

Introduction

Over the next several weeks, we are going to explore the biblical principles for building God's house—strengthening the local church and faithfully fulfilling the kingdom assignment the Lord has entrusted to us—by walking through the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Together, these prophets and leaders speak into a pivotal season of rebuilding, renewal, and realignment after long delay, discouragement, and opposition.

They show us how God restores His people by reestablishing right foundations, stirring hearts by His word, correcting misplaced priorities, and calling His people back to covenant faithfulness.

As we study their lives and messages, we will see how God builds not merely through plans and structures, but through obedience, repentance, spiritual alignment, and renewed vision.

These principles are just as vital for us today as we seek to build a church that is fully aligned with God's ultimate intention, experiences His presence, and overcomes in these end times.

We already looked at two principles last week:

1. Casting vision requires stating the problem clearly.
2. Casting vision requires stating the solution clearly.

Before we look at another principle, let me set the context for the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Understanding the context for these books helps us to glean the principles for building God's house.

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

Exile Ends

Ezra 1

539 BC: Babylon falls to Persia (Cyrus)

538 BC: Cyrus's Decree

- Jews permitted to return to Israel
- Temple rebuilding authorized

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

First Return (Zerubbabel)

Ezra 3

538 - 536 BC: Return and worship restored

- Altar rebuilt
- Sacrifices resume
- Temple foundation laid

Ezra 4

536 BC: Opposition begins

- Discouragement
- Political pressure
- Work slows, then stops

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

16-Year Delay

536 - 520 BC: The work stops

- A short legal pause becomes a 16-year spiritual drift
- People build their own houses
- God's house remains unfinished

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

Prophetic Intervention

Haggai & Zechariah

520 BC: Haggai and Zechariah

Haggai

- Misplaced priorities exposed
- Call to resume building

Zechariah

- Vision of God's purpose
- Encouragement to finish

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

Prophetic Intervention

Ezra 5

520 BC: Rebuilding resumes immediately

Temple Completed

Ezra 6

516 BC: Temple finished

- God's house restored
- Worship reestablished

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

Second Return (Ezra)

Ezra 7

458 BC: Ezra arrives

- Teaching of the law
- Spiritual reform
- Repentance and covenant renewal

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC

Third Return (Nehemiah)

Nehemiah

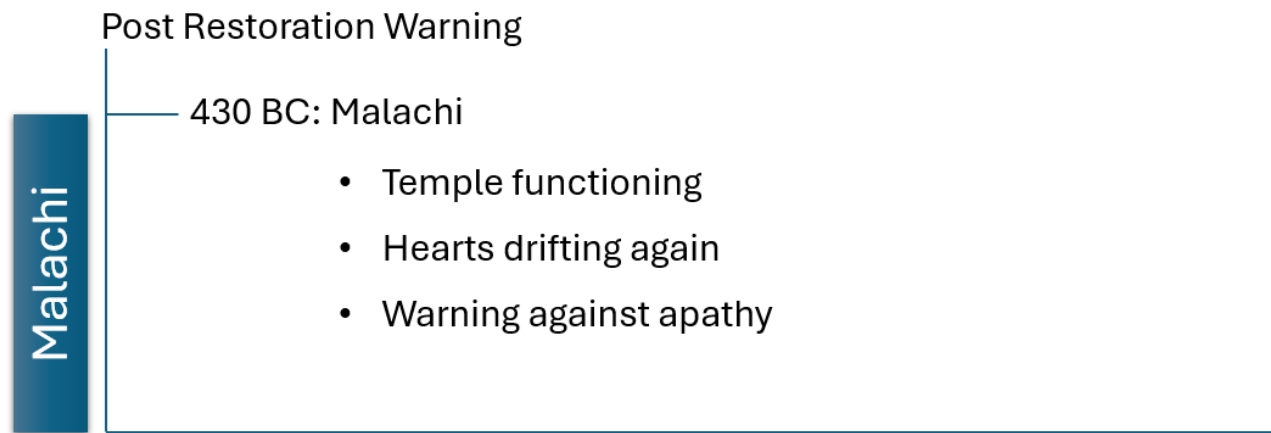
445 BC: Nehemiah arrives

- Walls rebuilt in 52 days
- Leadership restored
- Community reformed

433 BC: Nehemiah's reforms enforced

Post-Exilic Restoration Timeline

538 – 430 BC



With this context in mind, let's look now at another principle for building God's house.

