

10-04-15 – Rebuilding Isn't Easy

Ezra

Dr. David Jeremiah said this... *“Rebuilding is usually harder than original construction, whether it’s a coach rebuilding a team, a family rebuilding a home, a couple rebuilding a marriage, or a prodigal rebuilding a life. But whatever we’re rebuilding, we have a blueprint for it in the book of Ezra.”* (Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible, David Jeremiah, p. 73).

To give you the setting of the book, the Jewish people had been defeated and scattered by their enemies. However, groups of Jews over about 100 years returned to their land to try to rebuild their nation, their temple, and the holy city, Jerusalem. The condition of the remains was horrifying to them. The city was destroyed as well as their temple. The walls were broken and the gates burned out.

“The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther cover the historical period of Israel’s captivity in Babylon and the return to Jerusalem.” (Adventuring Through the Bible, Ray Stedman) The book of Ezra focuses on the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. The next book, Nehemiah, focuses on the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. These two were combined as one book in the Hebrew Bible telling one story. Ezra and Nehemiah are contemporaries and their stories overlap as we can see if we read both books. How many have ever read the book of Ezra or Nehemiah?

The book of Ezra is laid out in two sections. The first section, chapters 1-6, covers the first wave of Jews who returned to their land to rebuild the Temple. The second section, chapters 7-10, covers the second group who returned to Jerusalem and *the ministry of the teacher Ezra, who taught the people God’s Word and stressed the importance of remaining separated from the world around them.*

“The book of Ezra teaches us to seek the Lord in prayer, submit to His Word, and acknowledge His wisdom, power, presence and love. The rubble may not be cleared away in a day or a year, but when we put first things first, the rest of life will come back into alignment. Begin with the altar – with worship – and restoration will follow.” (Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible, David Jeremiah, p. 74).

“Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.”
(Ezra 8:21)

“In showing how the returning exiles rebuilt their Temple, city, and nation, Ezra teaches us to rebuild areas in our lives that have been damaged or defeated.”

Let's look at the book of Ezra as a template for rebuilding anything – including our spiritual lives...

“The Temple was the last structure to be destroyed when the nation fell into captivity. It was the last holdout of the Spirit of God within the nation of Israel. In a symbolic sense, the temple, representing the Spirit, is the last place to be destroyed in an individual's failure to relate to God. It is also the first place where God begins to set about the work of restoration.” (Adventuring Through the Bible, Ray Stedman, p. 205).

I want to break this sermon into 5 points.

I – God initiates rebuilding – Ezra 1:1-5 - NLT

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the LORD fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom:

² *“This is what King Cyrus of Persia says:*

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! ⁴ Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem.”

⁵ *Then God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the LORD.*

- God is the One who stirs us to want to rebuild
- **Is. 44:28, 45:14** – There were prophecies 100 years beforehand declaring God's will in all this. *When I say of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,’ he will certainly do as I say. He will command, ‘Rebuild Jerusalem’; he will say, ‘Restore the Temple.’ ... I will raise up Cyrus to fulfill my righteous purpose, and I will guide his actions. He will restore my city and free my captive people— without seeking a reward! I, the LORD of Heaven's Armies, have spoken!”*
- **Jer. 25:11, 29:10** - *This entire land will become a desolate wasteland. Israel and her neighboring lands will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years... This is what the LORD says: “You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again.* Prophecy of 70 years of captivity. God has a plan for each of us.
- Cyrus was a non-Jew, but he was used by God to support the rebuilding of the Temple that God wanted completed.
- God moved Cyrus to issue a decree that included all the support of the rebuilding on the Temple by the remnant returning to Jerusalem (money, food, resources, protection, even the Temple articles that were restored).
- God is prompting us toward restoration/rebuilding our spiritual lives.

II – Rebuild the Altar First – Ezra 3:1-5 - NLT

- *In early autumn, when the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled in Jerusalem with a unified purpose. ² Then Jeshua son of Jehozadak, joined his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his family in rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel. They wanted to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, as instructed in the Law of Moses, the man of God. ³ Even though the people were afraid of the local residents, they rebuilt the altar at its old site. Then they began to sacrifice burnt offerings on the altar to the LORD each morning and evening. ⁴ They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed in the Law, sacrificing the number of burnt offerings specified for each day of the festival. ⁵ They also offered the regular burnt offerings and the offerings required for the new moon celebrations and the annual festivals as prescribed by the LORD. The people also gave voluntary offerings to the LORD.*
- They restored the altar first and then the sacrifice or worship at the altar according to the Law.
- They rebuilt the altar at the original site regardless of changes in the local area over that time. We also may realize that things aren't the same as when we first believed or were spiritually in tune. We need to rebuild anyway.
- Everything was restored voluntarily – even offerings (usually the first thing to go by the wayside).
- After this – Then they began to rebuild the Temple foundation.
- Celebrate success – in the rebuilding process of our spiritual lives, we need to stop and rejoice/celebrate where we are in the process – along the way. They sang when the foundation was completed even though they still had a long way to go to finish the work. They were not there yet, but... rejoice.

