, not to worship, and not to obey because of fear and because of insufficient resources. This applies to the little issues and the big issues:

“If the worship team sings songs I like to sing and the songs I listen to, then I will worship; if the team had an electric guitar and the volume was just a little louder, I’ll be motivated to worship!”

“If I just have the perfect job, then I’ll start tithing, then I’ll start serving again.”

“If God takes care of A, B, C, and D, without me getting involved, then I’ll move forward.”

“If so-and-so randomly comes up to me after church and tells me this or suggests that, then I’ll know God is speaking or God is working or God is there to lead me.”

“I’ll start doing this ministry of working at that job once I feel ready and once I think I’m good enough.”

“I’ll fellowship with the saints again after the persecution decreases in intensity.”)

I pray that when it really matters, each of us will be courageous!

No matter the opposing forces that are causing fear in my soul; no matter if the resources are sufficient or insufficient. I will walk by faith. I will obey. **I will worship the Lord!**

Verse 7: Giving

(Ezra 3:7 They also gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre to bring cedar logs from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the permission which they had from Cyrus king of Persia.)

I admire these returnees for what we read here. How many people allow fear to control them, even believers? And how many people controlled by fear become people who are stingy, people who are ungenerous?

One thing we’ve seen so far in Ezra is this: These people were givers. They were very generous.

And here, they didn’t stop with money. It tells us they also gave food, drink, and oil...

What makes a generous person? Just from this text,

(1). Walking in God’s plan for your life.

- For when you are walking in God's plan for your life, you know that God is your provider.

(2). Walking by faith.

- Money doesn't grip your heart. You are able to hold money loosely - not in the sense that you are unwise with your spending, rather you trust in the Lord that by blessing others God is going to bless you.

(3). Worship despite fear (Obedience).

- Worshippers, those who are obedient to the Lord, find it a joy to give financially to the Lord and to the Lord's work!

(Proverbs 11:25 The generous soul will be made rich, And he who waters will also be watered himself.)

Verses 8-9: Getting to Work

(Ezra 3:8 Now in the second month of the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come out of the captivity to Jerusalem, began work and appointed the Levites from twenty years old and above to oversee the work of the house of the Lord.

Ezra 3:9 Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers, Kadmiel with his sons, and the sons of Judah, arose as one to oversee those working on the house of God: the sons of Henadad with their sons and their brethren the Levites.)

They are finally doing what God called them to do! And with any work of God, there has to be organization. There must be administrators, managers, team-leads and so on.

Application for the church of Jesus Christ:

Remember there are about 20 gifts of the Holy Spirit. One of those gifts is the gift of administration. God gives the gift of administration for His church to be efficient in the work of the Lord.

Every church, ministry, para-church organization, must have organization in place, administrators, and leadership with the ability to lead.

The work of rebuilding the temple efficiently required leadership, organization, and administration. And make no mistake that fulfilling God's plan for the church efficiently also requires leadership, organization, and administration.

Remember who the people were in Ezra 1-3:

These were people with pure hearts, hearts that were obedient, faith-filled, worshipful, and generous. This is important because there is a tendency and a sad reality such as today where a church begins as a work of the Spirit but then it begins to try to be perfected by a work of the flesh. In other words, a church moves from a work of God's spirit and becomes a business run by men. What keeps a church healthy, continuing as a work of God's spirit; so that the "business-side" of the church, the leadership, administration, organization, finances, etc." remains Christ-exalting?"

Just like these folks in Ezra: the answer is Godliness. If there is godly leadership, the organization will remain Christ-exalting - a leadership with pure hearts, obedient hearts, faith-filled hearts, worshipful hearts, and generous hearts. And when the hearts of the leadership and the hearts of the servants are God-fearing, then the organization and administration will not only be efficient, it will also be effective for God's glory.

Verses 10-11: The Foundation is Laid

(Ezra 3:10 When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel.

Ezra 3:11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever toward Israel." Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.)

What an amazing moment! Imagine that moment when all of God's people are worshiping Him? If you note careful, every single person praised and every single person shouted.

Application:

Over the years, I've heard multiple people complain saying something like: "A lot of people don't really sing at this church; or a lot of people aren't passionate enough in their singing at that church, so that's why I came to this church." And as a worship leader myself at this church for many years before I was the lead pastor, there were times I'd look out into the audience and see people just standing there, not singing at all or not even worshipping at all. Just poker face. And sometimes, I'd get mad and think, "why aren't you worshipping?" God taught me a valuable lesson which is found right here in the text:

Why did every single person sing, worship, and shout to the Lord?

