

*From the Pulpit of*



## **Hope and Hardship**

**No. 3**

**Ezra 3:1-13**

**May 22, 2016**

**Series: Ezra**

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What is your outlook on life at the moment? As you think about your life and your future you may be encouraged and look forward to all that awaits. Your life and future seem bright. There was a song from the 1980's by Timbuk 3 entitled "The Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades." (As in Sunglasses.) The song was often played at graduations as students were launched optimistically into a bright future. But the writers of the song say it wasn't supposed to be about a bright future but a dark future. The song is about a nuclear scientist starting out into the world. Here are the opening lines of the song: "I study nuclear science I love my classes I got a crazy teacher, he wears dark glasses. Things are going great, and they're only getting better I'm doing all right, getting good grades The future's so bright, I gotta wear shades." This is the mid 80's and the reason the future was so bright and the person needed to wear shades was because of the coming nuclear holocaust. Rather than a bright future, the future was grim.<sup>1</sup> It's odd to think that two people could be singing this song, one is looking for a bright future and the other sees nothing but destruction.

The reality is that in this world there is always a mixture of hope and hardship. Most of us live a mix and depending on the day we can wear shades because of an encouraging bright future or shades because life is about to blow up. There are encouraging things we can point to in life, especially as believers, but there are also a variety of challenges that we face now and there are difficult days ahead. Ultimately our outlook is bright as we will be with the Lord Jesus Christ, but in the meantime it's a mixture of hope and hardship.

That's where the people of Israel find themselves in our study today in the book of Ezra. They are back in the land after a long exile (life is hopeful) but they face a city and temple in ruins and are surrounded by opposition (life is challenging). What follows is the logistics in the midst of hope and hardship. Here is a good plan of action taken by the Israelites in the midst of their situation and it's a good action plan for believers throughout history - even you.

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 six chapters in Ezra are about the original exiles (first

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<sup>1</sup> Info from Wikipedia.

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. 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.<sup>2</sup> Main Theme: God doesn't scrap His wayward people, but restores and renews them so they can worship Him.

Let's recap where we are so far in Ezra. Chapter 1: King Cyrus proclaims a return of the exiles to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Chapter 2: List of Returnees. Chapter 3: The beginning of work and worship (logistics in midst of hope/hardship).

Ezra 3:1: "When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem." This is in the first year of the return when the seventh month (Sept-Oct) came around, which is the most significant month of celebrations during the Jewish calendar. The people had already settled in their towns and come together 'as one man to Jerusalem.' The goal of their pilgrimage was work and worship. They were there to see that the altar would be built so that they could begin again to worship the Lord in Jerusalem. Life was hopeful.

Verse 2: "Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God." The leaders of the rebuild were Zerubbabel along 'with his kinsmen' and Jeshua along 'with his fellow priests.' Before they rebuilt the city walls and before they rebuilt the Temple itself, they focused on rebuilding the altar so that they could worship. Their goal was to rebuild the altar according to biblical specifications/location (Exodus 27:1-2) and worship 'as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.' The altar would be a place where they would offer 'burnt offerings' of animals that would atone for sin. God's wrath would be poured out upon the animal instead of the worshipper, who was forgiven. The Israelites were commanded to gather at the altar to have their sins forgiven and fellowship with God. This is Good News; God is once again meeting His people at the altar (Exodus 29:42-43). These are the beginning stages of renewal and the people are filled with hope.

Logistics in the midst of hope and hardship: 1. Meet with God on a daily basis. Your hope can be fueled by meeting with God on a daily basis. Not through repeated animal sacrifices but through Jesus. He is your sacrificial substitute who bore God's wrath in your place and bore your sin. Now, through faith, you can be forgiven and embraced by your Holy Heavenly Father. This daily meeting with God gives you a hopeful future on this earth and a perfectly hopeful future when you are with Him in Heaven. But just because you are filled with hope in Christ doesn't mean you won't face hardships. All of God's people face challenges, including the Israelites.

Look at the challenges they faced in verse 3: "They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening." God opened the door for them to return but 'the peoples of the lands,' pushed back and challenged them. Perhaps these were fellow Jews who didn't go into exile but more likely these were the pagan inhabitants of the lands around them who felt

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<sup>2</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, page 802.

threatened not only by the return of the exiles, but also the rebuilding. The rebuilding of the altar would make them distinct from their pagan neighbors who wouldn't be too cool with that.

