

A TEMPLE RESTORED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The people obey because of divine encouragement (Ezra 4:24–5:2).
2. The people succeed because of divine intervention (Ezra 6:13-15).
3. The people rejoice because of divine sovereignty (Ezra 6:16-22).

Background Passage: Ezra 2–6

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God moves His people to obey Him so that He might be glorified.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When the people rebuilt the temple, God promised that the glory of the temple would be greater than that of the first. This promise was fulfilled in Jesus, who emptied Himself by assuming the form of a servant so that through doing so, God could dwell with His people and reveal His glory.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because God has forgiven our sin and dwells within us, we seek to show through our lives that God is our priority.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: The exiles in Babylon were graciously granted permission to return home to Judah with the express purpose of rebuilding the temple of the Lord. Immediately, they set out to lay the foundation, which resulted in cries of joy from the young but tears from the old. But then outside opposition to this work set in with physical and political threats. The result was a delay in the construction and a loss of motivation in the people. They would need a prophetic word and the Lord's intervention to help them complete the house of God.

DISCUSS: Why is it difficult to wait when we want something to happen? (we're used to instant gratification; we're impatient; waiting is hard; it's easy to lose hope; life is uncertain)

TRANSITION: God's people faced opposition from some enemies who were living in the land of Judah. They raised questions with the highest authority about the integrity of the Jews claim that they were to rebuild the temple. Because they faced these challenges, the Lord provided His people with encouragement and His providential working so that the temple could be rebuilt and the people could rejoice in the Lord.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: What are some ways that the Lord has encouraged you when you have felt stuck in your faith? (through Scripture; through corporate worship; through a friend who brought a timely word of advice or support; a listening ear; a gift from someone who met a practical need; wise counsel from a friend, pastor, or counselor)

POINT 1

THE PEOPLE OBEY BECAUSE OF DIVINE ENCOURAGEMENT (EZRA 4:24–5:2).

4:24 Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. **5:1** Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. **2** Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 4:24–5:2** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 4:24** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The Jews who had returned from exile allowed **opposition** and time to **distract** them from their mission, causing the delay of what they were sent to **accomplish**.

DISCUSS: Why is it easy to get distracted from the Lord's work? (we're too focused on our present needs; we get tired of waiting; we want instant gratification and immediate results; we can't see the full picture)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5:1-2** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The **words** and **actions** of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah **encouraged** God's people to obey God's will and commands.

DISCUSS: Why is it important to listen to godly wisdom from God's people? (because we do not always know what is right; we often have a limited perspective; the church is there to encourage each other toward godly living; we are made for community to seek God and His wisdom together)

TRANSITION: The word of the Lord brought encouragement to the people to obey His commands, and because the Lord had given them His commands, He would ensure their obedience by intervening for them in the day of trouble.

NOTES

KING DARIUS

Darius I Hystapes, mentioned here as "Darius king of Persia," is to be distinguished from "Darius the Mede" in Daniel 5–6. Darius I was king of Persia from 521 to 486 BC, during which time the temple was rebuilt after the Israelites' captivity. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during his reign.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The God of the universe has spoken, we believe what he says, and we will obey. We must make a decision that we will hold in the face of all opposition and apparent contradiction. The powers of hell can never prevail against the soul that takes its stand on God and on his Word."¹

—Elisabeth Elliot
(1926-2015)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 4:24 / After the Jews had returned to the promised land with the mission and encouragement to build the temple on account of Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1:1-4, they faced repeated challenges and opposition to its construction. Verse 24 picks up following the historical events that occurred in Ezra 4:1-5. Shortly after the work had begun, opposition came against the people. Rebuilding efforts were not only slowed, they were stopped entirely.

Two years after their return, the former exiles completed and celebrated the foundation of the new temple being laid, but then came the opposition. For a significant amount of time, nothing happened on the rebuilding project. Haggai 1:1-11 describes the Lord rebuking the people for taking time to build their own houses while the house of the Lord remained in ruins. Economic hardships (Hag. 1:6) and drought (Hag. 1:11) would further exacerbate the delay of the temple's rebuilding. Ezra 4:24 records that the building resumed in the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia (around 520 BC), suggesting that the delay was approximately fifteen years in duration.

The opposition described in this verse would be a continual struggle during the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem itself, as Ezra 4:6-23 indicates. At times, the opposition would be effective in stopping the building and causing great discouragement. At every moment when progress was attempted, resistance would grow.