Because their hearts were pure.

- Remember, the 50,000 returnees that came under Zerubbabel were the real deal: All of them had pure hearts, obedient hearts, faith-filled hearts, worshipful hearts, and generous hearts.

Now, can people worship the Lord with impure hearts? Yes, it's definitely possible. Jesus told the Pharisees quoting Isaiah 29:13, "in vain they worship Me" (Mark 7). But make no mistake: When you see every single person singing to the Lord, worshipping the Lord, shouting to the Lord and you know that they love the Lord their God with all their hearts. Remember that God is blessed when His people worship Him.

(John 4:23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.)

- The Father is seeking the person with a pure heart of worship.

The Lesson: For me personally, when we gather as God's people, I no longer let other people's lack of worship affect my worship.

Why isn't everyone singing at church?

- Understand that people come to our church who don't know the Lord.
- Believers who come to our church that are walking in disobedience.
- Believers who are frustrated and angry with life. And instead of surrendering and laying everything at Jesus' feet, they are holding up the pain inside. They should be worshipping but instead they are choosing to be obstinate.

- Believers who are weighed down and weary from spiritual warfare. While they should be worshiping, they think that the better thing is not to sing.
- Believers who are distracted for whatever reason at that moment.
- Believers who believe that because they don't have a good voice, and who are extremely self-conscious, don't sing.
 - If that's you today, learn from a personal example. This doesn't happen often, but there are times I lose my voice. And in those times I've lost my voice and I'm here at church, I'm raising my hands or I'm on my knees. If I can't worship with my lips I will worship with my hands.

Let me say this: I've been in the shoes of every example I've given. But, some of you know as well as I know, the more you mature in Christ, the less you allow your emotions or trials to hinder your worship in our gatherings. The more you mature in Christ, the less you allow people's lack of worship to hinder your worship in the gatherings of God's people. The more you mature in Christ, the more natural worship becomes. You no longer think, "Wait, am I the only one singing here?" I love it when I just see someone in their own universe singing, lifting their hands, going on their knees, just worshiping the Lord.

Remember that every believer is in a process of maturity.

- Therefore, would you agree with me that it's good to see somebody not singing in church? I'm just glad they're here at church.
- For example: on a different note, there are people who come only on Sundays and don't stay and fellowship. Would you agree with me that it's good to still see them come to church even though they don't stay to fellowship? I'm just glad they're here at church. I can pray for them. I can love them. Years ago, I used to get critical about people who did not sing or did not stay to fellowship. But the more I matured in Christ, the more I trusted that God is their shepherd and He's working in their hearts. We pray for them, encourage them, and let God work on their hearts.

I think many of us can see Ezra 3:10-11 and say, "Goodness me, I wish we can have worship like this every Wednesday and every Sunday."

You will most likely never be able to find a church where everyone's hearts are united, pure, mature, faith-filled, obedient, worshipful, and generous. Again, on

one side that's a good thing. All are welcome here. We don't have the guides at the entrance say, "Are you planning to sing today? Because if you aren't, you're not allowed to gather with us." No. Calvary Chapel was known and should continue to be known as the church that says, "Come as you are." If you are broken, come. If you are seeking God, come. If you are full of faith, come. If you are discouraged, come.

Last encouragement: If you didn't sing and worship today, get real with yourself and ask yourself, "why?" Deal with the problem and move forward worshipping.

(Psalm 42:11 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.)

- Side note: Sometimes the worship team will play a new song that I don't know. So I learned this from Pastor Lyle: Do your best to sing along, but if it's still too hard, close your eyes, lift up your hands, and start whispering to God by giving Him thanks, and telling Him how wonderful He is to you.

Verses 12-13: Tears of Happiness

(Ezra 3:12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy,

Ezra 3:13 so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off.)

Over the years, I've heard this text often taught that the old men, who were just children or young men when they saw the temple, were crying tears of sadness and frustration, thinking something along the lines, "this doesn't compare to Solomon's temple."

Why is that absolutely incorrect? Verses 11+12 tells us they only laid the foundation of the temple. If they built the temple, I can see the old men saying, "This temple doesn't even compare to Solomon's temple!" But the text tells us they only built the foundation of the temple. Therefore, it must be concluded that the weeping of the old men was a weeping of gratitude and happiness.

