

# KINGDOM WORK

*Week One | April 28, 2019 | Kingdom Workers Need a Vision of How God Works*

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's texts, Ezra 1–3, Proverbs 19:21, Haggai 2:4, 9; Zechariah 4:10; and 2 Corinthians 1:20. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

## THIS WEEK

### ■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is sovereign over all our work.

### ■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

We can trust Him to start, sustain, and complete the work He calls us to do.

### ■ MEDITATE

*"Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:5).*

## GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.*

In the very beginning of Scripture, we see God at work. He creates a world for us to live in. He designs the heavens and illuminates the evenings. He works until the job is finished. And when He creates man in His image (Genesis

1:27), He immediately puts him to work. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Adam, the first man, was a gardener!

Work is good and has always been a part of God’s plan. When sin entered the world, the curse of sin entered the world too. Part of that curse is that work would be frustrating and involve hardship (Genesis 3:17–19). We see this evidenced all over the world as people struggle to make ends meet and find satisfaction in their labors. But God planned for us to be a people at work, and when we work, we bear His image to the world.

Most of our time and energy each week is invested in some form of work. We train children, run offices, make sales, paint houses, and do many other things to support ourselves and contribute to the greater good. With our egocentric worldview and fueled by our blood, sweat, and tears, it’s easy to imagine that we direct our careers. But the Bible offers a different perspective. It teaches that God is sovereign over what we do. “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand” (Proverbs 19:21). The doctrine of the sovereignty of God should fill us with gratitude that no matter our work, we are ultimately fulfilling the grander redemptive purposes of God. What we do fits into what He is doing in the world. What a privilege! This should inspire us to work hard and work well, for we are doing important work.

In today’s lesson, we will see how God worked in the days of Ezra, a “scribe skilled in the law” (Ezra 7:6). What was God working toward in Ezra’s day? He was rebuilding His temple that was originally built by Solomon but destroyed by the Babylonians. The Israelites had been taken captive and exiled from Jerusalem by the Babylonian king seventy years prior, as prophesied in Jeremiah 25:11–12. Today’s text begins with Cyrus, the king of Persia, issuing a proclamation for the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. God stirred the hearts of His people as well as Cyrus to do this work and provided the resources they needed. And He saw to the completion of it. Cyrus commanded the temple to be rebuilt, the Israelites worked for years to do it, and God was sovereign over it all. God starts, sustains, and completes the work He gives us to do. He is with us in our work.

We are His kingdom workers. No matter what we do, we do it to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). We confidently work in the knowledge of His presence in our work. We humbly work in the strength He provides. We boldly trust Him to accomplish His work through us. Kingdom workers need to see how God works. Our vision of Him drives our work *for* Him. May our kingdom work bring our Father glory, and may others be blessed by our labors.

**Q:** *Do you keep your focus on God and His glory in your work? How? What changes can you make to be more aware of Him in what you do?*

**Q:** *In what way does seeing how God works spur you on in your work?*

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In today's lesson we will learn how our work fits within the grander redemptive work of God.

1. SEE GOD AS THE INITIATOR OF YOUR WORK
2. SEE GREAT THINGS IN SMALL BEGINNINGS
3. SEE CHRIST AS THE FULFILLMENT OF ALL THINGS

### GOING DEEPER

+ This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.

## SEE GOD AS THE INITIATOR OF YOUR WORK

### ■ EZRA 1:1, 5

Q: How did God get Cyrus and the Jewish exiles to rebuild His temple?

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). God is the originator. He begins things. This truth is given as the starting place of all Scripture. God is the initiator, the founder. He gets things going. He gets us going. God is the initiator of what we do. The dominant theme of the book of Ezra is God's sovereign work through people to accomplish His redemptive plans. Though it may be hard to see at times, He is always in control, and this truth gives us great comfort. It also produces in us great humility, for we get to participate in the work of the almighty God. What a privilege!

Our text today appropriately begins with God as the initiator. His people had been in captivity for seventy years. The Babylonians were their original captors, but then the Persians conquered the Babylonians. At first glance, it appears the fate of the Israelites was in the hands of Cyrus, king of Persia. But lean in and look closer. See who is really in control of this mighty king.

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be

fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—He is the God who is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:1–3).