3. To Build God's House, We Must Leave Babylon.

Only a Remnant Left Babylon

- Before the Jews could build God's house, they had to leave Babylon.
- Most scholars estimate that about 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem after Cyrus's decree (538 BC).
- Ezra never directly states how many stayed behind, but historically we know it was the overwhelming majority.
- By that time, the Jews had been in Babylon for 70 years. Many had built homes, developed businesses, and raised families.
- Many were second- and third-generation exiles. Conservative estimates suggest hundreds of thousands of Jews lived throughout the Persian Empire—some estimates even rise above one million.
- Even if we stay cautious, the ones who returned were likely less than 10%, possibly closer to 5%.
- The return was voluntary. No one forced them to go back.

Returning Meant Leaving Their Comfort Zone

- Returning to Jerusalem was risky and costly. Imagine leaving everything familiar behind to journey nearly 900 miles over the course of four months.
- Those who returned faced ruined cities, hostile neighbors, economic hardship, no walls, no military protection, and no stability.
- Those who stayed in Babylon had stability, prosperity, security, comfort, and predictability—they were living their "best life now." If the prosperity gospel had existed back then, the Jews who remained in Babylon could have been held up as the model of what "God's blessing" looks like.

- Building God's house required a willingness to leave their comfort for obedience.

God Always Works Through a Remnant

- God doesn't need large numbers to fulfill His purposes. He has always worked through a remnant.
- For example, Noah's family, Gideon's army, Isaiah's remnant, and the returned exiles.
- Only the remnant experienced *restoration* and *revival*. Only the remnant who left Babylon entered fully into God's purposes.
- Noel Mann repeatedly warned us about losing our remnant status—that if we grew familiar, lukewarm, apathetic, and indifferent, we could forfeit the assignment the Lord entrusted to us.
- To lose our remnant status doesn't mean we stop being God's people, but that we stop being a corporate vessel the Lord can work through to fulfill our unique assignment as a church.
- It means we drift from being a prepared, obedient church on the cutting edge of His end-time purposes to becoming spiritually settled, blended with the culture, losing our unique purpose, and no longer carrying the weight of His burden.
- As Noel warned, it could even mean that the Lord removes our lampstand as a church.
- Nobody drifts toward fulfilling God's purpose. Drift always moves you somewhere—usually away from what God desires, away from what's the most important, away from passion for Jesus.

What the Remnant Represents

- This remnant represents God's forerunners—those who obeyed God and prepared the way for the next generation, ultimately leading to the Messiah.
- Think about it. God's redemptive plan for the world depended upon this Jewish remnant. Their return was essential for rebuilding God's house and the city of Jerusalem. Their return was vital for the restoration of the priesthood and covenant worship. All of which were necessary for the Messiah to come.
- If they had remained in Babylon, Messianic prophecy would not have been able to be fulfilled. God's redemptive plans for Israel and the world would have been jeopardized.
- This remnant also represents the bride who separates from Babylon to pursue readiness.
- Jesus will never marry a bride who remains in Babylon. That's why the Lord calls out, "Come out of her, My people" (Rev. 18:4).
- The bride is not made fully ready (Rev. 19:7) until after Babylon has been fully judged (Rev. 17–18).
- There will be no Babylonian mixture in the Lord's bride.

Babylon Represents Spiritual Settling

- Babylon is a symbol for spiritual settling in Scripture.
- It begins in Genesis, when Shinar was the place where humanity first settled down, instead of obeying God's command to fill the earth (Gen. 9:1; 11:2).

