

From the Pulpit of



No One Is Irrelevant in God's Work

No. 2

Ezra 2:1-70

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Series: Ezra

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A couple of summers ago I read the book, "The Fault in our Stars" by John Green. It is the story of two teenagers in love and both of them are facing the reality of dying young of cancer. The guy, Augustus Waters, has some pretty deep disappointments of not being able to live a life of greatness and accomplish big things that will live on in a legacy. He wants to leave a mark upon this world and what bothers him the most is 'being another unremembered casualty in the ancient and inglorious war against disease.' But his girlfriend, Hazel Grace Lancaster (no relation), doesn't seek this hero mentality, but seeks to live a simple life of noticing the good things in the world and loving those near to her.

Many of us appreciate the sentiment and the simplicity of Hazel Grace to be content to play our small part on this earth. But most of us have the mindset of Augustus Waters; we want to make a dent and accomplish great things on this earth for God and be the hero with a lasting legacy. We read so many Bible stories of the Heroes of the Faith like Moses, David, Deborah, Esther, Peter and Paul. Many of us want to be great for God and be the Hero that makes a huge Gospel impact on the world. I hate to break it to you, but most of you won't be the hero. You won't be well known as billions will never have heard of you. You won't be a huge leader or accomplish big things. And the Good News is, that's okay. God has set it up that way. Rather than advancing His mission and work through heroes, God has chosen to use a corporate people called the church. And even though He uses great leaders, they are not alone in their work, because God also chooses to use normal people like us in the advancement of His work on this earth.

Context: This is the corporate reality that we are going to see today as we look at a variety of normal people playing their part in the advancement of God's work of renewal. Let's go ahead and turn to Ezra 2. Let's once again get our Biblical and historical bearings as we place the book of Ezra in an appropriate timeline: God created the world, Noah, Abraham, Israel goes to Egypt, Exodus out of Egypt, David, kingdom splits (Northern and Judah). Northern Kingdom destroyed, Judah exiled to Babylon due to sin, Exodus out of Babylon back to Jerusalem to rebuild, 400 years of Biblical silence, Jesus Christ.

The first 6 chapters in Ezra are about the original exiles (first wave) who returned to rebuild the Temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. This effort was led by Zerubbabel. Once we hit chapter 7, about 80 years have passed since the exiles have returned, then Ezra comes on the scene to establish the people in the ways of the Lord and His law. Ezra is part of

the latter returning exiles (second wave) to Jerusalem and he came about 13 years before Nehemiah, but their missions had some overlap. Nehemiah's mission was to build up the walls for security and Ezra's mission was to build the people up in the Law of the Lord. Ezra was focused on renewal, to see the people of God spiritually renewed in their commitment to the Lord. It's a story of starting over.¹ The Main Theme: God doesn't scrap His wayward people, but restores and renews them so they can worship Him.

What follows in chapter 2 is a list of those who returned. We will sometimes see lists like these in the Bible and the temptation is just to ignore them. Yet, let's stop and consider why this list may be here. On the surface it is a list of people and households that returned from exile to play a part in the rebuilding of the Temple. But I think one of the enduring reasons it was written in the Bible was to show us that God uses a variety of normal people to accomplish His work. No one is irrelevant in God's work. The advancement of God's work throughout the world doesn't just come through the well-known heroes, but also through normal people. God uses the whole people of God to accomplish His purposes, even you and me.

The Leaders - Ezra 2:1: "Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town." Last week we saw God stir up the Persian king Cyrus to issue a decree that allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple. The fact that there are 'exiles' is supernatural. We don't have a return from exile of the Northern kingdom that went into Assyria as they assimilated. But in the Babylonian exile, the Jews were pretty much held together and retained their unique identity, which enabled them to return from exile and settle in 'Jerusalem and Judah.'

Look at the list of their leaders in verse 2a: "They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah." Zerubbabel was a great man of God and an instrumental leader in rebuilding of the Temple (I don't know any parents naming their kids Zerubbabel. I'll pay \$5 to the first child at EBF named Zerubbabel). Another instrumental leader and almost always connected to Zerubbabel is Jeshua, the High Priest (Ezra 3:2). This is not the 'Nehemiah' of the Biblical book Nehemiah, as he will come 100 years later, nor is this the 'Mordecai' of the biblical book Esther. God used these leaders as instruments of leading back the first wave of exiles and getting a jump start on rebuilding the Temple. Though no one is irrelevant in God's work, that doesn't mean that leaders aren't necessary. Throughout history God has used men and women to lead His people in the advancement of His Kingdom. And these leaders tends to have several traits in common that have been summed up as "H3 Leadership": 'Be Humble, Stay Hungry, Always Hustle' (book by Brad Lomenick). These leaders during Ezra's time were humbled in discipline and leading from a place of humility, hungry for the Lord and to learn from Him and ready to hustle and work hard.

Now we move on to the list of returnees along with these leaders. Many debate why this list may be here: to demonstrate land rights, show who is Israelite by blood or possibly for tax purposes. Maybe it's just a list of those who returned and to show that no one is irrelevant to God's work. Let's consider some categories.

