

## RENOVATIONS

When God called me to be a pastor, I never thought that calling would include remodeling a dilapidated building... but it did. Our church's former location in Stone Mountain was as an abandoned warehouse before we moved in. It needed a radical renovation. We proceeded to gut it, then rebuild...

And in the process, we learned renovations are never easy. You run into all kinds of snags, obstacles, and setbacks. Our experience taught me four important lessons about remodeling projects: "First, it takes longer than you planned. Second, it costs more than you figured. Third, it is messier than you anticipated. Fourth, it

requires greater determination than you expected."

This was also the experience of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple and renovate their homeland. Two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, describe the three waves of Jewish patriots who returned to Jerusalem.

The first return is in Ezra 1-6, under Zerubbabel, who rebuilds the temple.

Ezra 7-10 recounts the second return under Ezra, who encourages and rebuilds the people.

And the third return is in Nehemiah, who himself rebuilds the walls.

## RESERVATIONS

What's sad is the small number of Jews who returned to Jerusalem. Ezra 2:64 lists the total at 42,360. There were well over a million Jews in Babylon, but many had become too attached to their pagan surroundings. They were frozen to the familiar. Glued to the guaranteed. Chained to the comfortable. Why give up a soft and cushy existence to endure the rigors and dangers of an iffy outcome?

It reminds me of the prospective employer interviewing a young engineer fresh out of MIT. "What starting salary are you looking for?" The young man answered, "Well, somewhere around \$125,000 a year, depending on benefits." The employer said, "What would you say to 5 weeks vacation, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental,

matching retirement funds, and a company car leased every 2 years - say, a red Corvette?" The engineer sat up straight and said, "Wow! Are you kidding?"

The employer replied, "Yeah, but you started it."

The young engineer was like most people - he wanted it all handed to him.

God wanted His people back in His land. He opened the door to bring'em back, but it would not be easy. They would have to rise up and move out in faith! The choice was obedience, or comfort? God's way, or the easy way? At times we all have to make the same choice - will we follow God, or stay in Babylon?

## Devotion Box - Laying a Solid Foundation

When the foundation of the temple was laid, the priests and people responded with praise and thanksgiving. Ezra 3:11 tells us they sang and shouted, "For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel."

It was a glorious day. The most important phase of construction is the laying of the foundation. Without a solid foundation, the rest of the structure is in jeopardy.

And the same is true in the Christian life. In Matthew 7:24 Jesus said, "whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house

on the rock..." And it withstood the testing of the storm. Here's how you lay a solid spiritual foundation - by hearing God's Word, then applying it to your life. There is no other short cut. You build on Scripture.

This is how the church - the New Testament temple - lays a sturdy foundation. It exalts Scripture. It takes it seriously - by teaching it, by applying it to all aspects of life, by insisting on obedience to it. It's been said, "A pastor is like an electrician - he takes a room full of live wires and sees that they're properly grounded."

## JESUS AND CYRUS

The year was 536 BC, when dramatic events occurred along the Euphrates. In a miraculous turn of events the impregnable bastion of Babylon fell to a coalition of Medes and Persians.

The walls of the city were unbreechable, so the Persian general, Cyrus, dammed up the river that flowed under the walls. His troops entered Babylon through the dried-up riverbed. It was a complete surprise to the Babylonians, and overnight, the world's mightiest kingdom crumbles. King Cyrus takes the throne, and ushers in the Medo-Persian empire.

It had been Babylonian policy to deport the people they conquered back to Babylon. This was not the philosophy of the Persians. They figured their subjects would be happier if allowed to live in their native lands. Ezra begins with a copy of Cyrus' decree that specifically allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

It seems certain that King Cyrus was heavily influenced by Daniel. At the very moment the Persian troops were flooding into the city through the dried-up riverbed, Daniel was before the Babylonian king, Belshazzar, predicting God's judgment. Cyrus appointed Daniel to a high level post in his new cabinet.