- Out of that settling came Babel, a man-inspired building project fueled by fear and independence: “Let us build for ourselves a city . . . and let us make for ourselves a name” (Gen. 11:4).
- Babel represents what humanity builds rather than what God builds.
- Over time, Babel becomes Babylon—the mature world-system that resists God, seduces and defiles His people, and trains them to live by self-rule and pragmatism instead of Spirit-dependence and wholehearted obedience.
- That is why the Lord cries out, “Come out of her, My people” (Rev. 18:4).
- That is why the Lord spoke through Zechariah, “Ho there! Flee from the land of the north . . . Ho, Zion! Escape, you who are living with the daughter of Babylon” (Zech. 2:6–7).
- Babylon is not only an ancient location—it represents spiritual settling.

What Settling Means

- Settling means stopping short of God’s ultimate intention and building your life around self-interests—what’s best for me and my family. It means living in your “paneled houses” while God’s house lies desolate.
- David did the opposite. He was convicted because he lived in a palace while God dwelt in a tent. So, he wanted to build God a house worthy of who He is.
- Here’s the difference between a person who has a heart after God’s heart and one who merely loves God. They are not ok with their personal life being blessed while God’s purposes are unfulfilled.
- I personally can’t be comfortable while God’s house is neglected.
- Lot didn’t start in Sodom—he pitched his tent near it . . . then ended up inside it. That’s settling: gradual proximity that becomes eventual captivity.
- Esau is the picture of trading long-term inheritance for short-term comfort. That’s Babylon: comfort now, cost later.
- Everyone chooses between two types of pain—the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The unending pain of regret is always way more painful than the temporary pain of discipline.
- Settling is choosing comfort over the cross, convenience over surrender, self-protection over obedience, blessing and prosperity over God’s will, and control over dependency upon the Lord.
- Babylon always produces comfort that dulls your hunger for God, a form of Christianity mixed with idolatry, and compromise in the name of convenience. It’s a dependence on man-made “security,” trusting in the flesh rather than in the Lord.
- If you are not changing, you are not growing. This applies both to individuals and to churches. Settling leads to stagnation and stagnation ultimately leads to the death.
- When Blockbuster refused to change with the times, it wasn’t because they lacked resources or brand recognition—it was because they clung to an old model that once worked. They stayed comfortable with what was familiar, ignored the shift happening around them, and dismissed the disruption as unnecessary or temporary. But while Blockbuster tried to preserve the past, Netflix embraced the future—and Blockbuster eventually became a cautionary tale of what happens when you refuse to change.

- Kodak is another sobering example. Kodak dominated the photography world for decades, but they failed to pivot when digital photography emerged—even though they had the technology and opportunity to lead the change. By holding on to what once made them successful, they lost the momentum of innovation, and over time their influence faded.
- In the same way, a church can't rely on yesterday's breakthroughs, victories, or progress to carry tomorrow's assignment—because when we refuse to grow, we don't remain the same; we slowly drift backward.

