

EZRA

Lesson 6, Chapters 3 and 4

As we continue in Ezra chapter 3 today, let's review last week for just a moment. Let us always keep in mind that the underlying foundation for both Ezra and Nehemiah is the zealous desire of many thousands of emancipated Jewish exiles for restoration and renewal of proper Yehoveh worship based on obedience to God's divine Torah. Yet we are in a historical section of the Old Testament that seeks to give us a historically accurate account of the Jews' return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple; so timing and sequence of events is critical to our understanding. Unfortunately we find at the opening verses that the timeline of events here and for the next several chapters is difficult to follow; there seems to be obvious discrepancies and that is partially (but not entirely) because of our modern use of chapter breaks, paragraph breaks, and verse designations that can throw us off course and create wrong impressions. That is, we've all grown up and been educated to take for granted that a change in chapters marks a change in scene or circumstance or time; and that the end of one paragraph and beginning of the next marks a change in thought, perhaps time, perhaps a change of characters. So when we read the Bible and we see a long series of words (that are usually sentences) and this series of words is given a verse number, and then we see two or more verses strung together in the same paragraph we assume that this is just an ongoing description or discussion of a continuing action.

But we have to grasp that this is not at all how the Bible was written. Bible books were written in one long sequence of sentences without chapters or paragraphs or verse markings. It was in the 13th century A.D. when scholars decided to break Bible books up into chapters, and then later still when they decided to break chapters up into paragraphs, and then later still in the 16th century when they broke up chapters into verses. Their choices reflected European literary conventions from those eras, and not Hebrew literary conventions from ancient times. Most of the time this poses no problems; sometimes it does. And here in Ezra it does.

The problem we discussed in our last lesson dealt with the timeline of chapter 3 and how it was impossible that only months after leaving Persia the returning Jews already had enormously expensive cedar logs and wood paneling on the way from Lebanon in order to rebuild the Temple. Designing plans for the Temple and then the logistics of getting logs from the far north to Jerusalem was an epic undertaking that would take years, and not months. So how do we account for verse 6 that says in the 7th month of the year, right after their arrival to Jerusalem, they rebuilt the altar but the foundation of the Temple had not be laid, but then in verse 7 we have logs arriving from Lebanon, and stone workers and other craftsmen being paid for their labors that can involve nothing else but Temple reconstruction?

The answer is that using the modern Western literary convention of paragraph breaks, the break that our modern Bibles have inserted after verse 7 should have gone after verse 6 instead. That is, verse 6 ends a thought and a time, and verse 7 starts a new thought at a new time. Thus Chapter 3 verses 1 – 6 speak of events during the reign of Cyrus, the King of Persia

(who released the Jews), and starting in verse 7 we leap ahead in time to the first years of King Darius, who came 2 kings later after Cyrus. Therefore, where our Bibles have created a paragraph break between verses 7 and 8, we need to erase that and just let verse 7 flow right into verse 8 without any kind of break. Verse 7 and verse 8 then are connected and are one continuing thought and action. Verse 6 and verse 7 are NOT connected and represent two entirely different scenarios separated by some number of years.

Thus in verse 8 we're told that the timeframe that is being dealt with is in the 2nd year of certain peoples' arrival at the ***beth ha-elohim Yerushalayim***: the House of the God of Jerusalem. And among them was ***Zerubbabel*** and ***Yeshua*** the High Priest. A casual reading would suggest that this means the 2nd year of the exiles' return to Jerusalem, however the writer makes it clear that this is not his meaning by adding a qualifier that uses the words: "of their coming to the House of God". Because the context of this verse begins in verse 7, then we know that this is pointing at the time when the work on rebuilding the Temple was finally beginning by collecting all the necessary building materials. So after the rebuilding of the altar and the immediate celebration of Sukkot (at the beginning of the chapter), some time passed and now later the Temple construction is going to begin. And so in verse 9 the supervision of the Temple workers is put into the hands of the leading families, all Levites of the line of Aaron, and they are here named.