God is sovereign over the Persian king and He “stirs his heart” to initiate the work of freeing His people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild His temple. There is such beauty in the phrase, “stirs his heart.” God is the heart-stirrer. See the Father’s intentionality. See His will generating the power for His people to accomplish it. It’s important to remember that Cyrus doesn’t issue this proclamation out of any desire to honor the Lord. He does it to entreat the favor of any god of any people in his kingdom. Cyrus isn’t interested in building the kingdom of God; he’s interested in building his own kingdom. But this powerful Persian king contributes, albeit unknowingly, to the advancement of the true King’s agenda.

Cyrus not only commands the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, he also commands the citizens of his kingdom to supply them with what they need (Ezra 1:4). God has given the authority for His people to be released to return to Jerusalem. He has given the supplies they will need to rebuild the temple. What else could He possibly provide for them to do this work? “Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5). God, the heart-stirrer, gives His people the desire to do the work.

See how God works. See Him as the initiator of your work. See the heart-stirring God in what you do. God’s work begins with Him. He lovingly places His desires in our hearts and gives us the grace to want what He wants. When we have a vision for what He is doing, we want in! We want to be a part of His great work. We don’t labor begrudgingly for His kingdom. We eagerly contribute to the advancement of His kingdom as we lovingly labor in marketplaces and schools and living rooms. God has called us to Himself, and in doing so, He’s called us to His work. Consider where you invest your energy and skills. Consider how He has placed you there and supplied you with the necessary gifting. See His glory in your work. See His redemptive plans in what you do. See God as the initiator of it all.

**Q:** *Consider what you do each day. Do you see God or yourself as the initiator of your work? How does the Bible inform our belief that God is the initiator of it?*

**Q:** *What has God initiated in your life? What has He stirred your heart to do? Are you doing it?*

# SEE GREAT THINGS IN SMALL BEGINNINGS

■ EZRA 3:12–13; HAGGAI 2:4; AND ZECHARIAH 4:10

Q: *Why were some people weeping as others celebrated?*

Q: *What reason for courage does God give the people to be strong and work?*

It was a big day in Jerusalem in 536 B.C. as the returned exiles (about 50,000) gathered to celebrate the laying of the foundation of the temple of the Lord. Do you hear the trumpets blaring? Imagine the raucous shouts mixed with the clanging of the cymbals. This multitude sang their thanks to the Lord. “For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever toward Jerusalem” (Ezra 3:11). They shouted “great shouts” of praise to God. But lean in and listen harder. Amidst all the shouting, there is another sound, the sound of weeping. “But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away” (Ezra 3:12–13). They wept because they were disappointed. These older saints remembered the splendor of the first temple, and the meager foundation of the second temple was underwhelming.

We can identify with these underwhelmed saints. It’s easy to experience disappointment in our work when our vision of what it should look like is so much grander than what we see. On this big day in Jerusalem, the prophet Zechariah said, “Whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice” (Zechariah 4:10). Most of us will spend our whole lives working in the days of small things. We will be tempted to despise them. But God wants us to rejoice in them. God sees beyond the easily visible evidence of our work. He sees more. We need a vision for what isn’t so easily seen. We need to see great things in small beginnings.

We are attracted to the spectacular. As a result, we often miss what God wants us to see. We overlook the significance of small things. When Jesus spoke to a hungry crowd, He didn’t despise His disciple’s suggestion of a boy’s lunch (John 6:9–11) to feed them. He used this small offering to glorify Himself in a big way. God is not disappointed in small things. He uses them to accomplish His purposes. God compares His kingdom to a single grain of mustard seed. “It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Matthew 13:32). The tiniest seed becomes a tree.

The greatness of something isn't determined by its beginning. Remember, God's great plan for our redemption began with a little baby. Richard Sibbes writes in *The Bruised Reed*, "See a flame in a spark, a tree in a seed. See great things in little beginnings." Do you see great things in small beginnings?

There may be a gap between our vision of our work and the reality of it, but it is not to be despised. In the gap, we must trust God to accomplish His plans for His glory. What looks unimpressive to us may look glorious to God. We must strive to see what He sees. Are you underwhelmed by the impact of your work? Remember, God is the initiator and sustainer of your work. It's by His grace that we get to work in our various industries to His glory. Praise Him for His work through you in the big and small things! When the people were unimpressed with the splendor of the temple, Haggai encouraged them by telling them to be strong and to work, for God was with them (Haggai 2:4). God is with us in our work too. He is sovereign over all our work and we can trust Him to sustain us in it. Work, Christian!