What Settling Looks Like

- *Self-sufficiency.* We quietly begin to say, "I have need of nothing," like Laodicea, not realizing we have become "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17).
- *Lukewarmness.* We still believe in Jesus, still attend church, still "do Christian things," but the fire, passion, and energy fades (Rev. 3:15–16). Our hunger for the Lord diminishes.
- *Shrinking back.* We stop pressing forward, stop fighting for spiritual growth, stop attending the prayer meeting, and stop pursuing the Lord wholeheartedly because the cost feels too high (Heb. 10:38–39).
- *Excuses.* We start saying, "This is too hard . . . too demanding . . . too costly . . . God expects too much," and we begin to negotiate with the Lord instead of surrendering to Him (Luke 9:23). But excuses are a form of self-deception—we convince ourselves that our reasoning justifies our disobedience and neglect, as though the Lord agrees with our self-justification. Instead of letting His Word correct us, we use our excuses to silence conviction and make compromise feel reasonable.
- *Quitting.* We allow discouragement to turn into resignation. We start to believe that our pursuit is pointless. Our life is being wasted without much personal benefit.
- *Comparison.* We look around and compare our devotion to others. We think, "They aren't pursuing God like I am, but they are more blessed than I am." This can easily result in envy or offense, resulting in apathy and indifference.
- *A Victim Mentality.* We begin to think like a victim rather than an overcomer. We allow spiritual warfare—though real and challenging—to lead us to retreat. We think, "Maybe if I stop pressing in so hard the devil will ease up in his attacks." We feel like the bullseye of the enemy, so we wrongly conclude that backing off is wisdom—rather than realizing that spiritual resistance is often evidence that we are progressing in the Lord.
- *Pragmatism.* We start making decisions based on what feels safe, comfortable, convenient, reasonable, practical, or efficient. We exchange logic for faith; what works for what the Lord is saying. In this mindset, obedience becomes too costly.
- *Misplaced Priorities.* Yes, we still love God, read the Bible, and pray. But we begin to place other priorities above Him and His church. We start seeking our own kingdom first, chasing after blessings, rather than God's kingdom first—and allowing God to bless us. We try to fit Jesus into our life rather than Him being the life we live from.

Settling Is the Opposite of Faith

- A pond that doesn't move eventually gets murky. A river stays fresh because it keeps flowing.
- Faith is movement; settling is stagnation.

- Faith in Scripture is often forward moving.
 - Abraham was called to leave his country (Gen. 12:1).
 - Israel had to go out of Egypt.
 - The Jews in Babylon were exhorted to return to Jerusalem.
 - The church is the *ekklesia*—the gathering of the “called out” ones.
 - Believers are “strangers and exiles” on the earth (Heb. 11:13).
 - We are called to go “outside the camp” of mainstream Christianity and follow the Lord fully, because much of what is popular today falls far short of what He desires.
- When we settle spiritually, we exchange a life of faith for a life of comfort, and ultimately, compromise. We choose self-preservation and independence over the cross and wholehearted obedience.
- When we settle spiritually, we choose stability without God, control without Christ, progress without holiness, success without surrender, and religion without obedience.
- Ultimately, we choose another Jesus, another spirit, and another gospel.
- If you are riding a bike and stop pedaling, you don’t remain balanced forever—eventually you wobble and stop. Settling is when you stop pedaling spiritually and call it “rest.”

Overcoming the Culture

- In Revelation 2-3, we are called to overcome the influence of culture.
- Many sincere believers have exchanged the values expressed in Scripture for the values promoted by culture, and subsequently, have been overcome by culture.
- Overcoming the influence of culture was one of Jesus’s main themes in Revelation 2-3.
- When Jesus exhorted the church to overcome, not only must we overcome the particular struggle the Lord put His finger on, but also the cultural influence inspiring it.
- Closely examining Jesus’s messages to the seven churches throughout Asia Minor, you see how heavily influenced the church was by the behaviors, beliefs, and values of their surrounding community.
- Believers in Ephesus left their first love due to the busyness of doing ministry in the fast-paced metropolis of Ephesus.
- Believers in affluent Laodicea grew lukewarm because the city’s prosperity provided for their every need, producing in them self-reliance and self-satisfaction.
- Believers in Thyatira were seduced into idolatry and immorality by the city’s popular trade guilds.
 - These were associations of craftsmen and merchants, often wielding considerable power.
 - If believers in Thyatira wanted to receive favorable business opportunities, they often had to pay homage to the city’s idols and participate in drunken orgies.

- My point is the culture where you live and even today's online culture—with all the generally accepted behaviors, beliefs, values, work schedules, fashion, manners, jokes, celebrations, food, and forms of entertainment and recreation—can easily shape the way you live the Christian life.
- If you allow the values of culture to replace the values of the kingdom, you fall prey to great deception and compromise without realizing it.
- This is why Jesus, in His letters to the seven churches, called you to live by kingdom culture rather than the culture of your city or nation.