The Laity. Verses 2b-6: "The number of the men of the people of Israel: the sons of Parosh, 2,172. The sons of Shephatiah, 372. The sons of Arah, 775. The sons of Pahath-moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812." The 'sons of' is talking about Jewish families and

¹ *ESV Study Bible*, page 802.

extended families. Some are also listed by their location. Verse 21: “The sons of Bethlehem, 123.” Verse 28: “The men of Bethel and Ai, 223.” Verse 34: “The sons of Jericho, 345.” Whether or not they had family listings or locational listings, these are just normal everyday Jewish people coming back and getting established in the land. They mattered to God and were important to rebuilding.

Too many times those who work non-ministry jobs may be made to feel like they are second-class. Yet they play a part in God’s work on this earth. Those involved in the workplace are contributing to the common good and loving their neighbors. In addition, they are involved in the local church and building up the Body of Christ. If you are in a non-ministry job, we want to encourage you to flourish in your work with excellence and be involved in Gospel advancement.

The Religious Servants. Ezra 2:36-39: “The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973. The sons of Immer, 1,052. The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. The sons of Harim, 1,017.” A significant point to note on the priests is that they made up about 10% of the returnees. These men seemed eager to rebuild and worship in the house of the Lord. Not so much the Levites, as a very small number returned along with the singers and gatekeepers as we see in verse 40-42: “The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74. The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139.” The Levites would help the priests with their work. However, most Levites seemed more comfortable in Babylon rather than return to the menial work in Jerusalem, but some came back. Others also returned to help the Levites and do the grunt work, like the Temple servants in verse 43: “The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth...” In addition, Solomon’s servants from a past era also returned in verses 55, 58: “The sons of Solomon’s servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda...All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon’s servants were 392.” The Levites, temple servants, Solomon’s servants, the singers and gatekeepers voluntarily returned to do a lot of the behind the scenes menial grunt work. God sees and He is glorified. God’s work is advancing through normal unknown people.

The Unregistered. Some even came back to the land who were unable to prove their rightful Jewish descent and claim land. Verses 59-63: “The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers’ houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel...Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz,... These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.” God is Holy and He may only be approached during this time by those with the right descent. Until their background could be determined, they were barred from serving at the Temple. Even though they couldn’t prove ancestry, they still returned. You don’t have to have all issues worked out before serving the Lord and taking steps of faith.

The Generous. People not only returned, but many gave sacrificially to the rebuilding of the Temple. Verses 68-69: “Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests’ garments.” Not only do they leave the comfortable surroundings

of Babylon to go and rebuild the house of the Lord, but they give sacrificially to see it rebuilt. God is using normal people and their sacrificial giving to do His work.

If you are like me, you may struggle with the concept of God working through normal unknown people. I don't want to be normal and unknown, but a great hero of the faith. The problem is that I suffer from 'individualitis.' It's all about me rather than about us as God's church. I once heard a teacher named Andrew Wilson list seven ways you can tell if you suffer from 'individualitis.' I found it very helpful, so I want to share it with you in closing.

How to Tell if you Suffer from Individualitis

1. You think, 'I have a destiny,' rather than 'We have a destiny.' Do you see God's plan in the world and your plan in the world more individually or corporately? Wilson asks if there is anything in your heart that elevates your destiny above the destiny of God's people?
2. You read the Bible and think, "This is for me," rather than "This for us." Of course, you want to read the Bible and make personal application, but at times we leave out the promises to us as a people. An example would be Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." This is not an isolated promise to an individual, but to the people of God. Broaden your scope as you read the Word of God.
3. You view the church as optional and not essential. If you are just popping in here for a little inspirational boost, then you are missing the point. The church is where it's at and it is not optional, but essential to God's work on this earth.
4. If you think, "I have this gift, how will the church use it" rather than "The church has this need, how can I serve it."
5. The Gospel is just for you and never in terms of a people, Israel or the Church.
6. Evangelism is just you alone rather than with the whole church. Perhaps you picture sitting by the pond with a single pole rather than the Biblical view of a catching fish with a huge net where we all need to be involved.
7. Culture change happens as great men rise up and change history rather than complex networks of people bringing about change. Yes, there are great men and women doing great things but it's not as if the rest just sit there and observe. We all are involved in culture change as we function as the Body of Christ.²

Conclusion: Andrew Wilson concludes by saying, "Don't ask, 'What am I doing to impact the world for God? but 'What are we doing to impact the world for God?'" His emphasis is good as the church is the point and your point is to be a part of the church. Destiny is corporate. No one is irrelevant in God's work.

The mission of God is advancing and we all play our part and do what we do together for the glory of God. God knows, God sees and God rewards ordinary people who play their part in His Kingdom work.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, May 15, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.

² Andrew Wilson from his sermon, "Being the Dung Gate Guy."
<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2013/06/18/being-the-dung-gate-guy/>