

Rebuild: Ezra and Nehemiah

Week Two

Day One

Real Estate

Read Ezra 2.

Ezra chapter 2 is a lot of names and numbers, and we aren't going to spend a lot of time here. But don't rush past it in your reading! There's something hidden here in plain sight – just one verse – that I want you to see before we move onto chapter 3.

To appreciate it, you have to go back seventy years to the time right before Babylon conquered Judah and started hauling everyone off into exile. The prophet Jeremiah was trying to warn the Israelites that trouble was coming if they didn't turn their lives around. Let's hear from some of the people who lived in Jerusalem at the time ...

Witness #1: Living in Jerusalem is great – we live inside safe city walls, we have plenty of food, everybody is really friendly. Really there's only one part of living in Jerusalem that's a chore. There is one man in the city who will ... not ... shut up. His name is Jeremiah.

He is a public nuisance and he must be stopped. Last weekend I was with some of my friends eating dinner downtown. It was a perfect night, we were sitting out at a table on the sidewalk – there was candlelight, the food was great, everybody was enjoying their meal after a long workweek.

And then, we hear yelling. Loud yelling. And down the street, right through the middle of town comes Jeremiah. And on his shoulders he's carrying a yoke, like you'd use to plow a field with cows.* I don't know where he got a yoke, there are no farms inside the walls of Jerusalem.

Anyway, he's yelling like a crazy person – “Hey everybody, see what I've got here? You guys may as well all get one and put it on, because you're all going to be worked like cows when the Babylonians take over the city! You're all going to be slaves, so get ready now!”

What is he even talking about? Babylonians? Anyway, crazy Jeremiah comes right up to our table, where we're all eating and he yells, right in our faces, “Enjoy your food now

ladies, because all you'll be eating is Babylonian food soon!" It was so embarrassing.

Witness #2: Yes, Jeremiah is my next-door neighbor, and he is the oddest guy I've ever met. This dude bought these really expensive clothes, made from linen – only the priests wear linen. Really fancy stuff. And I saw him come home with it, so I said, "Hey Jeremiah! Those clothes look great!"

Did he say, "Hey, thanks, man!"? No. He grumbled to himself, took the clothes, and sat them underneath a muddy rock.** And then walked away! And he left the clothes there, under the muddy rock ... for three weeks! It rained on them, who knows what kind of animals probably used the bathroom on them, and he left them there for three whole weeks.

Then, when he finally goes out and gets them three weeks later, he yells, "Everybody see these clothes? See how they're ruined? Babylon is going to ruin all of you people the same way!" Jeremiah spent a lot of money on those clothes, and then ruined them just to make his crazy point. He is insane.

Witness #3: The other day I was looking out my window at work, and here comes Jeremiah carrying a huge rock up the hill, and he drops it. And then a few minutes later, here he comes with another giant rock, and he drops it next to the first one.

All afternoon, Jeremiah carries these huge rocks up the hill and he makes this pile of ten or fifteen huge rocks, they must have weighed 60 or 70 pounds each. And then, he starts swinging a pick, and I realize, he's trying to dig a hole in the pavement. For two days he digs and finally gets a pretty big hole dug. And then he starts putting all his rocks into the hole.***

Finally I just went down there, and I walked up to him and I had to ask, "Jeremiah, dude, what are you doing?" He said, "I'm building a foundation." I said, "A foundation? For what?" He said, "Well, the Babylonians will be here soon, so I figured I might as well start building them a palace."

What is this guy's obsession with Babylon? Nobody is coming after us, and even if they did, we live in the safest city in the world. We have a huge wall around us. Also – we have God! God said he'd protect us, we're his people. We have nothing to worry about.

* Jeremiah 27

** Jeremiah 13

*** Jeremiah 43

God instructed Jeremiah to do several crazy things to try and get his

peoples' attention. But none of them worked. And it wasn't long before all of Jeremiah's warnings came true. Babylon arrived, broke down the walls of Jerusalem, and started the long process of hauling everyone off.

And you would think that this would be a time for Jeremiah to say, "I told you so." But he didn't. Instead, in the middle of all the fires, and the chaos, and the occupying soldiers, he did the single craziest thing he did in the book of Jeremiah.