How Culture Affects You Today

- America is a very busy, materialistic, and entertainment-driven culture.
- Undoubtedly, American values have crept into the American church.
- Consequently, many American Christians are too busy to seek the Lord, to spend time in the Word, and to pray.
- To survive in this materialistic culture, you must work fifty to sixty hours a week.
- Culture rarely tries to overcome you by getting you to deny Jesus—it overcomes you subtly by training you to follow Jesus only when it's convenient, obey Him only when it's comfortable, and pursue Him only when it fits into your schedule.
- Many believers sincerely love the Lord, but without realizing it, they are being disciplined by the surrounding culture—or even worse, they are disciples of the internet.
- Over time, “busy” becomes normal, exhaustion becomes expected, entertainment becomes necessary, and comfort becomes the goal.

Examples of Culture Influencing Us

- Culture pressures us to build a life where Jesus is added on rather than central—where church becomes one activity among many instead of the priority gathering of God's “called out” ones under Jesus's headship.
- This pressure often shows up through constant scheduling challenges—where weekends fill up quickly, and what once felt sacred and central begins to feel optional.
- Angie and I say this often: are you a thermostat or a thermometer. A thermostat changes the temperature in the room; a thermometer merely reflects the temperature in the room.
- Jesus isn't calling the church to reflect culture—He's calling us to set the spiritual temperature.
- Even good things can quietly begin to compete with the vital priority of gathering together in the Lord's house, until attending becomes something we do “if nothing else is going on.”
- Attending church on time is not a decision we make on Sunday morning—it's one we make on Saturday morning.
- Sometimes it's not that we stop loving God—it's just that life becomes so full that the Lord keeps getting pushed to the margins.

- There's no way to separate Jesus from the church. The church is Christ's body. Therefore, to miss the weekly gathering, even ten to twenty percent of the time, is to slowly drift from Jesus Himself. This is not stated enough.
- Instead of making the weekly gathering of the church a non-negotiable, we pencil it into our schedule and come if nothing else more important comes up.
- Some of the reasons why people don't come to church honestly shock me. I can't imagine going shopping, to the High Museum of Art, or attending an Atlanta United soccer game instead of coming to church.
- Whatever you don't schedule first becomes what gets squeezed. If the weekly gathering is penciled in, it's the first thing erased.
- In the words of Haggai, we need to "consider our ways."
- Little by little, seeking the Lord, praying, and gathering with God's people every week starts to feel like a chore rather than a life-giving joy.
- Our culture does not naturally help us keep spiritual priorities first. In many cases, it assumes that family life, sports, activities, and entertainment will set the calendar—and then the church is expected to adjust around it.
- If we aren't watchful, we can slowly begin living by the mindset: "God gets what's left."
- Culture doesn't usually slash your tire. It's a slow leak. One missed gathering becomes two... then it becomes normal... then spiritual hunger weakens. By the time you notice, you're running on empty.

A Prophetic Dream

- On 5/30/2023, I had the following dream.

Our church was in a different building, and we were having a Christmas service or a service around Christmas. Visitors were there. We were going through the motions during worship. Not worshipping with much passion. We were very lethargic.

Suddenly, I saw Noel. I knew he was coming to us from the great cloud of witnesses as an overcomer.

Noel stood up without being asked and rebuked us for our apathy, complacency, lukewarmness, and lack of passion in our praise and worship. For us just going through the motions.

In the dream, I realized that a significant part of our apathy was because of cultural influence.

- Over the last several years, I've felt an increasing burden about how deeply cultural holidays and school breaks have begun to shape our weekly church gathering.
- Let me say that I love vacations and wish I could take more. I also love every holiday. I'm especially thankful for holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I believe rest and time with family is a genuine gift from the Lord.
- But what I'm seeing more and more is that nearly every holiday—and now even fall break, winter break, and spring break—results in a significant drop in attendance, which affects the strength, unity, and spiritual momentum of our gathering.

