



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 5:6 - 6:12

Topic

Two Persian officials pen a letter to King Darius to determine if the Jews have permission to rebuild their Temple

Title

*"Persian Pen Letter"*

Our family loves to communicate using film and television quotes. For instance, if something isn't going as planned, one of us invariably says, "You're gonna need a bigger boat."

There is some research to suggest that quoting from movies, or from music or literature, can help you to connect with others more quickly. If you say to me, "Never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line," then I know we are on the same wavelength.

- Some quotes are ones that most everyone would recognize, e.g., “I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse.”
- Others are obscure. One Pam and I use when someone is long-winded is, “I love how you talk, using 40 words where four will do.”

Giving long answers was something highlighted in the movie, *Lincoln*, for which actor Daniel Day Lewis received an Oscar. Several times Lincoln gives a long, homespun story as his indirect but poignant answer.

In our verses, the returnees to Jerusalem are challenged by their enemies with a simple question: “Who commanded you to build this Temple and to finish these walls?” (5:9).

One word - a name - could have sufficed. They answered by telling a long story, lasting from verse eleven through verse seventeen of chapter five.

Their answer was filled with history and theology, as well as personal testimony.

And that is why their response reminded me of a commonly quoted phrase from a verse in First Peter in the KJV version of the New Testament. The apostle said, “and *be* ready always to *give* an **answer** to every man that asketh you a reason of the **hope** that is in you with meekness and fear...” (3:15).

Being ready to give an answer of our hope in Christ is going to be our theme as we work through these verses. I’ll organize my comments around two points: #1 Live In A Manner That Moves Others To Ask About Your Hope In Christ, and #2 Live In A Manner That Matches Your Answer About Your Hope In Christ.

## #1 Live In A Manner That Moves Others To Ask About Your Hope In Christ

(5:6-17)

“Houston, we have a problem.” Tom Hanks made that line famous in 1995’s *Apollo 13*. It’s a misquote; the words actually spoken, by Jack Swigert, were “Okay, Houston, *we’ve had* a problem here.”

The enemies of Israel drafted a letter to the Persian king to clear up confusion regarding the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. It could have started, “Darius, we have a problem.”

Ezra 5:6 This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai sent: The governor of *the region* beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and his companions, the Persians who *were in the region* beyond the River, to Darius the king.

We studied the first five verses of chapter five last Sunday, as they were a fitting conclusion to the action of chapter four. In them, Tattenai and other non-Jews tried to ascertain if the Jews really had permission to be rebuilding their Temple.

The result of their conversation with Zerubbabel, the leader of the Jews, was to write a letter to King Darius.

Ezra 5:7 (They sent a letter to him, in which was written thus) To Darius the king: All peace.

Ezra 5:8 Let it be known to the king that we went into the province of Judea, to the temple of the great God, which is being built with heavy stones, and timber is being laid in the walls; and this work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands.

Ezra 5:9 Then we asked those elders, *and* spoke thus to them: "Who commanded you to build this temple and to finish these walls?"

Ezra 5:10 We also asked them their names to inform you, that we might write the names of the men who *were* chief among them.

Something I really hadn't seen before in these verses. Throughout the letter, they made no false accusations; nor did they exaggerate. Tattenai & Company didn't put any spin on what was said. Their reporting was **fair and balanced**.

You are going to have enough trouble and opposition as a believer in Christ that you don't have to exaggerate. If someone disagrees with you, or even opposes you, it is their prerogative to do so. Not everything is a [conspiracy theory](#).

Ezra 5:11 And thus they returned us an answer, saying, "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the Temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and completed.

I'm surprised that the Jews didn't start farther back, with Moses and the Tabernacle in the wilderness. The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, were their center. It was where God dwelt among them; where they met with Him. As the Temple of "the God of Heaven and earth," it was far more significant than any other religious building on the earth. Ever.

Ezra 5:12 But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the

Chaldean, *who* destroyed this Temple and carried the people away to Babylon.

This isn't mere history; it is a theology of history. It is an example of the historic fact that God "removes and raises-up kings" (Daniel 2:21), and that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord" (Proverbs 21:1). It highlights the doctrine of God's providence.