VERSES 5:1-2 / Two prophets are specifically mentioned in Ezra 5:1: **"Haggai"** and **"Zechariah."** These two prophets had their words recorded in separate books called their names. These prophets were given a specific task: They were to prophesy to the Jews by speaking the word of God to the post-exilic community in Judah and Jerusalem. Their task was to reprove, correct, and instruct the people regarding the rebuilding of the temple. For quite some

time, the task of rebuilding the temple had stopped because of the opposition that the people faced. Now, these two prophets came with the life-giving words of the God of Israel so that the people would hear the authoritative word of the Lord and obey His voice. Their messages were a reminder that the God of Israel had not abandoned them; rather, the sending of His prophets was an act of merciful love to remind the discouraged and faint-hearted Jews that their God was still over them.

The prophetic word of the Lord was heeded by **"Zerubbabel,"** the son of Shealtiel, and **"Jeshua,"** the son of Jozadak, both mentioned earlier in Ezra 2:2. These two key leaders had led the returnees back. Zerubbabel served as a governing official and connection to the Davidic line (see 1 Chron. 3:16-19); Jeshua was the high priest who gave direction and leadership to the temple servants. Together, these men heeded the word of the Lord and led the people to continue the rebuilding efforts that Cyrus had decreed earlier. Just as the Lord had roused the spirit of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1) and the hearts of the people (1:5), now the Lord roused the spirits of His leaders by His all-powerful word.

These prophets, however, were not mere preachers of the word of the Lord. They were **"with them, supporting them."** The word of the Lord was so great that it stirred leaders and prophets to action. Because of God's word through the prophets and because of the prophetic work among the people, God's people were roused again to take up the task they had been given. Standing together with the people, Haggai and Zechariah brought the necessary encouragement from the Lord to enable the people to move forward. This task was not merely one that had been permitted by Cyrus. The rebuilding of the Lord's temple was the very will of God for His people to accomplish. Because it was the Lord's will, the Lord would ensure that His people had everything necessary to do His good work.

POINT 2

THE PEOPLE SUCCEED BECAUSE OF DIVINE INTERVENTION (EZRA 6:13-15).

NOTES

13 Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. **14** And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; **15** and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

READ: On account of some difficult names, read aloud **Ezra 6:13-15** yourself for this point.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 13** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God works **miracles**, even in people who don't trust Him, to accomplish His purposes, as seen in the work of the **restored** temple.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 14-15** commentary to highlight the following doctrine, noting that in His infinite power, God was orchestrating the completion of the temple (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #19: God Is Infinite: God's infinity means that there are no boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Ps. 147:5). For instance, God is infinite when it comes to space and time, meaning He is not confined by **material** space nor is He restricted by time since He is **timeless** (Ps. 90:1-2). God's infinity also extends to His **knowledge** of things as well as His **power** to do all things according to His will.

DISCUSS: How should we live knowing that God is infinite? (we should not fear when trouble comes; we should trust God in all things; we should believe that He is working out His sovereign plan even when it's difficult to see)

TRANSITION: The people's obedience to God's command resulted in the successful completion of the temple and resulted in the people rejoicing in the sovereign Lord of history.

KING ARTAXERXES

King of Persia from 465 to 423 BC. He stopped the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem because of letters written by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4:23). But later, he allowed Ezra to take back to Jerusalem whomever he wanted and to take resources to support the ministry of the temple (7:11-26). He is mentioned again later as the king to whom Nehemiah was the cupbearer and who allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem with his blessing and support to rebuild the city and its walls (Neh. 2).

COMMENTARY

VERSE 13 / Ezra 6 begins with King Darius of Persia commanding that there be a search for the decree by Cyrus. The Persian leaders in Judah had requested from Darius proof of permission for the Jews to rebuild the temple. A search was conducted, revealing that Cyrus indeed had decreed that the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem. To Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai, two Persian officials in the region of Judah, along with their companions, Darius gave his permission for the temple to be rebuilt, and he included that his officials were to assist the Jews with supplies for the temple construction and offerings for Jewish worship.

Darius's edict was so strong that it included a warning to anyone who would interfere with the temple rebuilding:

[A] beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 6:11-12a)

So the work was to be done with all diligence (6:12b), just as it had begun with all diligence (5:8).

The result of Darius's edict was complete obedience by the Persian officials, with them diligently carrying out everything that King Darius had decreed (6:13). Certainly the threat of impalement would have spurred them on to follow every order with great eagerness! Tattenai had also been a diligent Persian leader, checking in with Darius about the decree of Cyrus, waiting for confirmation, and then fulfilling the king's commands to their full extent.

All of these events, however, happened because of the gracious intervention of the Lord, for God was watching over the Jewish elders and ensuring that their hearts would stay devoted to His work to rebuild His temple and restore His worship (5:5).