III – Rebuilding will meet opposition – Ezra 4:1-3 - NLT

- *The enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were rebuilding a Temple to the LORD, the God of Israel. ² So they approached Zerubbabel and the other leaders and said, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God just as you do. We have sacrificed to him ever since King Esarhaddon of Assyria brought us here.” ³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the other leaders of Israel replied, “You may have no part in this work. We alone will build the Temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, just as King Cyrus of Persia commanded us.”*
- The enemy will try everything to disrupt our commitment to rebuild.
- People may pretend to be on our side – our friends – offer assistance

- They work behind the scenes, behind our backs to derail our efforts (come on, we used to go here all the time – come on one joint won't hurt – God understands you need to have some down time. We used to hang out together all the time like this. I'll help you keep it all together... The enemy is diligent and tenacious –
- **Ezra 4:5-7 - *They bribed agents to work against them and to frustrate their plans. This went on during the entire reign of King Cyrus of Persia and lasted until King Darius of Persia took the throne. ⁶ Years later when Xerxes began his reign, the enemies of Judah wrote a letter of accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem. ⁷ Even later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, the enemies of Judah, led by Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel, sent a letter to Artaxerxes in the Aramaic language, and it was translated for the king.***
- Look at the lengths the enemy will go to stop the rebuilding – He hates it. We need to be aware of these attacks, especially when we commit to rebuilding our spiritual lives in Christ.
- Sometimes it seems like there is a temporary success on their part...
- **Ezra 4:24 says, *So the work on the Temple of God in Jerusalem had stopped, and it remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.***
- **BUT ...**

IV – When God is rebuilding, it will succeed – Ezra 5:1-2 - NLT

- ***At that time the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem. They prophesied in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. ² Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jehozadak responded by starting again to rebuild the Temple of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them and helped them***
- **Rom. 8:31 - *What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?***
- Letters went back and forth – The Jews referred to Cyrus' decree. At this time there was the Law of the Meds and Persians that stated if a decree was declared officially – it could not be revoked or changed – so this was solid.
- Truth has nothing to hide – The Jews asked that a search be made for Cyrus' decree to see if it existed and said what they declared.
- Cyrus' decree was found and read. It was true and full support must be given (God is so cool) King Darius honors Cyrus' decree and orders work forward.
- The accusers are ordered to help in the effort (stuffed in their face).
- Temple rebuilding was completed – A great celebration was held
- Feasts and holidays were restored with great joy!
- Success was had – but this was only Phase I in God's plan for rebuilding.

V – God wants more and goes deeper – Ezra 7-10

- 80 years later – Ezra leads a 2nd return to Jerusalem
- The Temple is rebuilt, but the personal lives are a mess
- Commit to study, follow, and teach God’s Word – **Ezra 7:10 - *This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel.***
- We are to keep the details of God’s commands (Word) – it needs to be taught!
- Fellowship with others of like mind and spirit (Nehemiah and company)
- A starting place for serving God again is a personal commitment to serve Him today even if we don’t know where that will take us.
- Ezra gave the people a charge – It was a call to complete commitment – no contamination from the nations around them... He found they had intermarried...
- **Ezra 9:3 - *When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked.***
- They then made a covenant that they would separate themselves from their foreign wives and children from those wives to consecrate themselves to the Lord only. How serious are you and I regarding our complete commitment to God only?
- This separation from wives and children was drastic and symbolic for us – What do you hold on to from the world around you that is putting God second or blocking your relationship with Him? Is it time to take inventory? Is it time to rebuild?

“In rebuilding anything, we must start with the altar – reestablishing the Cross of Jesus Christ as central to our lives and activities.” (Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible, David Jeremiah, p. 75)

Repentance is NOT like the person who sent the IRS a check for \$150 with this comment, “If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send the rest!” (Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes).

Eugene Peterson says this, “Repentance isn’t an emotion. It isn’t feeling sorry for your sins. It’s a decision. It is deciding that you’ve been wrong in supposing that you could manage your own life and be your own god; it is deciding that you were wrong in thinking that you had, or could get, the strength, education, and training to make it on your own. Repentance is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God aren’t going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts. Whenever you say no to one way of life that you’ve long been used to, there’s pain. But when that way of life is in fact a way of death, the quicker you leave it the better.” (The Message Study Bible, Eugene Peterson)

*The prophet Ezra, confronted by some pretty serious faith problems, wrote this: “**So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer**” (Ezra 8:23). Prayer was a process for Ezra, a way of accomplishing God’s will. It wasn’t something upon which to speculate. If God says He answers prayer, He will. We pray, He acts upon it even before we ask.*

Where are you right now in your relationship with God? Is there some rebuilding God may be prompting you to do? **Let’s pray together.**