God came to Jeremiah and told him to buy a field from his cousin. This doesn't sound as crazy as carrying a yoke around Jerusalem, but you have to think about the context – Jerusalem has fallen. Everyone knows they are all about to be hauled off to Babylon. Why would you buy a field that you know you'll never get to use?

Making it even crazier is that this field is in a location called Anathoth. Anathoth sat just northeast of Jerusalem – an area that was currently occupied by Babylonian soldiers. Why buy a field that has already been taken over by a foreign army?

But Jeremiah does it –

"So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel. I paid him seventeen silver shekels. I followed all the proper procedures: In the presence of witnesses I wrote out the bill of sale, sealed it, and weighed out the money on the scales. Then I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy that contained the contract and its conditions and also the open copy—and gave them to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah. All this took place in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and the witnesses who had signed the deed, as the Jews who were at the jail that day looked on. Then, in front of all of them, I told Baruch, 'These are orders from God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel: Take these documents—both the sealed and the open deeds—and put them for safekeeping in a pottery jar.'" (Jeremiah 32:6-14, MSG)

Why did God want Jeremiah to buy this field? What is the point of making this real estate transaction when everything around him is falling apart?

For the answer, write out Jeremiah 32:15 in the space below.

By buying that field, Jeremiah gave God's people hope. Jeremiah bought a field with enemy soldiers camped on it. Jerusalem is on fire. Everyone knows they are about to be hauled off to another country. But this real estate purchase showed the people of Jerusalem something they needed to remember in the days to come – **God has plans beyond this mess.**

And that brings us back to Ezra chapter 2. It's just a list of names and places. But there's one verse in particular that stands out.

Write Ezra 2:23 in the space below.

128 people move into a neighborhood. It would be easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. Just a small notation in someone's chart. But the meaning is powerful. God keeps his promises. He's always looking beyond the current situation toward a better outcome for his people, and he *always* delivers on his promises.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

You, like Jeremiah, have been called to do crazy things in this broken world. Things that don't really make sense if this current life is all there is. But when you do them, you are helping to lay the foundation for a kingdom that is coming. Every time you do one of the crazy things in the list below, you are *prophesying* to your friends and neighbors about the world that is to come.

- Forgiving someone who will never treat you right.
- Loving enemies instead of defeating them.
- Giving generously instead of keeping for yourself.

- Caring for people who can't do anything back for you.
- Refuse to pay anger back with anger.

Ask yourself: What is a way I can “buy a field” in my current family, work, or social situation – a way I can live so differently from the people around me that it points toward the future I know is coming?

Day Two

A “Start Here” Sign

Read Ezra 3:1-6.

When I was a kid at Saffel Street Elementary, every year we did a Thanksgiving play. The kids would all divide up – some would play Indians, some would play pilgrims. And our parents and grandparents would come watch us act out the story of not only the first Thanksgiving, but also the story of the pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock and starting the very first settlement in what would become the United States.

I recently read an article that called Plymouth Rock “the most disappointing historical site in the United States.” I have never been there, so I went online to see a picture of it. In my mind, I’d always thought of it as a giant boulder, something that the Mayflower would have docked next to, so that the Pilgrims could triumphantly step down onto it.

But I was wrong!



The article said that over *one million* visitors from around the world travel to Plymouth Rock each year, only to discover that it’s no bigger than a rock you might find in your neighbor’s landscaping.

I thought about Plymouth Rock last week when I was reading Ezra chapter 3. In Ezra 3, the returning exiles finally make it back to Jerusalem. Most had never been there before. Only the very oldest Israelites could remember what the city was like before.

The trip had taken four months, and along the way those older folks painted a picture of what Jerusalem was like for the exiles – A glorious temple whose gold shone in the reflection of the morning sun. A city where you could sit on the walls and catch breathtaking views of the surrounding hills and farms. Family homes that had been passed down from generation to generation.

But after four months of anticipation, what do the exiles find? A city in ruins. The temple had been completely destroyed, torn to the ground and stripped of all its gold and decoration. The walls and gates had been toppled, leaving burned debris everywhere. The city's roads were impassable due to the rubble.

So as the exiles return, it must have been disappointing. All the hope and excitement they had when they left Babylon was starting to feel more like despair.