VERSES 14-15 / The result of the decree by Darius was that the temple was finally completed. But the way that the temple was completed was by the mighty hand of God orchestrating all events and people, first with the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah to spur on the Jewish elders, as we read in Ezra 5:1-2.

Second, God used **"Cyrus,"** the Persian king, whose spirit was roused by the Lord to issue the edict for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of the Lord (Ezra 1:1). God was also working in **"Darius,"** a later king, who confirmed the edict of Cyrus after a diligent search and thus affirmed the work. And God worked in **"Artaxerxes,"** the final Persian king mentioned in this passage, whose later decrees contributed in permitting the reconstruction projects that would take place as described in Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 1–6. Since the temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of Darius's reign, Artaxerxes was included to show how the Lord would continue to move the hearts of foreign leaders so that His city could be reestablished.

Clearly, the One behind all of the actions regarding the temple was the God of Israel. By His power, the Lord put His words into the mouths of His prophets to encourage the leaders and people to rebuild the temple. Further, it was the Lord who moved the spirit of Cyrus to make the initial decree (1:1). And it was the Lord who worked in the lives of Darius, and later in Artaxerxes, so that His purposes were accomplished.

Once the rebuilding resumed, it took four years of diligent work until the completion of the temple. The specific dating by Darius's reign may be included to remind the reader of Jeremiah's prophecy. The time from Jerusalem's destruction and the sacking of the temple in 586 BC to the completion of the temple around 515 BC might account for the seventy years that Jeremiah prophesied regarding the exile (see Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10-14; Ezra 1:1).

POINT 3

THE PEOPLE REJOICE BECAUSE OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY (EZRA 6:16-22).

NOTES

16 And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. **17** They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. **18** And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses. **19** On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. **20** For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. **21** It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. **22** And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 6:16-22** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 16-18** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

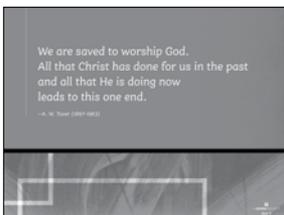
At the completion of the temple, God's people **rejoiced** and **worshiped** God diligently and wholeheartedly, following the Lord's commands.

DISCUSS: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 9: SAVED TO WORSHIP**, and then ask: **What are some commands for how we are to worship God because of our salvation in Jesus Christ?** (we are to worship in spirit and truth [John 4:24]; we are to confess our sins [Hos. 14:2]; we are to worship the triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit [Phil. 3:3]; worship should comprise our whole lives [Rom. 12:1])

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19-22** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God is **sovereign** and always at work rescuing His people, from Egypt, from exile, and through Christ, from **eternal** death and punishment.

DISCUSS: **How should belief in God's power to rescue us bring joy to your life?** (in times of trouble, knowing God is there brings joy; we can be thankful for our future inheritance; we can praise God that He is all-powerful and loves us no matter what; we can be glad He can rescue us from sin and shame)



COMMENTARY

VERSES 16-18 / With the completion of the temple, all the people came together to commemorate what God had done. The dedication included the temple servants, the priests and Levites, along with the rest of the people who had returned from exile to rebuild the temple. The **“dedication”** resulted in great **“joy”** as they offered a sacrifice of praise.

When Solomon offered up sacrifices at the completion of the first temple, the offerings and sacrifices could not be counted or numbered (see 2 Chron. 5:6). Here they were numbered and were not as great as before. Regardless, this was a celebration because the people’s center, identity, and focus had been restored through the building of the temple and the restoration of worship.

The offerings of twelve male goats for a sin offering reflects two aspects of Israel’s restored worship. First, the sin offering was for all of Israel, with twelve animals representing all twelve tribes of Israel. Second, the sin offerings were given as an acknowledgment that the whole nation had broken the covenant and had rightfully been disciplined by being sent into exile (see Jer. 11:6-11).

The people joyfully obeyed the word of the Lord, doing exactly what had been commanded in the books of Moses, showing their wholehearted devotion to the Lord. Further, the appointment of priests and Levites, as Moses had instructed, followed the pattern that kings David and Solomon had set for the worship of God at the first temple (see 1 Chron. 22:13; 23–26). This joyful worship reflected the people’s delight that the Lord was their covenant-keeping God, the One who ruled over them by His presence.

VERSES 19-22 / The restoration of worship at the temple included celebrating the **“Passover”** and the **“Feast of Unleavened Bread.”** The whole community of returnees worshiped the Lord at Passover about

a month after the temple was completed. After Passover, they celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread, eating bread without yeast for seven days. These celebrations were a reminder of God’s judgment passing over every house with blood on the doorposts, sparing the firstborn from death. These were a remembrance of their deliverance by God from the bondage of slavery and death in Egypt (see Ex. 12:1-22). Now, as Israel celebrated these festivals during the days of Ezra, they became a reminder of a new exodus: God’s people had been brought out of exile and into the land of promise to worship the Lord.