After laying the foundation for the Temple a big celebration was held. Let's be clear; the only accomplishment at this point was the foundation and no more. But considering the difficulties and political opposition that the returnees had faced, and the years that had gone by just in getting to this point, it is obvious that they felt a holy convocation was called for to commemorate this auspicious day. We're told that the ***cohanim***, the priests, were in their priestly robes that had been donated by the heads of the clans, and the Levites played cymbals (two metal discs that you bang together to establish a beat). Interestingly we're told that this order of ceremony was something that King David had long ago established as a tradition and it seemed right to them to re-establish it.

There was also singing (no doubt of Psalms), which consisted of two kinds: songs of praise and songs of thanksgiving. And here we need to take note that the thanksgiving songs spoke of God's ***chesed*** (His loving kindness) towards ***Israel***.... not towards Judah. This is important in that we need to keep reminding ourselves that the nation of Israel was not being re-established by the return of the Jews. It was only the Jews returning to repopulate the Persian province of Judah. But during their return from the Babylonian exile the Jews came to the determination that they represented all 12 tribes of Israel (all Israel), and not merely the 2 that they really were (Judah and Benjamin). This became an embedded cultural belief and a non-negotiable reality to them (despite this being historically and biblically inaccurate), and has remained so for 2500 years. Only today, in our time, is this tradition starting to come undone as the 10 lost tribes of Israel have re-emerged, are demanding to immigrate to Israel, and have made it clear that the Jews are not "all Israel", and that the members of the 10 tribes are not Jews.

And then verse 12 explains that despite the unfettered exuberance expressed by most Jews at this momentous event of the beginning reconstruction of God's House, some of the older Jews who had seen the Temple before it was destroyed were not very joyful. In fact they wept and

wailed in sorrow and disappointment for what they saw. But we have to ask ourselves, what is it that so upset them? They were witnessing a dedication of the foundations; not the structure. The only situation that I can imagine is that the foundation must have been of poor quality using much smaller foundation stones and/or the outline of the foundation must have indicated that the new Temple would be noticeably smaller than Solomon's Temple. We should note that earlier when the altar was rebuilt, the Scriptures say that it was rebuilt on the same foundations as the original altar meaning it was not only the same location but also the same size. So while the location of the new Temple would be the same as the original, its size would be somewhat less.

As an example; when we look at the Temple Mount today, we can easily see the contrast between the grandness of the carefully crafted huge stones the Jews used for first class construction versus the irregular smaller stones that the Muslim Turks used at a later time. The difference is glaring and so it's not hard to imagine why the older Judeans had a hard time with this.

Let's move on to chapter 4.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 4 all

Professor H.G.M. Williamson said something in one of his lectures that has always stuck with me. He said: "The work of God in all ages has known the pressures and persecutions of those who would seek to frustrate its advance". An astute observation and an important reality check for Believers in all eras. In chapter 3 we first heard of nearby political factions who threatened the returning Jews and inhibited the Temple construction such that it delayed its start. Now here in chapter 4 we get more specifics and even learn of opposition groups reporting these Jews to the Persian authorities as potential rebels and tax dodgers, with the hope of thwarting both the construction of the Temple and the restoration of the all-important defensive walls of Jerusalem. But to what end? Why would these groups be opposed to these projects? Well, as is the case with power and politics from time immemorial, different groups had different agendas and so there was not just a single cause or reason for the opposition, but several. We'll uncover some of these reasons as we proceed through this chapter and beyond.

The Bible shows us again and again that it is necessary for our spiritual maturity that God's worshippers become comfortable with being made uncomfortable. The Jews of the era of Zerubbabel and Ezra no doubt happily journeyed back to Jerusalem, King Cyrus's decree in hand, believing that what lay ahead was smooth seas, clear skies, near universal acceptance of their divinely inspired mission to rebuild their city and Temple, and that the only barriers to success would be the practical realities of time and funds to organize, plan, gather construction materials, and the inevitable delays caused by weather, errors, and schedules that were too aggressive. They seem to have been surprised, and became discouraged, at the unexpected and vehement opposition to their plans. Was God, perhaps, not in this after all? How could the Lord follow through with His promise to first exile the Jews for their unfaithfulness, then keep them in exile for 70 years, and then after a proper period of discipline send them home only to find their hopes and dreams blocked at every turn?