♀: *Are you envious of people who seem to succeed in their work more than you?  
How can you prepare your heart to rejoice with others when they flourish?*

♀: *What help can you find in Scripture to encourage you when what you do feels  
insignificant and unimpressive?*

## SEE CHRIST AS THE FULFILLMENT OF ALL THINGS

■ HAGGAI 2:9; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:20; AND REVELATION 21:22

♀: *Why is there no temple in heaven?*

♀: *What will the latter glory of the house be compared to the former?*

We left off with the blended sounds of the peoples' great shouts of joy and great weeping. The contrast in this symphony is significant. While God was showing the returned exiles great things, they still saw lack. He freed them from captivity and returned them to their homeland and provided them with everything they needed to rebuild His temple. But there was still weeping. They still yearned for more. All that God promised had not been fulfilled. And

a new temple, grand or not, would not ultimately satisfy the longing of their hearts.

In the Old Testament, the temple was the manifestation of God's presence. Its existence was important to remind the Church in that day that God was with them. In the New Testament, Jesus enters in and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Church becomes the temple because of Christ's presence in our lives. "In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). His presence dwells in us through the Holy Spirit.

But Scripture teaches that a new day is coming. In the new heavens and the new earth, Jesus is the temple. While John was exiled on the island of Patmos, God gave him a vision of heaven and he wrote, "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Revelation 21:22). Jesus Himself is the temple! He is the fulfillment of what God began showing His people in the Old Testament. One day we will dwell in His presence forever. A fuller presence is our inheritance.

The temple is not the presence of God. It only represents God's presence. While some saints were disappointed in the new temple, God promised that "the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former" (Haggai 2:9). How could He say this when the foundation was so underwhelming? Because of Jesus! He is the fulfillment of this promise. He is the fulfillment of all God's promises. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Corinthians 1:20). He is Immanuel, God with us. He eclipses the symbol of God's presence with His actual presence. We don't have to go to a temple to dwell with the Lord because He dwells within His people through the Holy Spirit. But one day, we will dwell and reign with Him forever. We will be with Him in glory. Future glory is our birthright. We have the extraordinary privilege of living in anticipation of what's to come. This is not our best life. This life is fraught with challenges and pain. But our earthly sufferings cannot be compared to our future glory (Romans 8:18), glory given to us in Christ.

God's children will be glorified (Romans 8:30). What grace! Know your inheritance, dear saint. See Christ as the fulfillment of all the promises of God. See His sovereignty over all your work and know the great privilege of joining Him in His redemptive purpose of reconciling man to Himself. He began a good work in you, and He will complete it (Philippians 1:6). He has called you to do good work on this earth (Ephesians 2:10). He initiates that work and sustains it. And He will complete it. Kingdom workers need a vision for how God works. This vision inspires us to do the work. Eyes up, saints! See God at work in the world and join Him in it for His glory.

**Q:** *What are some of the promises of God in Scripture? How will they be fulfilled in Christ?*

**Q:** *Do you live in anticipation of the establishment of God's kingdom on earth? What spiritual disciplines can help direct your heart toward longing to be with Jesus forever?*

## NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

**Q:** *Discuss how God's sovereignty in your work encourages you. How does it give you courage to do the work?*

**Q:** *What work is God initiating among your faith family? How can you encourage one another to see your work through God's eyes and not your own? Pray for the faith to trust Him to start, sustain, and complete the work He's given you to do.*

## PRAY

+ *Use this prayer point to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

*Father, You are at work and You've created me to reflect You in this world through my work. Thank You for the privilege of joining You in Your plans. You've gifted me with the skills I need to accomplish the tasks You've given me. Use me, Lord. Show me how You're working and equip me to work with You. Give me the grace to trust You to start, sustain, and complete the work You've given me to do. May You be glorified through my work.*



**EZRA 1:1** – *that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled. See Jeremiah 25:11–14; 32:36–38.* The whole book of Ezra is the story of God’s work to fulfill His promises by bringing His people back from exile and establishing them once again in their land. The prophet Jeremiah had foretold an exile lasting seventy years, after which Babylon would be punished and Judah restored.

**EZRA 3:11** – *all the people shouted with a great shout.* The laying of the foundations occasions praise, which echoes the celebrations of King David when he prepared for the building of Solomon’s temple.

*\*All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes.*