The priests and Levites purified themselves as the Law of Moses required (Lev. 22:1-9; Num. 8:5-22) and offered the Passover lamb for all the people (Ezra 6:20), separating the Israelites as holy people of a holy God. And they rejoiced because they knew God was at work from beginning to end.

As glorious as the renewed temple was during Ezra’s day, the fire that had come and consumed the offering and the glory that had descended upon the first temple did not happen at this second temple. The prophet Ezekiel had told of a day when the glory of the Lord would return to His holy temple (Ezek. 43:5). It would be another five hundred years before that glory would appear in the temple.

When Jesus came into the temple following His triumphal entry, Mark 11:11 tells us that He entered and looked around. No one noticed that the King of Glory had returned (cf. Ps. 24:7). But in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:19). That glory came and dwelt among humanity (John 1:14). By coming to us, Jesus has shown us what the Father is like. God shines His revelation of glory into our hearts by His Spirit (2 Cor. 4:6), and we are being built into a holy temple of the Lord (Eph. 2:21-22). This should cause us to worship and praise God for His sovereign work of making us holy and blameless in Christ (Eph. 1:4).

MY RESPONSE



NOTES

PACK ITEM 10: GOD, OUR HELP HYMN: Pass out copies of this hymn and sing it together as a reminder that the sovereign God of Israel is still helping and saving people today.

Because God has forgiven our sin and dwells within us, we seek to show through our lives that God is our priority.

HEAD:

God's grace is so great that He will work through His Word and the circumstances around His people so that they might obey Him. Through our obedience, God is glorified and we are helped.

What are some ways you have seen God glorified through the obedience of His people?

HEART:

While the rebuilt temple did not have a greater glory than the first one, Jesus came to earth and said that He is the temple of God (see John 2:19-21). By humbling Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death at the cross, He made a way for our sins to be removed and His righteousness to be imparted to us (Phil. 2:5-11). Through Jesus's death and resurrection, we now have access to God by His Spirit, and His glory is revealed to us and in us.

What aspect of what Jesus has done for you stands out to you that you can praise Him for today?

HANDS:

When our sins are removed, our consciences cleansed, and God places His Spirit within us, we are the temple of the Lord. Our lives should reflect that God is our first and greatest priority by giving Him all worship, praise, and adoration. These expressions of worship should affect our daily witness for Christ and motivate us to show that we seek first Christ and His kingdom.

How will you express your worship of God, in the Spirit and because of Jesus, through serving others this week?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Let us see to it that we keep God before our eyes, that we walk in His ways, and seek to please and glorify Him in all things great and small. Depend upon it, God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supplies."²

—Hudson Taylor
(1832-1905)

POINT 1: THE PEOPLE OBEY BECAUSE OF DIVINE ENCOURAGEMENT (EZRA 4:24–5:2).

+ COMMENTARY

“Happily we possess the very words of Haggai and Zechariah, and can see in their books not only the fascinating contrast between the two prophets (Haggai the plain speaker, who dots every ‘i’, while Zechariah is provokingly enigmatic and visionary) but also the persistence and aptness of their preaching as the enterprise wore on.”³

+ ILLUSTRATION

Encouraging and motivating children can be very tricky. In many homes, parents have different approaches and personalities. Their differences may be complementary or contrasting. Some children will hear and respond better to one parent over another because of similar temperaments, personalities, or communication styles. Some children respond well to direct, concise communication while others will rise to the challenge upon getting the big picture. Sometimes parents find that they need outside support from someone who shares their ideals and values but who can communicate in a way that speaks differently to their child to enable their child’s understanding. But the goal is the same: to spur the child on to comprehend, appreciate, and follow a way of wisdom.

In a similar way, God had given His people two different prophets who spoke the word of God to them. Haggai’s direct, straight-forward approach challenged the people by speaking directly to their loss of focus. While the people had built homes for themselves, the Lord’s house had remained in ruins. Haggai’s words addressed the people’s lack of attention with directness.

Zechariah, on the other hand, spoke as a prophetic visionary. By looking at the future and seeing what the Lord was doing in the grand scheme of things, Zechariah’s words were intended to give the people a larger picture of God’s work.

Like children, people need both types of communication: direct, bold, and clear instructions along with visionary, future-oriented thinking, and hopefulness. One challenges and confronts us in our complacency; the other reorients our thinking with hopefulness so that we are spurred on. Both are necessary, and the Lord knows we need these encouragements and corrections.

