



“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”

Session 2: Temple Rebuilding & Opposition

June 11, 2024 6:30 PM

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the many lessons we can learn from the history of Israel, from both their failures when they doubted Your Word, to their successes when they trusted Your promises. Help us to grow in grace and mature in the faith, and keep us from allowing the circumstance of life to affect our faith in You. Thank You that You are always in control and that You are a faithful God Who keeps His promises. This we pray in Jesus' name, AMEN.

Session 1 Recap

Last week in Session 1, we examined the historical background of the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We also looked at the primary characters – Ezra and Nehemiah – in detail, before reading Ezra chapters 1 and 2. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the return of the Jewish people from the Babylonian Exile to their home country of Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem. God “moved the heart” of the Persian King Cyrus to allow the Jewish people to return home. The Jewish people that returned to Jerusalem came in three stages – first with Zerubbabel in 538 BC, second with Ezra in 458 BC, and third with Nehemiah in 445 BC. Each returning group focused on one specific aspect as they sought to rebuild their homeland. The first returning group rebuilt the Temple. The second wanted to rebuild the “community” and worship. The third to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Ezra chapter 1 details the first return, while chapter 2 recounts who returned.

Opening Question...

Think of a time when you took a step of faith when you did not know what the outcome would be. What helped you to make the decision? What happened as a result of your action?

Ezra Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 Overview

In the next two chapters of the book of Ezra, we see the rebuilding in Jerusalem start to take place. After the people reestablished their home situations, they came back together to worship, remember, and rebuild. Chapter 3 focuses on the rebuilding of the altar for sacrifices and then the foundation of the Temple. Chapter 4 focused on the conflict the individuals faced as they sought to rebuild the Temple, not just immediately but over the next few centuries.

Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 3 (verses 1 – 13)

Vs. 1 – 3 – After the Jewish people established their homes scattered across the region, they returned to Jerusalem united to start the rebuild of the Temple. As one of their first official acts, the Jewish leaders built the altar for sacrifices. This altar symbolized God’s presence and protection. The altar also demonstrated their purpose as a nation and their commitment to serve God alone – something their previous generations had failed to do, leading to the exile. As leader, Zerubbabel sacrificed burnt offerings following the Law of Moses as prescribed in Leviticus chapters 1 through 7. These sacrifices demonstrated that the people were seeking God’s guidance, rededicating themselves to living as He commanded, and daily asking Him to forgive their sins.

Verse 3 mentions that the Jewish people were terrified of the people of the lands. Their fear is that they would be attacked, because the city and their households were vulnerable. Many of the people that now lived in Jerusalem were resettled individuals from different lands, pushed to the South by the invading nations. These neighbors may have seen the return of the Jewish people as a threat to claiming the land that they now lived on.

Vs. 4 – The Feast of Booths lasted seven days. During this time, the people would live in temporary dwellings (tents, booths, etc.) as their ancestors had during their journey through the wilderness on their way to the

Promised Land. The feast reminded the people of God's past protection and guidance in the wilderness and of his continued love for them. (The Feast of Booths is described in Leviticus 23:33-36.)

Vs. 5 - 6 – The people began worshipping God through sacrifices even before the Temple foundations were laid. After many years in captivity, they had learned their lesson – they knew that God does not offer special protection to people who ignore Him. They knew they needed to rely on God's power. They realized the importance of obeying God from the heart, and not merely out of habit. If we want God's help when we undertake large tasks, we must make staying close to Him as top priority.

These sacrifices were originally set under the Law of Moses in Leviticus 1 and 6:8-13. The feasts are described in Leviticus 23. Every month on the day of the new moon, they held a special observance (see in Numbers 10:10).

Vs. 7 – The Jewish people exchanged goods for the supplies needed to start building the Temple foundation. When Solomon built the first Temple (2 Chronicles 2), he also exchanged food and olive oil – both plentiful resources in Israel – for wood, a resource Israel lacked. The wood came from the same places – Sidon and Tyre.

Vs. 8 - 9 – It took from September (seventh month; 3:1) to June just to prepare to build the Temple foundation. The returning Jewish people took time to make plans because the project was important to them. Preparation many not always feel heroic or spiritual, but it is vital to any project's success, and project meant to do well.

Vs. 10 - 11 – Completing the foundation for the Temple required great effort on the part of all involved. But no one tried to get praise for himself and his own hard work. Instead, everyone praised God for what had been done. All good gifts come from God – talents, abilities, strength, and leadership. We should always give thanks to God for what has been done in and through us.

King David have given clear instructions concerning the use of music in worship services in the Temple. The Jewish people followed these as they gave thanks to God. (1 Chronicles 16 and 25)

Vs. 12 – Fifty years after its destruction, the Temple was being rebuilt. Some of the older people remembered Solomon's Temple and they wept because the new Temple would not be as glorious as the first one. But the beauty of the building was not nearly as important to God as were the

attitudes of the builders and worshipers. God cares more about who we are than what we accomplish. Our world is always changing, and once-magnificent accomplishments decay and disappear. Seek to serve God wholeheartedly.