Regardless that nonbelievers accuse God of inaction, mostly because there is evil and it's resultant suffering in the world, He is working out His plan of redeeming humanity and His creation by His providential involvement in history. Israel was, and remains, central to that plan.

Ezra 5:13 However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to build this house of God.

Whenever we read about, or think about, Cyrus, we ought to marvel that his name, and his reign,

and his decree, were all prophesied by Isaiah around 150 years *before* Cyrus was born.

The argument against Isaiah's accuracy is that nonbelievers don't think anyone can truly predict the future.

Well, that's not entirely true. They think that an obscure reference by Nostradamus to "Hister" means that he predicted "Hitler." But when Isaiah writes about Cyrus - they **can't handle the truth.**

I find it odd, and disturbing, that many who are in Christ have a contempt for prophecy. The author of the best-selling Christian book of all time characterized prophecy as a "distraction" and says that anyone who lets himself get involved in distractions like studying prophecy, "is not fit for the kingdom of God."

Ezra 5:14 Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple that *was* in Jerusalem



and carried into the temple of Babylon - those King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor.

Sheshbazzar is either another name for Zerubbabel; or he died early-on, leaving Zerubbabel in charge.

Ezra 5:15 And he said to him, 'Take these articles; go, carry them to the Temple *site* that *is* in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its former site.'

I think I mentioned in a previous study that when an army conquered a city or a region, they went into its temple and removed its idols. It was their way of saying to their enemies, “[Puny god.](#)”

There were no idols - no representations of Jehovah - in the Temple at Jerusalem, so all the Babylonians could remove were plates and cups and platters.

Ezra 5:16 Then the same Sheshbazzar came *and* laid the foundation of the house of God which *is* in Jerusalem; but from that time even until now it has been under construction, and it is not finished."

Work had stopped for a period of about fifteen years. Still, it is accurate to say it remained "under construction."

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

The truth was out there - and Tattenai was committed to finding it.

**The answer** that the Jews gave was fueled by their hopes to rebuild the Temple.

To paraphrase Peter, “they gave an answer of the hope that was in them, with meekness and fear.”

That phrase from First Peter is immediately associated with what scholars call *apologetics*. Apologetics is the defense of biblical truth against opposition and attack.

We love that; we love apologetics. It equips you to defend your faith out in a hostile world whose ruler is the devil.

I’m not positive, however, that is how Peter used the word. He said we were to give an answer *for our “hope”* - **not** for our foundational doctrines. The context, also, is something a little more personal. He ties the answer you give to *your conduct*, not to *your confession*.

What is our “hope?” Lot’s of things are on that list:

- Galatians 5:5 For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the **hope of righteousness by faith.**”
- First Peter 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a **living hope through the resurrection** of Jesus Christ from the dead.
- Titus 1:2 [we have] **hope of eternal life** which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began,
- First Thessalonians 5:8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, **and as a helmet the hope of salvation.**

One of our favorite verses about our hope is Titus 2:13, “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Our hope in Christ, then, is *everything* He has done for us, and has promised to complete in us. It is our initial salvation, and our daily sanctification, and our future glorification.

It is the restoration of creation. It is eternal life.

**You don't need to be a scholar to give an answer of your hope in Christ.**

The people you are around - they're not typically looking for an intellectual defense of the Bible; not really. They want to know if what you have 'works.'

They're searching for answers to their hurt, to their grief, to their loss; to their emptiness. God has placed eternity in their hearts, but they don't know how to fill it.

Their marriages are failing, and they don't know where to turn for help.

And we who are in Christ - we have the answer; **it's Jesus.**

Others can, and will, be moved by your hope in Jesus - if, indeed, your hope is in Him.

## #2 Live In A Manner That Matches Your Answer About Your Hope In Christ

(6:1-12)

Dr. J. Vernon McGee frequently talks about the rubber meeting the road. He means your *talk*, and your *walk*, ought to **match**. If hope in Christ is transforming - *you'll be transformed*.

While waiting for Darius to respond, Zerubbabel kept the project on schedule. Their hope in the Temple was matched by their work on it.

Ezra 6:1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and a search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.