To make matters worse, as they arrive they discover that the areas around Jerusalem had been re-populated by foreigners. Foreigners who did not want them there and were already starting to make it known.

So what do the exiles do? There's a temple to rebuild. Walls and gates to fix. Tons and tons of debris to clear. So where do you start?

Have you ever been there? In a situation where the circumstances are dire, and there are so many things that have to be fixed that you don't even know where to start? If so, Ezra 3:1-6 is a giant "Start Here" sign from God. **Start with worship.**

Dale Ralph Davis says it like this in his commentary on Ezra 3 – "Worship occurs as a 'nevertheless' in the face of the world's pressure."

I think that's a great way to think about it. When everything is stacked against you, and you have no idea what to do, and you don't have any resources to even start getting things right, what do you do? In the middle of the craziness, build an altar.

You're busy, and you're tired, and your schedule is so full you don't have time to think. But you build an altar anyway – you carve out time and space in the middle of the madness to get on your knees and thank God for all he has done for you in the past, and all you trust him to do for you in the future.

When your life feels overwhelming—marriage strained, finances tight, faith shaky, future uncertain—the temptation is to fix everything first and worship later. Ezra 3 says: *reverse that order*. Don't wait until things are stable to worship. Worship is how God stabilizes you. It's you turning over control and authority to someone much more capable than you.

Praise is a recognition of who we think God is – that he is powerful, capable, loving, a promise keeper, and truly *good*. Recognizing and speaking these things helps us to see our circumstances and problems as less dangerous and intimidating than we thought.

How much worship is in my life right now? Do I have space for it?

Reserve some time today just for praising God.

Day Three

A Burning Stick Snatched from the Fire

So who is in charge of the worship of the people as they return to Jerusalem? A man named Jeshua.* He was the grandson of Seraiah, the last Chief Priest of Israel before the exile began.

According to 2 Kings 25:18-21, how did Seraiah's term as Chief Priest end?

According to 2 Chronicles 36:14, was he a good Chief Priest?

This raises a question. Wouldn't now be a time to start back with a clean slate? Can we trust this family to lead God's people spiritually after they were so bad at it for so many generations?

Read Exodus 40:12-15.

The reason Jeshua was chosen to be the first Chief Priest of Israel after the exile, even though his family line had such a terrible track record in that job, was that God had promised his ancestor Aaron that the job would always stay in his family.

As we make our way through Ezra and Nehemiah, we will occasionally jump into Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These books contain the stories of three prophets that God sends to Jerusalem to help guide his people.

We will see that there are passages of scripture from these three books that line up with passages from Ezra and Nehemiah. And Zechariah chapter 3 lines up with Ezra chapter 3.

In Zechariah chapter 3, we learn something about Jeshua.

Read Zechariah 3.

Zechariah chapter 3 is a vision that the prophet Zechariah was given about Jeshua, the Chief Priest. In this vision, Satan and God are having an argument about Jeshua.

Satan's argument – "How could you allow someone like Jeshua to lead your people? He's a sinner! This whole return from exile is going to fail! Jeshua is not worthy for this job, he's going to ruin everything. You can't use someone like him for a job this big!"

According to verse 3, was Satan right?

Satan wasn't saying anything about Jeshua that was untrue. He really was a sinner. He really was unworthy to do everything God needed him to do for his people. But God makes a counterargument.

What is God's counterargument in verses 2 and 4?

What you are seeing Satan do here in Zechariah 3 is what Satan has always done, and is still doing today.

Fill in the blank below. What title does Revelation 12:10 give Satan?

"The a_____." **

Satan's role is to accuse you, in front of God, of all the ways you are broken and unfit. He says that you are a liar. He says that you are lazy. He says that you are too weak. He says you are un-useful to God because you are so broken. And most of all, he says you are *unworthy* to be in God's family. He argues to God that you should be abandoned.

And here's the problem – everything he says in his role as the accuser is true. You really are way too sinful to be a part of God's family. You really are way too broken to be useful for anything. You really should be punished and left for dead.

Fortunately, Satan is not the only person talking about you in God's courtroom.

Fill in the blank below. What title does 1 John 2:1 give Jesus?

"A_____."

In God's courtroom, Satan is accusing you – saying out loud all the things that should keep you out of God's family. He is the prosecutor. But fortunately you have a lawyer, an *advocate*. Jesus is making the case for you to stay in the family of God.

But he is not saying you are a good person. He is not trying to convince God that Satan is wrong in his assessment of you. Jesus is making a completely different kind of argument.

In the space below, write out Romans 8:31-35:

According to these verses, what did Jesus do that makes us able to stay in God's family?

Jesus says to God, “Yes, this person is broken, yes, this person is sinful, and yes, this person has failed to live up to a holy enough standard to be in your presence. But I have snatched him out of the fire like a stick! I have taken away his filthy clothes and given him new ones to wear. I have accomplished this by living a perfect life and dying as a sacrifice. I have made this person righteous.”

Satan brings charges. Jesus presents scars.

What are the things Satan can say about your life as a reason for God to keep you out of his family?

Pray a prayer of thankfulness for Jesus.

*The NIV calls him “Joshua,” but all other modern translations and most commentaries refer to him as “Jeshua,” so we will use that in this study. Either is correct. It is the same Hebrew name given to the Joshua who led Israel against Jericho, and it is the same Hebrew name Mary gave to the Messiah in Luke 2. We call him “Jesus” because it is the Greek form of the name, and the New Testament was written in Greek.

**Another great example of Satan as accuser is the beginning of the book of Job.

Day Four

Day of the Small Things

Read Ezra 3:7-13.

These verses describe the laying of the foundation of the temple. Work is finally under way! It's going to be a long time before everything is done (as we'll see) but everything has now started. And the people who had grown up in exile are excited that work is now underway.

But there are a group of Israelites who are *not* as excited.

According to verse 12, which group of people wept when they saw the foundation of the new temple?

Why might the people who had seen the original temple be upset with the foundation of the new one?

The Bible doesn't tell us for sure, but we can make a pretty good guess at why they were upset. This new temple just wasn't going to be anything like the temple Solomon built. It wasn't going to be as big because they didn't have the same amount of workers and materials Solomon did. But it also wasn't going to be as *glorious*. This new temple wouldn't have nearly the gold and treasure that Solomon's had.

Let's jump back for a minute to the day Solomon's temple opened so that we can see one of the biggest differences between the two temples.

Read 2 Chronicles 5.

According to verses 7-10, what was the centerpiece of Solomon's temple?

The Ark of the Covenant was the main attraction of Solomon's temple. It was the centerpiece because it didn't just *represent* the presence of God, it *guaranteed* it. Wherever it went, the Israelites could be sure God would be there. It led them into battle and gave them victory after victory.

But the ark would not be in this new temple. It seems to have been destroyed during the Babylonian siege. And never again would God's people win a great military battle. Those days were over.

So for the older exiles who remembered what the old temple was like, the laying of the new foundation was a day of weeping. "It's not going to be nearly as big! It's not going to be nearly as beautiful! There is no ark! What a disappointment."

God understood their sadness, and he sent a message to them through the prophet Zechariah.

*Then the word of the Lord came to me: "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. **Who dares despise the day of small things**, since the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel?"* (Zechariah 4:8-10)

God says to the exiles, "I'm not worried about the size of the temple. I'm not worried about how good it will look. You won't even need an ark. All you need is me. Your circumstances may have changed, but I haven't."

Compare 2 Chronicles 5:13 with Ezra 3:11. Write the lyrics to the song that was sung on both occasions.

The Israelites' circumstances may have changed, but God hadn't. He was still good. He still loved them. That's all they needed.

Are you someone who is currently living in “the day of the small things”? Maybe you are working in a job that to you seems really insignificant. Maybe your finances aren’t as solid as you thought they’d be at this stage of your life. Maybe your role in the Kingdom of God is smaller than you hoped it would be. Maybe a mistake you made in your life has greatly *limited* what your life can be based on our culture’s standards.

God’s message to you is this – “Do not despise the day of the small things.”

God loves to use the small things to bring his glory to earth. The writer Scott Hubbard reminds us, “God’s kingdom, which will one day cover the earth, does not begin big. It grows from an old man and his barren wife (Genesis 11). A mustard seed (Matthew 13). Twelve uneducated men (Acts 1). An embryo in the womb of a virgin (Isaiah 9).”