POINT 2: THE PEOPLE SUCCEED BECAUSE OF DIVINE INTERVENTION (EZRA 6:13-15).

+ COMMENTARY

“The king’s officials carried out his commands with diligence, keen to prove their obedience to him (6:13). They had no personal hostility to the building project but had merely investigated it as an administrative matter. However, human effort alone would not have been enough to carry this project through. The Jews succeeded only because God was in charge of the whole process, providing funding and using Haggai and Zechariah to ensure that his word was proclaimed (6:14; 5:1-2; Ps 127:1). The temple was built according to the command of the God of Israel and according to the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. (Artaxerxes ruled some fifty years after the temple had been dedicated. Perhaps he is mentioned here in anticipation of the financial support he would later extend to the temple and its worship—7:12-26.)”⁴

+ ILLUSTRATION

In 1933, at the age of seven, a little boy named James was being chased by a bully when he ran out onto a busy roadway in London, England, and was struck by a bread truck. He sustained a massive head injury and was rushed to the hospital, where he underwent major surgery to remove bone fragments and was given a metal plate to protect his brain. From that time until he went to university, James wore the metal plate and was forbidden from any sports or activity that would cause harm.

But it was this incident that would be a forming moment for James. During his six months of convalescence, James grew fond of and fell in love with reading and books.

Already a loner, when he went back to school with his metal patch, he secluded himself from others even more. He missed out on many things that “normal” children would experience. On his eleventh birthday, he desperately wanted a bicycle just like other kids would receive around that age. He had left strong hints to his parents, but on that special day, he headed downstairs eagerly anticipating a set of wheels, only to find an old but excellent conditioned Oliver typewriter. Because his parents knew that one fall from a bicycle could prove deadly, they bought something else they thought he might learn to enjoy. The typewriter was old but in good condition. James initially was grieved at the sight of his gift. However, disappointment quickly turned into delight as soon as James began to type. The typewriter would later prove to be his most treasured possession. All his life, he never graduated to a computer but always used a typewriter to write.

Because James was disabled and weak, he could not receive the bicycle he desperately wanted, and instead, his parents gave him a typewriter. What has God done through James over these years? James Inness Packer, better known as J. I. Packer, has been one of the most influential Christian theologians and writers of our time. A world-famous theologian and prolific author, the boy that was thought to be at risk of a serious brain injury and who suffered so badly in childhood has been used by God in ways that seven-year-old boy could never have dreamed. Rather than wallowing in self-pity at what he could not do, Packer, with a dent in his head, used that same mind to glorify God.⁵

POINT 3: THE PEOPLE REJOICE BECAUSE OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY (EZRA 6:16-22).

+ COMMENTARY

“[Ezra 6:21] shows that there were Jews living in Judah other than the ones who returned from the exile. Apparently many had been assimilated with non-Jewish people who also lived there. The religious fervor of the returned exiles served to call these Jews back to the religious and ethical norms of the Torah, the books of Moses. Ezra and Nehemiah may give the impression that the returned exiles were very exclusive, but at least they accepted the other Jews (who had not been in Babylon) when they made a definite decision to follow God according to the Torah traditions.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

Using a piece of paper, have group members draw a picture of the church. If it helps, ask group members what first comes to mind when they hear the word “church.” Ask them to share why they drew the image they did or to explain the image that came into their mind. Some may draw a picture of a church building; others may draw a picture of a group of people.

When people in the West think of “church,” it is almost always associated with a building. Much of a church budget goes towards the maintenance and renovation of a physical building. While these allocations of money are not wrong, the building itself is not the church but the church’s building.

The church is the gathered people of God where God dwells by His Spirit. The church is where the Word is proclaimed, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are practiced, and where the discipline of the church is carried out through constructive and corrective practices.

What ought to bring us joy should be more than a building; we should rejoice that God dwells with us by His Spirit and is forming us into the image of His Son. When we keep this focus as our priority, our eyes will be looking at how God is building a people who bear the name of the Lord Jesus.

Church buildings are tools that churches use to do ministry, but the building is never the ministry itself.

References

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *On Asking God Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1989), 142.
2. Hudson Taylor, quoted in *The Story of the China Inland Mission*, by M. Geraldine Guinness, vol. 1 (London: Morgan & Scott, 1900), 238.
3. Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, vol. 12, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 59-60 [Logos].
4. Augustine Pagolu, “Ezra,” in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 547.
5. Adapted from *Kiss the Wave*, by Dave Furman (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 101-102.
6. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1993), 121.