Ezra 6:2 And at Achmetha, in the palace that *is* in the province of Media, a scroll was found, and in it a record was written thus:

Nothing was found in the archives in Babylon. The decree was found at Achmetha, which was a kind of Camp David for the Persian king. This tells us that the government of Persia was diligent; and that they were not out to get the Jews.

The government isn't always against you. We should work within it, obeying its laws, unless and until they conflict with the Gospel.

Ezra 6:3 In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree *concerning* the house of God at Jerusalem: "Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices; and let the foundations of it be firmly laid, its height sixty cubits *and* its width sixty cubits,

This is essentially material we encountered in chapter one, only with some additional detail.

As to the dimensions of the Temple - they were the maximum dimensions Cyrus would allow. It was a building code. They could build smaller (which they did), but no larger.

Ezra 6:4 *with* three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber. Let the expenses be paid from the king's treasury.

This project was not only green lighted by Cyrus - he would have Persia fully fund it from their [national treasure](#).

We don't want government money. Neither do we solicit nonbelievers for funds. There may be exceptions, but that's the rule. To God be the glory.

In passing, notice that building was hard work. Timbers and heavy stones were the basic materials. As we build together a Temple on earth - the church - it will involve hard work, spiritually and physically.

Being filled by, and led by, the indwelling Holy Spirit doesn't mean we can coast; or that we won't encounter trouble. We do, and we will.



One of my favorite descriptions in the Bible is that of a companion of the apostle Paul, Epaphroditus, who was “sick almost unto death” (Philippians 2:27), but nevertheless fulfilled his ministry to the saints.

Ezra 6:5 Also let the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which *is* in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and taken back to the temple which *is* in Jerusalem, *each* to its place; and deposit *them* in the house of God" -

Persia had a tolerant position with regard to religion. You could worship any deity so long as you were not seeking to revolt.

Ezra 6:6 Now *therefore*, Tattenai, governor of *the region* beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Persians who *are* beyond the River, keep yourselves far from there.

Ezra 6:7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site.

Darius wanted to be clear, so that they would not have a **failure to communicate**. They were to **snap out of it**, and help, rather than in any way hinder, the rebuilding.

Ezra 6:8 Moreover I issue a decree *as to* what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes *on the region* beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered.

While we're here, talking about funding, let me share something. It's about our building, and our mortgage. Don't worry; I'm not going to ask you to **"Show me the money,"** and we're not starting a capital campaign.

We purchased this property in 2003 for \$850,000.00. We've paid down the mortgage by \$500,000.00, leaving us with right at \$300,000.00 owed (\$300,253.19). The last appraisal on the property was \$1.3million.

Our current loan is with a Christian credit union, and it's a good one in that it is fixed in both duration and interest rate - something unusual for churches.

*I want us to start praying that God would pay-off the mortgage.* I don't know how; and, as I said, we're not soliciting or initiating any program. **Just pray.**

Ezra 6:9 And whatever they need - young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who *are* in Jerusalem - let it be given them day by day without fail,

Ezra 6:10 that they may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

Darius was a pagan idolator, for sure; but he wanted the Jews to pray for him and his sons.

Have nonbelievers ever asked you to intercede with God on their behalf?

It's an encouragement to you that your life matches your hope. They see in you something genuine.

Ezra 6:11 Also I issue a decree that whoever alters this edict, let a timber be pulled from his house and erected, and let him be hanged on it; and let his house be made a refuse heap because of this.

Ezra 6:12 And may the God who causes His name to dwell there destroy any king or people who put their hand to alter it, or to destroy this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I Darius issue a decree; let it be done diligently.

Would you drive the suggested speed limit if there was no fine for exceeding it? Nope. It'd be *Mad Max* out there - worse than it already is. I've driven with some of you who *have the need... the need for speed*.

The 'fines' in the ancient world - let's just say they were brutal. You mess with God's house, and you'd be messed-up on a beam from your own house.

**Your** life and lifestyle choices communicate what is at your core. Do they match your confession of hope in Jesus?

I'll end with some encouragement to match our belief with our behavior from Second Peter.

2Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.

2Peter 3:11 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,

2Peter 3:12 looking for and **hastening** the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?

2Peter 3:13 Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

2Peter 3:14 Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;

2Peter 3:15 and consider *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation...