

Today, we are resuming our "The Story" Sermon Series with the story about returning home from exile. We are picking up the story of Israel stranded as enslaved people in Babylon's captives. Regardless of how faithful or successful Daniel and his three friends were, they were still enslaved people in Babylon. The keyword from that story was "שׁוּמַ" (Sum)," translated to "purposed." They "purposed." They "decided." They made up their minds that they would not let their circumstances determine their reality but God's faithfulness.

Now, the circumstance has been changed. About 50 years later, from the time Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and took most of the Jews into exile (586 BC), the Persians brought the Babylonian Empire to an end. The following year (538 BC), the Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

There are different strategies for ruling Israel. According to Habakkuk chapter 1, Babylonians had no respect for the Israelites. They scoffed at the city walls. They came through like locusts and devoured everything in their path. They just beat up the Israelites into submission and enslaved them. The Babylonians made the Israelites work for them to make them money. That was the way the Babylonians ruled over the Israelites.

However, unlike the Babylonians, the Persians kept peace with the Israelites. They cultivated the culture of Israel. They want the Israelites to go back to their home and live out their own culture and live well. They wanted the Israelites to prosper and make a lot of money. And then, they taxed the heck out of them. So, the Israelites made the Persians rich. Simply, they kept peace with the Israelites and others under their ruling by letting them control whatever they wanted but taxing them to pay Persia a bunch of money.

So, under the ruling of the Persian King Cyrus, the Israelites were permitted to return to their homeland under the leadership of Religious Leader Ezra. However, not all Israelites returned home. For example, Esther and Mordecai we will talk about next week did not return home. Among the returning exiles were the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2). They prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem.

When Babylon conquered Israel, Israel was a divided nation—the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, Judah. When the Israelites came back to their homeland, they were not a divided kingdom anymore. They were a unified Kingdom under one ruler—Governor Zerubbabel.

When the Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, he sent the Jews with all the implements taken out of the temple in Jerusalem by Babylonians. Under the leadership of Ezra, they hauled them all back to Jerusalem and completed the foundation of the temple (Ezra 1-3). After that, people grumbled about the temple rebuilding project, and the project was halted for 18 years (Haggai 1:1).

Then, God raised a new assistant leader, Joshua, the son of Jozadak, to partner with Governor Zerubbabel and raised Prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage all people to finish the temple rebuilding project (Ezra 4-6). God also raised Nehemiah, a cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1).

Today's scripture, Haggai 2:20-23, is the 4th encouragement Prophet Haggai gave to Governor Zerubbabel— "Zerubbabel! You are God's signet ring!" In ancient times, a signet ring was used as an identifier, like a driver's license or passport these days. Instead of signing their name, people would press their ring into hot wax or soft clay to make their mark. Then, what does it mean by "Zerubbabel is God's signet ring?"

To understand that sentence, we need to know who Zerubbabel was. Indeed, we already know that he is the governor and in charge of the Jerusalem rebuilding project, including rebuilding the temple. He is himself of royal blood, being a descendant of David and the grandson of Judah's King Jehoiachin. Years earlier, Jehoiachin had lost his throne when he was deported to Babylon; God pictured Jehoiachin as a signet ring being removed from God's finger (Jeremiah 22:24). Now, God calls Zerubbabel the "signet ring," but this time, it won't be removed.

In Haggai's prophecy, God is giving Zerubbabel encouragement and hope. The governor is "chosen" for a unique and noble purpose. As God's signet ring, Zerubbabel is given a place of honor and authority. God reinstates the Davidic line and renews His covenant with David. Judah still has a future as they look forward to the coming Son of David, the Messiah, who would one day "overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms" (Haggai 2:22). Yes, with

this encouragement, Zerubbabel restarted the temple rebuilding project (Ezra 5:3-6:12). The temple was finished and dedicated (Ezra 6:13-22).

We, God's children living in the 21st century, are also God's signet rings who make a mark on the world as we spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, share God's grace through loving our neighbors and work to end oppression and bring justice and peace. Each of us has our own unique stamp that reveals how we're created in God's image and expresses our particular mix of gifts, passions, and wisdom. It is our call and privilege to act as this signet ring in God's world.

We are God's signet ring, leaving the mark of our God on the people around us for better or worse. What kind of God's signet ring do we want to be? The choice is ours. Amen.