The Jews of the modern State of Israel also ask themselves this question regularly. How could God do the impossible by creating the reborn nation of Israel in but one day, then bring home Jews by the thousands from every corner of the globe, help them to win wars against the many enemies who surround and outnumber them 50 to 1, give them back their precious holy city of Jerusalem with the Temple Mount, and yet almost 50 years later they seem further away from their dream of building a new Temple (the 3rd) on the holy mount than ever before? What is stopping them? Money? No. Building materials? No. A Priesthood with their implements and the needed Temple furnishings? No, priests have been found and trained and the needed implements and furnishings are mostly completed and in storage. It is only the political opposition and threats from various groups nearby and far away; domestic and foreign. Jews and gentiles. Friends and foes.

The God-pattern is as Professor Williams so aptly proposed: "The work of God in all ages has known the pressure and persecutions of those who would seek to frustrate its advance". Risk and discomfort for God's people is usual. Opposition is normal. Having received what seems to be a clear, God directed purpose and mission does not mean a clear path will be provided to achieve it. All of these negative things are to be expected. Paul said this about that:

2Timothy 3:10-13 CJB

¹⁰ But you, you have closely followed my teaching, conduct, purpose in life, trust, steadfastness, love and perseverance-

¹¹ as well as the persecutions and sufferings that came my way in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

¹² And indeed, all who want to live a godly life united with the Messiah Yeshua will be persecuted,

¹³ while evil people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived themselves.

And Our Messiah left us with this important warning:

John 15:18-19 CJB

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, understand that it hated me first.

¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, the world would have loved its own. But because you do not belong to the world- on the contrary, I have picked you out of the world- therefore the world hates you.

Here's the thing: in a decision that is frankly unfathomable to me, our all powerful God determined to bring redemption to the world by means of a co-operative venture with mankind. This same God could have simply spoken and the world as we know it would be as easily brought to an end and renewed, as when He first created it. He could have made evil

impossible to exist; He could have supernaturally inhibited humanity from making evil an available choice; and He could bring about redemption without any human participation whatsoever. But in His eternal wisdom that is NOT the choice He made. Rather He has decided to place much responsibility in the hands of all those who call Him Lord. He has made it our job to tell everyone who will hear that the Lord is King, and the Lord is Savior. And of course we are well outnumbered by those who oppose this message, because it is not our message, it is God's. And it's a message that brings more anger, dissention and rejection than welcome and hope.

One of my all-time favorite movies is a WWII action drama called the Band of Brothers. This series follows the 101st Airborne (paratroopers), from training to D-Day, to victory in Europe. In one scene they are dropped smack into the middle of overwhelming German military forces. And when a Lieutenant realizes their precarious condition and complains to his superior, Captain Winters, that they are in grave danger and somebody has severely fouled up this situation, this excellent officer who leads them says: "We're paratroopers Lieutenant; we're supposed to be surrounded". Paratroopers weren't trained to avoid the enemy; they were trained to confront the enemy. Even more they were trained to take the fight to the enemy's territory. Captain Winter's attitude is precisely the one that God's people are supposed to have. It's not that if we're surrounded by the enemy that something is wrong; it is that if we're NOT, then something is wrong. It's not that if we're uncomfortable, out of step with the world, and find ourselves following God's commands but nothing good seems to be happening that means something's wrong; it is that if we're NOT facing discomfort and opposition that something is wrong.

The Jews of Zerubbabel's, then Ezra's, then Nehemiah's day had to learn that same lesson before God allowed the Temple to finally be built. But for a while, they seemed to take a path to try to find a political compromise in order to bring the desired result. Modern Israel is trying the same thing, and so is the Church in general; the approach is to look more like the world and give them most of what they want. Why? To alleviate the discomfort and to appease the opposition. To move out of the uncomfortable condition that in some ways is a sign that we are directly in God's will. Please don't take that last remark out of context or extend it too far. Christian cults have arisen and died out (only to rise again) who intentionally try to find ways to be persecuted; and if that doesn't work they harm themselves. It's not that we ought to go looking for trouble; it's that we should expect it when we encounter it because being devoted to the God of Israel means being an enemy to everything else. And when we do encounter it we need to regroup, and to be persistent and patient in our discomfort as we continue in our journey with Christ. Easier said than done, yes? But don't feel as though you're alone if at times you stumble or fail. Perhaps the most outspoken and courageous of all the Apostles was Paul. And he wrote this, which well characterizes our dilemma:

Romans 7:15-25 CJB

¹⁵ I don't understand my own behavior- I don't do what I want to do; instead, I do the very thing I hate!