Since the new Temple was built on the foundation of Solomon's Temple, the two structures were not that different in size. But the old Temple was far more ornate and elaborate, and was surrounded by many buildings and a vast courtyard. Both Temples were constructed of imported cedar wood, but Solomon's had vast amounts of gold and precious stones. Solomon's Temple took over seven years to build. Zerubbabel's took about four years. Solomon's Temple was at the hub of the thriving city. Zerubbabel's was surrounded by ruins.

Vs. 13 – The celebration after laying the Temple foundation was marked by contrasts of emotion – shouts of joy and sounds of weeping. Both were appropriate. The Holy Spirit can stimulate us both to rejoice over the goodness to His grace and to grieve over the sins that required Him to correct us. When we come into the presence of the Almighty God, we may feel full of joy and thanksgiving, yet at the same time feel sobered by our shortcomings.

Follow Up Questions...

1. The Jewish people started building an altar almost immediately after they returned to their homeland. What does this say about their priorities?
2. In light of their actions, what had the exiles learned during their years in captivity?
3. Why do you think it was important to the exiles to publicly demonstrate their faith in God?
4. Why was it important for the people to give to support the work of the Temple?
5. Why don't believers today need a "physical" altar? What kind of altar do we have?

6. How can this Old Testament scene of worship encourage and exhort us as New Testament believers today?

Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 4 (verses 1 – 24)

Important clarification notes about chronology in Chapter 4...

The author uses two “jump forwards” – a common literary device – to show that opposition from enemies continued to occur as the Jewish people rebuilt the Temple.

- Ezra 4:1-5 describes opposition to the first group of returned exiles under Zerubbabel (beginning 538 BC, during the reign of Cyrus)
- Ezra 4:6 jumps forward to oppression during the reign of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I, king from 486 – 464 BC – when Esther lived)
- Ezra 4:7-23 jumps forward again to oppression during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464 BC – 423 BC which was during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah)
- Ezra 4:24 picks up the story again from 4:5, moving back to the time of Zerubbabel, but also moving forward from the reign of Cyrus to a later king Darius (whose second year would have been 520 BC, making the period of inactivity under Zerubbabel about 15 years).

Vs. 1 – 3 – The enemies of Judah and Benjamin were people who had been relocated in the northern kingdom when Assyria conquered Israel. In an attempt to infiltrate and disrupt the project, these people offered to help in the rebuilding. They wanted to keep a close eye on what the Jews were doing. They were hoping to keep Jerusalem from becoming strong again. The Jews, however, saw through the ploy. Such a partnership with unbelievers would have led God’s people to compromise their faith. Believers can expect opposition when they do God’s work. It may come in many forms – compromising alliances, discouragement, intimidation, or unjust accusations.

These enemies claimed to worship the same God as Zerubbabel and the rest of the Jews. In one sense, this was true; they worshiped God, but they also worshiped many other gods. In God’s eyes, this was not worship – it was sin and rebellion. True worship involves devotion to God alone. To these

foreigners, God was just another idol to be added to their collection. Their real motive was to disrupt the Temple project. Believers today must beware of those who claim to be Christians but whose actions clearly reveal that they are using Christianity to serve their own interests.

Vs. 4 – 5 – Discouragement and fear are two of the greatest obstacles to completing God’s work. Most often they come where and then you least expect them. Discouragement eats away at our motivation and fear paralyzes us so we don’t act at all. Recognize these common barriers. Remember that God’s people in every age have faced these problems and with God’s help overcome them. By standing together with other believers, you can overcome fear and discouragement and complete God’s will.

Vs. 6 – 23 – As outlined earlier, Ezra summarizes the entire story of the opposition to building the Temple, the walls, and other important buildings in Jerusalem. Chronologically, 4:6 fits between Ezra chapters 6 and 7. 4:7-23 refers to the events between Ezra chapter 7 and Nehemiah chapter 1. Ezra grouped them here to highlight the persistent opposition to God’s people over the years and God’s ability to overcome it.

4:24 – Ezra resumes his chronological account here. It may have been ten years since the Israelites had worked on the Temple. It did not begin again until 520 BC, the second year of Darius’s reign.

Follow Up Questions...

1. It is good to be aware of the methods commonly employed by adversaries to halt God’s people and God’s work. What methods have you experienced? How did you overcome them?
2. What is a current situation in your life that is requiring you to place your faith in God? How can you lean on times in the past when God has honored your faith when you have trusted in Him?
3. The Jewish people were facing a “new season” as they returned and rebuilt the Temple and city. What “new season” do you sense that God has for you in the near future? How are you seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit in that season?

A few helpful guides when facing opposition/persecution/trouble...

- **Remember, opposition and trials are normal.** If we are following God and His plan for us, things are going to get in our way!
- **Believers may have to battle discouragement.** When things get hard, it is easy to slip into discouragement and fear.
- **Our opponent cannot win!** The Lord always gets His way, and His purposes always triumph in the end. He has already won!
- **God’s Word can strengthen and stir our spirits for the fight.** God’s Word is applied by His Spirit to bring deep-seated transformation. Let it move inside you!

Closing Prayer

Father, we cherish your presence with us. You are always near and always ready to take us back when we have turned away from You. Forgive us, Father, for thinking we don’t need You. Help us to be faithful in good times and bad. Give us the courage to tell the world You are our God. Amen.

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Session 3 – Rebuilding Again & Resolution

THURSDAY, June 27 6:30 PM

Ezra Chapters 3 & 4

Facebook Live