I'm sure the first thing Daniel did was show King Cyrus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 44 and 45 predicted Cyrus' rise to power 100 years before he was born. Isaiah mentions Cyrus by name, and describes in detail events surrounding his takeover of Babylon. God referred to Cyrus as a deliverer of the Jews. *Cyrus* took it all *seriously*. He wants to live up to his *prophetic portrait*.

Cyrus not only issues the important decree, he backs it up with Persian dollars. He orders his subjects to help bankroll the project. He even returns the temple treasures taken by the Babylonians 70 years earlier.

Look at Ezra 1:5: "Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all

whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem." While God worked in the heart of Cyrus, He worked in the hearts of the Jews. Remember, some of the exiles had been in Babylon 70 years.

In addition, the prophet Jeremiah had counseled them to get jobs, build homes, settle in – they'd be in Babylon for awhile. Many Jews had become successful. They'd risen to positions of prominence. Daniel was a good example. As a result, few Jews wanted to return. Jerusalem was nothing but rubble. Rebuilding would be hard. Why bother, when life was comfortable on the banks of the Euphrates? This is why it took the Holy Spirit to move on their hearts – to stir'em up.

Guys, this whole story is a wonderful picture of what God wants to do in us. Jesus died, rose, and now sits on the throne of God. In the process, He overthrew spiritual Babylon, or the kingdom of Satan. Jesus is our Cyrus. He makes deliverance possible for everyone formerly under the dominion of Satan.

And His decree is the Gospel. It's the proclamation that allows us to rebuild and start over. Our venture was paid for on the cross. Even the former treasures Satan stole from us, have been returned. Talents have been redeemed, integrity recovered, relationships mended, joy rejuvenated, purpose restored. All that's left for us is to respond to the Holy Spirit's stirring, and rise up in faith to rebuild.

To become a Christian is to start over! Jesus does not tinker. He's not into slight alterations and minor modifications. He does more than fine tune. His intentions are not to help you attain your current goals, and reinforce your present lifestyle. Jesus brings a new direction. He builds a new lifestyle.

Jesus is not an accessory you add to an already crowded life. When Jesus becomes Lord, His goal is to completely remodel. He guts and starts over.

The Jews were uprooted, and replanted. That's His plan for us. Jesus uproots our worldly thinking and priorities, then He replants us in His spiritual kingdom. To become a Christian means leaving Babylon behind, and moving to a holy land.

### Devotion Box - Purest Praise

Ezra 3:12-13 tells us there were two reactions to the laying of the temple's foundation. The old men in the crowd – 80-90 years old - had seen Solomon's temple with their own eyes, and knew this rebuilt temple would pale in comparison. It was smaller, and it lacked the lavishness and ornamentation of the first temple. They wept. They realized afresh the consequences of their sin.

Whereas the young men shouted for joy! Their eyes were on the future. This was a significant step toward the reconstruction of their temple and nation.

We're told the weeping and the rejoicing blended together and formed a single sound. Perhaps, this is the purest praise – a combination of weeping and rejoicing. When we're most up-front about our sin we're most thankful for God's forgiveness.

Real praise is the combination of a *broken heart over the past* and a *blessed hope for the future*. Repentance and rejoicing. Sorrow over sin, and joy in Jesus!

### Devotion Box - Ezra the Expert

Ezra was not only a "*skillful scribe*", but in 7:11 he's called an "expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD..." Ezra is an expert in God's Word. Wow! How would you like to be known as a Bible expert?

Hey, what's your expertise?... everybody has an area in which they're an expert! It's where you've had the most experience, and invested the most time, and applied yourself to the greatest degree. It's where you've invested your intensity, passion, energy, and concentration.

Let me suggest when it comes to the Bible, we all should be an expert. Not just Ezra. Not just the pastor. "*But Sandy, the Bible is a big book. There's so much to assimilate.*" Hey, you feel about the Bible the way I feel about automotive repair, or baking cheese cakes, or stamp collecting – I could never become an expert.

Here's how you master a subject. Look at what's said of Ezra in 7:10: "(he) prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach..." Ezra became an expert in the Scripture the way you become an expert in any pursuit – *you prepare* - you put your heart into it – you study and seek, apply and share.

## ENCOURAGEMENT

During the 15 years temple construction had been halted, God sent two prophets to encourage the Jews and keep the flame of hope alive. Zechariah and Haggai ministered during the time of Zerubbabel.

The letter from Persia stopping the work was a punch in the gut to Zerubbabel, but Zechariah encourages him. In Zechariah 4:7 the prophet compares the job of building the temple to a mighty mountain, and asks, "Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'" Zerubbabel will succeed. He will conquer the mountain.

In verse 6 of the same chapter Zechariah reminds him how: "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit..." He needs to be patient and realize the work God has called him to do is a spiritual work. Zerubbabel has to rely not on human brains or brawn, but trust in the power of the Spirit.

Haggai is what eventually fuels the fire, and causes the Jews to resume the work. Haggai 1:4 was a cold slap in the face. He challenged the Jews who'd returned: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" In other words, you've built nice houses for yourselves, but neglected a dwelling place for God. Strong and sobering words - if that realization didn't light a fire under them nothing would!

## TIME TABLE

### **536 BC Medes and Persians conquer Babylon**

*Persian King Cyrus allows the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple.*

### **536 BC First Return**

*Zerubbabel rebuilds temple*

### **486-473 BC Story of Esther**

### **458 BC Second Return**

*Ezra rebuilds people*

### **445 BC Third Return**

*Nehemiah rebuilds walls*

## OPPOSITION

Guys, a work for God would be easy if it were not for what happens in Ezra 4. Opposition arises. Whenever God's people rise up to do a work for God, God's enemies will rise up to stop them.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "As soon as God starts to bless, the enemy starts to battle!" I love how Samuel Rutherford put it: "If we were not strangers on the earth, the hounds of the world would not bark at us."

There were a group of people living in the land - a mixed race of Israelites and foreigners - later called the Samaritans. For 70 years they'd enjoyed having things their way, and weren't happy the Jews were returning home. Surely, a Jewish resurgence would throw a damper on their party.

In Ezra 4, Zerubbabel's enemies try three tactics to hinder the rebuilding work - *infiltration, irritation, intimidation*. The devil will use the same three tools against us.

First, notice their attempt to *infiltrate*. Ezra 4:2, "they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' houses, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." They don't tell Zerubbabel they sacrificed to other gods as well. They're idolaters.

Verse 3, "But Zerubbabel and Jeshua (the priest) and the rest of the heads of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

Understand, often Satan poses as an angel of light. He approaches us with a friendly posture, speaking kind words, promising good intentions... but don't believe him. He wants to infiltrate in order to contaminate.

Whenever it's apparent that Satan can't wipe out a church, the next best move he can make is to join. Most of the time he can do far more damage from within than without. Beware, when the world appears to be our friend. It's not! The world and the church are headed in totally opposite directions.

When the enemies of Zerubbabel realized they won't be unable to infiltrate the ranks of the Jews they tried to *irritate* their efforts. Verse 4, "Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building..." They deluged Zerubbabel with hindrances and irritations - zoning ordinances, special use permits, building code compliances - anything just to irritate the Jews and cause them to conclude it wasn't worth the hassle.

Irritation is one of Satan's most effective tools. Song of Solomon 2:15 says it's "the little foxes that spoil the vines...". In other words, little distractions pile up and take a highest toll. The constant friction does the most damage to our resolve.

I learned this week the earth's termite population outweighs the earth's human population two to one. Can you imagine! There're a lot of termites out there trying to eat away the wood in your house, and there are a lot of little irritations trying to eat away at your joy, contentment, and peace of mind.

The third means the enemies of Zerubbabel use to hinder the work is *intimidation*. In chapter 4 they write an inflammatory letter to the king of Persia. A new ruler has taken Cyrus' place, and the Samaritans hope they can influence him against the Jews. Their malicious letter is recorded in 4:11-16.

The letter refers to Jerusalem's past, and warns the king if he allows the city to be rebuilt the Jews will rebel against Persia just as they rebelled against Babylon. And the king agrees with the Samaritans. His response is in 4:17-22. He shuts down construction of the temple for 15 years. The foundation was laid in 535 BC. The work ceased shortly thereafter, and was not resumed until 520 BC.

The enemy was unable to stop God's work and purposes, but the opposition was tenacious and fierce. Zerubbabel had to be vigilant.

If you have questions on tonight's study, email Pastor Sandy - [sandyadams@calvarychapel.org](mailto:sandyadams@calvarychapel.org)

Calvary Chapel Announcements - June 11, 2000

**6/15 Thurs—Thrilling Thursday**

**6/19 Mon -6/23 Fri—Junior High Retreat at St. Simon's Island**

**7/24 Mon - 7/27 Thurs—Kid's Camp 2000 at FDR State Park**

**7/22 Sat- 7/29 Sat - Senior High Mission Trip at Saltillo, Mexico**

Next Bible Scan - June 18 - Nehemiah 1-13

### Devotion Box - The Principle of Separation

"...yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this." - Ezra 10: 3

### Bible Scan Memory Verse

Ezra 9:1 tells us, the people "have not separated themselves". As followers of Jesus, we are called to live lives separate from the world.

This is an important principle, but it's one that's easily misunderstood. Often this is interpreted to mean that as Christians we should separate ourselves from people spatially or culturally. In the Middle Ages, monks and priests literally went off into the mountains and deserts to separate themselves from the world – spatial separation. In the church I grew up in we separated ourselves culturally. We refused to listen to rock music, wore crew cuts, and peg-leg pants.

In the Old Testament spatial and cultural separation was important. God was building a physical kingdom, so separation was called for in the areas of culture and proximity. Physical, as well as spiritual separation, was to be practiced.

Notice the concern in Ezra 9:2, "the holy seed is intermingled with the peoples of those lands." The Jewish genealogy needed to remain pure to insure fulfillment of the Messianic promises – that to David and Abraham a Savior would be born. But this is no longer necessary under the New Testament. God's kingdom is spiritual – not cultural, physical, racial. Jesus reigns in the heart.

He's no longer concerned about holy seed being intermingled with gentiles. Instead, He cares about truth intermingled with error, love intermingled with lust, and godliness intermingled with selfishness. Today, God doesn't care about the pants we wear. He cares about the values we share. His truth is cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, trans-global. He wants us to be separate from the world, alright - but in terms of values, priorities, and loyalties.

## THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

In chapter 10 Ezra dissolves the unlawful marriages. Which brings up a point... were these Jews right in divorcing their wives?

Malachi 2:6 assures us that God hates divorce. Scripture only sanctions three situations where God allows for divorce and remarriage. First is adultery (Matthew 5). Second is abandonment (1 Corinthians 7). Third is when a guilty party repents, and there's no opportunity to reconcile with the spouse. But this is not one of those situations...

It reminds me of the two boll weevils who grew up in South Carolina. One boll weevil went to Hollywood and became a famous actor. The other stayed behind in the cotton fields. His life never amounted to much. And of course, the boll weevil who stayed in South Carolina was always known as *the lesser of two weevils*.

In my opinion, what happens in Ezra 10 is another case of choosing the lesser of two weevils – I mean, evils. Either option would not have been right... If the marriages remained intact, the Messianic line could be lost, and the nation lured back into idolatry. Whereas, if they divorce their wives they've committed a sin, and deprived their kids of a father.

Which brings up another question... isn't this the situation every believer faces when married to an unbeliever? If they could do this in Ezra 10, why does Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 teach that a believer married to an unbeliever should not terminate the marriage lest through their love and faith end up converting their lost spouse?

Here's the difference... the New Testament believer packs a power the Old Testament saint lacks. We have a new nature, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This enables us to be the influencer, rather than the influencee.

This is why Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 held high hopes that the believer could positively influence their unbelieving spouse. The Spirit of God lives within us. Whereas, Ezra knew there was a high probability the Jews in Jerusalem would be negatively influenced by their unbelieving spouses. Thus he condoned divorce. To sum it up, Ezra 10 was a special case. A one-time occurrence in history.