¹⁶ Now if I am doing what I don't want to do, I am agreeing that the Torah is good.

17 But now it is no longer "the real me" doing it, but the sin housed inside me.

18 For I know that there is nothing good housed inside me- that is, inside my old nature. I can want what is good, but I can't do it!

19 For I don't do the good I want; instead, the evil that I don't want is what I do!

20 But if I am doing what "the real me" doesn't want, it is no longer "the real me" doing it but the sin housed inside me.

21 So I find it to be the rule, a kind of perverse "torah," that although I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me!

22 For in my inner self I completely agree with God's Torah;

23 but in my various parts, I see a different "torah," one that battles with the Torah in my mind and makes me a prisoner of sin's "torah," which is operating in my various parts.

24 What a miserable creature I am! Who will rescue me from this body bound for death?

25 Thanks be to God [, he will]!- through Yeshua the Messiah, our Lord!

Ezra chapter 4 opens with this classic deception of Satan: "Can't we all just get along?" The locals and those not far away from Jerusalem come to Zerubbabel and ask to join forces in their efforts to rebuild the Temple. Shocked, they receive a most harsh reply from Zerubbabel that pulls no punches; the offer is summarily rejected with no apologies. In fact it includes an insult and no hope for compromise.

Look at the opening half dozen words of verse 1: "When the ENEMIES of Judah and Benjamin...." The editor of Ezra makes it clear that these were not well meaning and sincere folks who wanted to be good neighbors, or were they a welcoming committee coming to the Jewish leadership. Rather they were downright enemies of the Jews who sought to portray themselves as friends or at least those sharing a common cause. As we will soon see, they are not enemies in the sense that Hitler was an enemy of France or the USA in WWII, but rather in the sense of cleverly trying to grab hold of the Jews' vision of rebuilding the Temple and restarting true Torah observant worship of God, and co-opting it to turn it into something more in line with their ways.

We can trace these "enemies" back to the beginning of chapter 3 when the Jews hurried to rebuild the altar of sacrifice so that they could perform the *tamid* (the daily burnt offering), celebrate Sukkot, and observe as many of the appointed times that require sacrifices as was possible. We are informed in verse 3 that some of the locals threatened the Jews about their plans, but the Jews went ahead anyway. And since this was only a few months after the returnees' arrival to Jerusalem, then we see that they began facing tough opposition almost immediately, and it would not let up over the years; rather it would stiffen.

These “enemies” claim that they “seek your God” and that they have been “sacrificing to Him”, “since the time of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria”. Who were these people? We’ll describe them more carefully later, but for now just know that they were mostly foreigners imported by the Assyrians to the area of Samaria and other parts of the former Kingdom of Ephraim-Israel, the kingdom of the 10 northern tribes. Recall that around 723 B.C. the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom and deported and scattered the 10 Israelite tribes all over Asia. Once the land was emptied of Hebrews, they began immediately to import people from other conquered nations to replace them. This was standard operating procedure for the Assyrian government; a nation or kingdom was overrun, the people were removed and scattered, and a different and foreign people were brought in to replace them. This produced a completely ruptured social fabric that the Assyrians believed made rebellion all the more difficult. No doubt there were family remnants of some of the 10 tribes who had for one reason or another escaped the Assyrian deportation well over 2 centuries earlier. But by now they were well assimilated through intermarriage with other ethnic groups, and through the typical pagan religions these foreigners had brought with them. So while a distant memory of their Hebrew identity might have existed in some, as well as an inclusion of Yehoveh in whatever multiple god pantheon they worshipped, they indeed would have nothing in common with these zealous and pious Jewish returnees who wanted to reinstitute the Temple services for purposes of strict obedience to the Law of Moses.

Is their claim to have been sacrificing on the altar in Jerusalem all during the time that Judah was in Babylon true? According to Jeremiah 41 it is. But what they might have actually sacrificed upon was probably closer to a heap of rubble than a real altar. And to whom were they sacrificing? Likely Yehoveh. However these folks worshipped multiple gods and so Yehoveh was just one of several; He was the god of Jerusalem to them. But now the altar was rebuilt by the returning Jews and they wanted to use it. This didn’t settle well with Zerubbabel, Yeshua, and the other Jewish leaders.

So the response was: “You and we have nothing in common”. Then added: “Koresh King of Persia ordered us to do it”. The first reason for their refusal was religious in nature, the second reason was political. Indeed, the King of Persia had given the responsibility to Zerubbabel and his returning Jewish caravan to rebuild the Temple; no authority was given for them to include anyone they chose to help.

The consequences of this abrupt and less-than-cordial response to those locals who wanted to help, but who were denied in a rather rough manner, isn’t hard to imagine. So in verses 4 and 5 we read that these folks began harassing and making life difficult for those Jews who sought to rebuild the Temple. They went so far as to bribe Persian government officials to frustrate any kind of progress on the structure. This active interference started in the latter years of Cyrus’s reign, continued throughout his son and successor Cambyses’ reign, then through the few weeks of an imposter who ruled immediately after Cambyses’ death, and then well into the reign of King Darius who followed the imposter. So what we learn is that up to the time of Darius (and Darius began to rule in 521 B.C., about 17 years after the Jews first returned to Judah) there was no progress yet made on the Temple. In fact, as I think we’ll see, the first foundation that was laid had to be redone a second time before they could actually start construction on the building.

Let's close with this thought. The Temple rebuilding project began with joy and high expectations. It was approached with reverence and enthusiasm to return to the true, Bible-based religion. But almost immediately they ran into ominous opposition. This opposition characterizes the remainder of the Book of Ezra and plays a substantial role in Nehemiah. Yet, in some ways, on the surface it might seem as though these troubles were self-made. A group of locals, who we shall call Samaritans for the sake of an easy label, came forward and expressed a desire to help and contribute. They were slapped-down quite harshly. And in the Middle East where the society has always operated on a shame and honor based system, such an offense as publically refusing an offer of aid and comfort (however insincere and manipulative the offer might really have been) results in shame being heaped upon the rejected parties, and this shame must be remedied or there will be revenge that continues interminably. This is what is happening in the Book of Ezra.

So should the Jews have been more charitable, understanding and accommodating to the Samaritans? Should they have acted "in love" and accepted their offer because it would no doubt bring at least a temporary time of peace and good will? My answer is that the Jews acted correctly; doing God's will often means going against the expected conventions and courtesies of this world. How could Zerubbabel and Yeshua allow these two groups to essentially merge into a common cause, thereby jeopardizing the identity of these returning Jews as faithful worshippers of the God of Israel alone?

This is one of those instances in the OT that is regularly used in Church sermons to show how the advent of Christ and His teachings demonstrate that the OT Jews should have reacted differently. They should have turned the other cheek; they should have let love rule. They should have shown Christian tolerance and allowed the merger with the Samaritans to happen and then let God worry about sorting it out later if need be. Thus in this same spirit and rationale we see efforts of some of the largest denominations today to try to find common ground with Islam; or to find ways to accept homosexuality as good and normal, and gay marriage as desirable and even applauded by Jesus. Why? Because it supposedly demonstrates our underlying values of love, mercy and peace.

The Jews led by Zerubbabel knew that they could not allow themselves to be joined with non-Believers and idolaters who had no interest in scrupulously following God's Word or they would lose the clear commission that God gave them to reinstitute true and proper worship. They must also have been tempted to find a suitable compromise with the Samaritans after months, then years, of barriers, roadblocks, threats, and no progress on rebuilding the Temple. But to their credit they remained mostly on the high road; they did what was right in God's eyes and let the chips fall where they may.

I can promise you that the Church will never be able to be salt and light to this dark world by means of an evolving compromise with what God calls evil nor can we be God's reapers of souls by the dilution of our strong identity with Yeshua. Painting our positions on Godly morality, on the nature of true Biblical religion, and on divinely commanded behavior in pale pastels instead of bold contrasting colors has led the body of Believers to the edge of irrelevance if not apostasy. Tolerance of sin, continued acceptance of false but familiar doctrines, and willing participation in whatever might be the current political and social

correctness that makes us feel good and allows us to maintain a close friendship with, if not admiration by, the world have to be curtailed and replaced with sincere obedience to the Lord at whatever the personal cost to us. This is one of the most important lessons and principles that we can learn from the Book of Ezra.

We'll continue with chapter 4 next time.