

No prizes if you answer correctly. No public shaming for a wrong answer. A question to remind us of where we left the story of the rebuilding of God's temple and people. How many years was the building of the new temple delayed? Twenty years. Twenty years of discouragement, distraction for the people of God. Did you hear a key moment in today's reading? Return to work. *'Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem.'* **v2** A key question in understanding the passage. Why did they start work again? In the 1986 World Cup quarter final between Argentina and England the score in the second half was 1-1. Until dynamic Argentinian player Diego Maradona heads the ball into the English goal. Argentina wins 2-1 and then go on to win the World Cup. Replays show Maradona punching the ball as it connects with his head. After the match, Maradona describes his goal as *'a little with his head and a little with the hand of God'* Who knows whether the hand of God covered the eyes of the referee at that pivotal moment. What we do know, **Ezra 5** does reveal the hand of God. Not literally the hand of God. Picture language describing God's active intervention and ordering of events. It is the hand of God that guides the return to work. The restart of the temple and people rebuilding project. Revealed throughout the chapter: *'the God of Israel, who was over them.'* **v1** *'And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.'* **v2** *'But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews,'* **v5** How does God intervene and order events? How are the discouraged, distracted Jews moved to go back to work? Their circumstances haven't changed. The difficulties and pressures have not disappeared. The pressure not to build still overwhelming. Something or someone makes a difference. The powerful word of the Lord. **Verse 1** *'Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.'* The words of Haggai and Zechariah preserved for us in the Old Testament. Their words begin the same year the temple building recommences. Second year of the reign of King Darius. God's response to the persistent opposition against his people: speaking his word into their discouragement. Brothers and sisters, when you are discouraged, tempted, distracted, God offers you his life-giving word of promise. Through the lens of **Ezra 5**, God reassures us of that truth. The Book of Haggai. All two pages. The powerful word of the Lord rebuking and encouraging God's people. Why not read it together over morning tea. In their

discouragement the Jews stop building the temple. Building homes for themselves instead. Haggai, in the Lord's name, rebukes their failure to put him first. Despite having the security of their own homes, their lives miserable and unfruitful during that twenty-year period. Haggai challenges them about their spiritual health. Speaks powerful words of encouragement. *But now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'*

Haggai 2:4-5 Sisters and brothers, what a reassuring word from God when you are afraid, discouraged, unsure whether you can keep on living for God. The hand of God working through his powerful word impacted God's people. Shaping people and events around them. Surprisingly government officials concerned about the project restart don't stop the work again **v5**. Providentially they write to King Darius setting out the claims of the Jews. Seeking verification from official Babylonian archives **v7-17**. Unknowingly setting up the glorious conclusion of **Ezra 6**. In their letter the impact of Haggai and Zechariah's preaching, encouragement and support revealed. The Jewish leaders no longer discouraged. Confident again in their identity. Honest about their dark spiritual history. Convicted of the God-origins of Cyrus decree. **v11-13**, *This is the answer they gave us: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our ancestors angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon. "However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. This heart change amongst God's people beautifully summed up in Haggai, *Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.* **1:12** Sisters and brothers, the hand of God working through his powerful word a feature throughout the history of God's people. The prophet Nathan rebuking King David after his adultery and murderous actions. Jeremiah offering hope to the discouraged exiles. Habakkuk speaking of trust in God in the face of judgement. Malachi rebuking the slack people of God. John the Baptist announcing the arrival of Jesus after four hundred*

years of God's silence. Jesus, God's living word, fulfilling the powerful word of God spoken through the centuries. Brothers and sisters, two important questions for us. In your Christian walk, where do you turn in times of discouragement, distraction, temptation? What do you offer your sisters and brothers in their time of need? The message of this passage. Turn to, and offer, the living God, revealed in his powerful word. The living, active word penetrating, judging the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. The word that rebukes, corrects, encourages, equips. Our offensive weapon against the hand of Satan. Sadly, the powerful word of the Lord often our last resort. Our forgotten guide in navigating the sometimes treacherous waters of life. Sisters and brothers, I urge you to make God's powerful word of promise first resort. The means by which you respond to your discouragements, hurts, distractions, temptations. I urge you to protect your heart in readiness for the tough times. Fill your heart and mind with God's word. By reading, memorizing, obeying. Actively, prepare your heart for listening to God's word explained. As you walk into church pray you will hear God speaking in his word. Make it a priority of Christian living to always belong to a church that faithfully teaches the Bible. Parents, grandparents as you seek to prepare your children and grandchildren for life read the Bible with them. I urge you to renew your pastoral care for each other. The powerful word of the Lord your primary tool in that care. My goal when meeting one on one with parishioners is reading the Bible with them. Love one another enough to prayerfully plan your one on one meetings. Reflect on the needs of your sister or brother in Christ and an appropriate passage in the Bible to share with them. The hand of God may or may not have won Argentina 1986 World Cup. Be assured, God did intervene raising up his servants to speak his powerful word to his people in Jerusalem. Be assured, God is still doing so right here, right now. Still doing so throughout his world.