- These old men had the privilege to witness the rebuilding of God's temple. Their journey. Their lifelong desire to come back to the holy land. The promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The 70-year

prophecy of Jeremiah. The mercy of God to bring His people back when they did not deserve His mercy. **And so when they see the foundation of God's house, knowing all of these things personally, and to remember Solomon's temple 70 years prior, what an overwhelming moment of worship and weeping for the elders.**

All to say, on a macro-level this was a momentous moment that revealed God's faithfulness to Israel.

- God restored them to the Land at the time He promised He would. And these nearly 50k saw the rebuilding of the temple, the most important piece to the worship of God's people in the Old Covenant.

Now, chapter 4 is not very encouraging. It's a very discouraging chapter. You'll see why if you don't already know. This chapter will encourage us in ways I find so relevant in the life of the Christian.

Chapter 4

Verses 1-3: The Opposition Arrives

(Ezra 4:1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the Lord God of Israel,

Ezra 4:2 they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' houses, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."

Ezra 4:3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.")

Verse 1 makes it clear that the returnees are moving forward with the building project.

Verses 2-3 makes it clear that Zerubbabel and the rest of the leadership saw right through the lies and the pretense of these surrounding cities and peoples. Zerubbabel and the leadership knew that these people were adversaries, sent by Satan, the greatest adversary himself.

Principle: Godly leadership needs to discern adversaries trying to destroy the work of God. This applies to all walks of life:

- For fathers and mothers: Your child's friends: Are they a good influence for your child or are they poisonous to your children?
- For church leadership: May God help the leadership of New Beginnings have discernment when particular people try to detrimentally steer the church into a different vision or try to steer the church towards its destruction. May God give this church's leadership discernment to expose the adversaries, no matter how real their flattery may appear.

One thing to be reminded of: As Christians, there will always be adversaries. As servants of Christ, there will always be adversaries from outside of the local church and from within the local church. The Bible warns of both types of adversaries.

Adversaries are relentless. They are no respecter of persons. Let's read the next two verses:

Verses 4-5: Tactic Changes

(Ezra 4:4 Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building,

Ezra 4:5 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.)

The text makes it clear that the adversaries changed tactics. Initially, they came in pretense: pretending to be allies. But when the leadership discerned their hypocrisy, their tactic changed. They revealed their true colors as adversaries. So, their tactics became these 3 words:

- (1). Discourage
- (2). Trouble
- (3). Frustrate

These scriptures are valuable to us because the Lord wants us to know the tactics of our spiritual adversaries that disguise themselves in physical adversaries. The Bible tells us that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,

but we wrestle with spiritual enemies (Eph. 6:12). Second, there was a situation where the Corinthians were holding back their full love and forgiveness for a brother in the Lord. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians to quickly express their love and quickly forgive the brother. Why? Because if they did not, the spiritual adversaries would get a foothold in their lives and hearts: CSB (2 Corinthians 2:11 *so that we may not be taken advantage of by Satan. For we are not ignorant of his schemes.*)

Coming back to this text, Ezra 4. These scriptures (along with many others) reveal to us the tactics of our adversaries. For some of you, that truth might be the most liberating thing to you right now:

You can know how spiritual attacks work.
You can know the schemes of Satan.
God does not want you to be ignorant regarding spiritual warfare or how Satan and his demons scheme. As believers, we should be keenly aware of the tactics of spiritual warfare.

So to repeat to engrave it our minds:

The adversaries sought to infiltrate the leadership in pretense. When the leadership exposed their hypocrisy, the adversaries began to discourage, trouble, and frustrate the congregation. Their objective? To hinder the congregation from rebuilding the temple.

A common question is this: Why in the world would these people care whether the Jews have a temple or not? By the very absurdity of it, you know that it's spiritual.

To give you a contemporary example:

As a church we go on multiple mission trips a year. Over the years, I've heard this many times from people trying to go on a mission trip: "Why in the world is my family fine with me going around the world for vacation but the moment I want to go on a mission trip, all of a sudden my family cares about my safety and are having bad dreams that I'm going to die if I go?"

“Why in the world is my job okay with giving me time off for a vacation but not for a mission trip.” Absurd right? The absurdity just points to the reality that there is a real spiritual battle when we seek to walk in God’s will.

There’s a famous idiom that relates to our text:

“If the enemy can’t get you with disobedience, he’ll go to discouragement. If he can’t get you with discouragement, he’ll go to doubt; if he can’t get you with doubt, he’ll go to distraction.”

Now, it doesn’t mean he always follows this order, but the order we see in this text is:

Because the spiritual adversaries (Satan and the demons) could not get the people through disobedience, he went to **FEAR AND DISCOURAGEMENT**.

Interlude: Verses 6-23

What you have to understand is that verses 6 + 7-23 function like a parenthesis. As Ezra was writing this, he was thinking about the opposition that occurred around the time of the events in the book of Nehemiah, decades later. How do we know this? Because verse 6 jumps to the reign of Ahasuerus. And verse 7 jumps to the reign of Artaxerxes. The Reign of Ahasuerus does not happen until the future (the book of Esther); and the Reign of Artaxerxes does not happen till after that (the book of Nehemiah).

So why does Ezra, the writer, record these two events separated by decades? To reveal the opposition of the enemy; Ezra wants to expose the similar tactics of the enemy, although the events were separated by decades. Since we are going chronologically through scripture, we’ll come back to Ezra 4:7-23 where it is placed in the historical timeline.

*So if you want to know what happens immediately after verse 5, you have to go to verse 24.

Verse 24: Discouraged

So with that knowledge, to look at this chronologically, read with me verses 4-5 and then jump to verse 24:

(Ezra 4:4 Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building,

Ezra 4:5 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.

Ezra 4:24 Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.)

Do you now see why I consider chapter 4 a very discouraging chapter?

The nearly-50,000 returnees took the step of faith to come back to Jerusalem. They obeyed the Lord and walked by faith. Regardless of their fears, they built the foundations of the temple. They worshiped, they obeyed. They had a remarkable dedication to the foundation of the temple. They donated financially to get the supplies. They established leadership, organization, and administration, and laborers to get the rebuilding of the temple going efficiently. Everything is going strong and well!

But then, what do we read in verse 24? Because their spiritual enemy could not get the people through disobedience, he tempted them with fear and discouragement. And they took the bait!

Verse 24 tells us they stopped. Verse 24 also makes it clear how long they stopped. When you look at the dates with what we've read in chapters 3-4, according to verse 24, this rebuilding of the temple stopped at 536 BC and did not start up again until 520 BC.

A good question is, how long did they stop the rebuilding of the temple?

If they stopped in 536 BC and resumed in 520 BC, do the math: 16 years had gone by where not a brick was laid; where not wood was cut; where not anyone was doing anything to rebuild the temple God destined them to rebuild.

For 16 years, people who once walked by faith were no longer walking by faith, rather self-paralyzed by fear and discouragement.

You see these people in chapters 1-3 with so much momentum. You see these returnees with so much faith, encouragement, strength, generosity, worship, vision, and division. And then you get to verse 24, and you see them fearful and discouraged, no longer moving forward, no longer doing what God called them to do - FOR 16 YEARS!

- There might be some of you in this room who knows exactly what that is like. You were walking in God's will, you were taking steps of faith, but then because of discouragement, you took the detour of discouragement. And instead of coming back on the path, you kept walking on the detour of discouragement rather than instantly coming back to the path of God's plan for your life.

I think of chapter 3 verse 3 again:

(Ezra 3:3 Though fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening burnt offerings.)

Why did fear not stop them in chapter 3 verse 3. But now in chapter 4:24, their fears and discouragements stopped them from fulfilling God's plan? What changed?

- Only God knows what changed. But the principle I want to share is this: Just because you were courageous today does not guarantee that you will be courageous tomorrow. Just because you were fearless today does not guarantee that you will be fearless tomorrow. As humans, we have our highs and lows. As humans, we exercise great faith at times, yet at other times, we are faithless and helpless.

Imagine a 16-year dry spell where you are in "the wilderness" of the Christian life, so-to-speak? I CANNOT IMAGINE 16 years of always remembering what God called me to do, but choosing fear and discouragement to ultimately keep me disobedient. Again, maybe that is one of you tonight. I pray it hasn't been 16 years. I hope it's only been a year at the most, a couple of months, or a couple of weeks.

Fear and discouragement are favorite tactics of the enemy. And as we will read soon in the book of Haggai, their discouragement seducingly developed into their distractions and ultimate disobedience. So what did the Lord do?

Chapter 5

Verse 1: God Sends Encouragement

(Ezra 5:1 Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. [to get back to work and rebuild the temple])

The encouraging thing is that when we get back to Ezra and study chapter 5, although it took 16 years, they started to rebuild the temple and fulfill God's plan for their lives. There is a positive ending to the record. And we are reminded again, that how well you start does not matter as much as how well you finish. The returnees started off well. Then they had a 16 year detour. But by God's grace, hallelujah, they finished well.

Application: 16 Year Detours

I hope that none of us have 16 year detours. The Bible says you have 70 years to live, maybe 80. (Psalm 90:10) And anything past 80 is borrowed time. So, if you dedicated your life to Christ at 20 years old and God takes you home at 75, and you have a 16 year detour, that's about 30% of your life wasted. And for those of you who started following Christ at the age of 40, and the Lord takes you home at 75, a 16 year detour is about 45% of your life wasted. For those who understand that young people die, old people die, that my final breath might be at age 33, and your final breath may be at age 75, as Christians we learn that every day is a gift: And there's no time to go on detours that last longer than a week or a month or a year. We don't want to waste time going on detours of discouragement.

Application 2: To the Elders

Think about this thought: Remember in chapter 3 verse 12 there were old men, elders, who saw the first temple as children weeping when they saw the

foundations of the temple laid? Well, Ezra 5:1 makes it clear that Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to get back to rebuilding the temple. So, what does that tell us? It indirectly tells us that the elders were also discouraged. Because the elders would not get to work, because the elders would not encourage the next generation and the following generation to get to work, God sent prophets.

Also think about this: Based on the timeline of events, some of those old men died in that 16 year window of discouragement and disobedience.

Exhortation to my older brothers and sisters in the Lord:

Don't go to heaven leaving earth with some unfinished business. Don't go to heaven discouraged and fearful. Don't go to heaven without dispersing all of the knowledge, wisdom, and testimonies that God has given you. Young people, within your families within the church, need your prayers and encouragement to keep moving forward. The next generation needs you to be moving forward and encouraging them to move forward. Don't be like many of the elders here in this 16 year window who died in discouragement and fear.

Application 3: To the Leadership

Where was the leadership? You had Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the others. You also had the spiritual leaders, the priests and the Levites. Where was the leadership in this 16 year-detour? Discouraged and fearful.

The only animal that God likens humans to are sheep. Sheep are creatures that follow trends. Sheep are creatures that follow the group. Sheep may wander at times, but ultimately, they're always following the rest of the sheep, for better or for worse.

Interestingly, God anoints certain sheep to function as shepherds for God's sheep. So, for example, as a pastor (shepherd), while I am still a sheep myself, God has anointed me and called me to shepherd His sheep: to become the hands and feet of our Shepherd. The primary job of a spiritual shepherd today, the scriptures say, is to teach the word of God; and equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

So with that said, I speak to church leadership and future leadership. If you are fearful and discouraged, the people around you will feed off of your fear and discouragement. If you smell like fear and discouragement; it will rub off on them. If you make decisions based on your fear and discouragement, it not only affects you, it affects all those around you. May God give the church leadership at New Beginnings that deep-rooted fear of the Lord and humility, so that we may remain Spirit-filled for God's glory.

And I encourage you to pray for the church leadership to remain humble and to remain in the fear of the Lord.

Application 4: God's Encouragement

Aren't you so thankful for God's mercy?

The leadership fell prey to fear and discouragement. The elders fell prey to fear and discouragement. The spiritual leaders, the priests and the Levites, fell prey to fear and discouragement. This whole congregation went on this 16 year detour together.

But God shows Himself merciful, faithful, and encouraging.

When everyone is walking in fear and discouragement, no longer walking in God's plan for their lives,

HE SENDS THE PROPHETS TO ENCOURAGE THEM.

- He sends two of them: Haggai and Zechariah.

Aren't you so thankful that when you are wandering, God is your good shepherd to rear you back in?

In our lives, there will be hours, days, weeks, or God-forbid months and years where we will wander from the path. And even in our wanderings, the Lord Jesus will be our good shepherd, where He will show Himself faithful to us even while we are unfaithful to Him.

That when we are on our detours in life, He will send people our way to encourage us to come back and move forward in God's plan for our lives.