- Often it's not just one Sunday that is impacted, but the Sunday before and the Sunday after as well.
- You can think of it as the "Two-Sunday Slide." You leave on Saturday for the trip. You arrive back home the following Saturday. But then you say, "We need some time to recover." And suddenly you have missed not just one vital gathering but two. The problem is this isn't just a one-time pattern. It becomes the norm for many school breaks and holidays. This pattern then becomes part of the church culture and we drift away from God's intentions slowly.
- And when you add in other cultural weekends like Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day, it feels like a smaller portion of our Sundays remain unaffected.
- I don't have a perfect formula or a list of rules—and I don't want to create legalism by handing out dos and don'ts—but I do want to share my heart.
- I simply encourage each of you to ask the Lord about this and obey what He leads you to do.
- The real question isn't whether vacations or holidays are "allowed," but whether, over time, our comfort and personal plans are quietly becoming higher priorities than God's house and the corporate life He calls us to build together.

Come Out of Babylon

- Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly calls His people to come out of Babylon.
- This prophetic exhortation by the prophets was inspired by the 90–95% of the Jews who remained in Babylon rather than returning to rebuild God's house and the city of Jerusalem. They became a prophetic picture of compromise.
- Listen to what the prophets said about coming out of Babylon:
 - "Flee from the midst of Babylon" (Jer. 51:6).
 - "Come forth from her midst, My people" (Jer. 51:45).
 - "Escape . . . you who are dwelling with the daughter of Babylon" (Zech. 2:6–7).
 - "Go forth from Babylon" (Isa. 48:20).
 - "Come out of her, My people" (Rev. 18:4).
- The principle is clear: you can never be who God has called you to be or do what He has called you to do while entangled in Babylon.

Comfort Is Not Your Calling

- In Ezra, the tension is that most did not return—not necessarily because they hated God, but because they had become comfortable in Babylon.
- But comfort isn't your calling.
- Your calling is to be God's inheritance, to build His house, and to advance His kingdom in the earth.

Pragmatism Rather Obedience

- Pragmatism means making decisions based on what works (what gets results or what's practical), rather than what is true, right, principled, and most importantly, what is scriptural.

- Babylon trains us to live by pragmatism rather than obedience.
- Babylon teaches: “Do what works.” “Do what’s safe.” “Do what’s advantageous.” “Do what’s practical.” “Do what’s reasonable.” “Do what’s comfortable.”
- Pragmatism becomes a problem when “what works” and “what seems reasonable” replaces “what God said.” It elevates results over obedience, and comfort over faithfulness.
- But God’s house is built by costly obedience, sacrifice, the way of the cross, surrender, and seeking first God’s kingdom.
- Babylon teaches you to negotiate with God rather than obey Him wholeheartedly.
- God’s house is not built by partial obedience—but by full obedience without compromise.

Babylon Blurs Boundaries and Produces Compromise

- In Ezra 9–10—when the people married pagan foreigners—it demonstrated that even though they left Babylon, the ways of Babylon were still within them.
- Though the people returned physically they were still entangled spiritually.
- This is why Ezra led them into repentance (Ezra 10).

Summary

To “come out of Babylon” means we forsake the world’s values and its system of comfort, compromise, and self-first priorities—so that we can return wholeheartedly to the Lord. So that we can worship the Lord with honor and reverence in the fear of the Lord and take responsibility to build God’s house.

The Builders Mindset

- When someone is truly building a house, they don’t treat it like a hobby. They don’t show up “when they feel like it.”
- They don’t build only on weekends that are convenient.
- They build because it matters—and because someone will live in it.
- We are building God’s house—a spiritual house of living stones that becomes a dwelling place of God’s Spirit.