Just because God opens a door doesn't mean there won't be challenges. God brought them back to the land, but it's hard. When God swings wide the door for you to set out on a new faith venture, there may be a lot of challenges that cause you great fear. I remember when God swung the door open for us to begin the adoption process back in 2008. Miraculous gifts fell into place to fund the adoption, but there were many challenges. The first agency dropped us because they deemed us not qualified. Referral days came and went while we still waited. We finally were matched and showed up in Ethiopia to go to court but we did not pass. Finally, we passed court, but the American Embassy held up the paperwork for trivial reasons. But after all the drama, we brought our sweet Mary home. God opened the door for adoption and we brought home Mary in 2011, but in between we were on "THE GREAT FEAR ROLLER COASTER." I dislike roller coasters at amusement parks but especially the life roller coaster of the unknowns that jerks us one way and then the other. Our emotions went up and down with each roadblock and setback.

That's where the Israelites were; God opened but they feared the surrounding people. Their fear didn't paralyze them, but catalyzed them (Rhymes). It catalyzed them to worship. Fear drove them to worship and to seek the Lord on a daily basis. Look at verse 3 again: "They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening." Fear drove them to worship and seek the Lord. It's not a bad motive to seek the Lord when you are afraid. I often find that fear reignites my worship and focus. Logistics in the midst of hope and hardship: 1. Meet with God on a daily basis (utilize fear to catalyze worship). This past December I had an encounter that scared me. It's as if the fear gave me a laser sharp focus on the Lord and His ways. Fear drove me to the Lord in a way that I would not have turned if it had not happened. Come to the One who can calm you down, help you and say, "Fear Not."

Not only did they worship, but they also kept the rituals and worked. Verses 4-5: "And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD." They 'kept the Feast of Booths' which was a re-enactment of the desert wanderings in which they lived in makeshift huts as if out in the wilderness to reflect on God's redeeming love. I'm sure they were reflecting upon their own deliverance out of Babylon as well. They also observed 'all the appointed feasts' as well as the 'daily burnt offerings' and 'freewill offerings.' Logistics in the midst of hope and hardship: Establish a rhythm of obedience. Whether your outlook in life is hopeful or hazardous, you can still be in a rhythm of obedience and seeking the Lord. Our corporate rhythms are Sunday worship, the Lord's Supper and Ethos Communities. But your personal rhythms can be daily time in the Word and prayer, accompanied by obedience and faithfulness.

They are worshipping and keeping the rhythms of obedience but there is still work that needs to be done as we see in verses 6-7: "From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia." Worship had begun at the altar but the Temple was still in ruins. Many 'gave money' to get the work going as they contracted out to

the ‘Sidonians and the Tyrians’ who brought in the ‘cedar trees from Lebanon’ with the authorization and approval of ‘Cyrus.’

The work gets going in verses 8-9: “Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, (when it was dry and not rainy) Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.” Zerubbabel heads up the building project along with Jeshua, the priest, who supervises ‘the workmen in the house of God’ to make sure the work is all done to Biblical specifications.

Now watch what happens once the foundation is laid; it’s a mixture of joy and sadness. It’s the classic worship and weeping. Verses 10-13: “And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.” After the foundation is laid, worship and praise breaks out. The people are singing and shouting praises to God. But some wept. The older people who saw the first Temple, Solomon’s Temple, wept. Solomon’s Temple was magnificent and the Lord filled it with His glory (2 Chronicles 5:14), but this new one was puny. But they can still worship. The prophet Zechariah said of this Temple in Zechariah 4:10a, “For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice...” Don’t despise this small work because God is in it and blessing it! This is the beginning of the Temple that Jesus will enter during His lifetime. Herod will remodel this Temple, but these initial foundations will one day host the Messiah who will save His people from their sins. God is still working in the small things.

Logistics in the midst of hope and hardship: Believe that God is still working, even in small things. Your life may not be as before or as expected but God is still working, even in the small things. ‘Big’ things may not be happening in your life, but God is still moving and working in the small things for His glory and your good.

Conclusion: This is often life: a mixture of joy and sadness. The outlook can be hopeful but also contain a lot of challenges. The clouds will break for sure in eternity with the Lord. In the meantime, we are to be people who worship through meeting with God on a daily basis, establish the rhythms of obedience and believe that God is still working, even in the small things.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, May 22, 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.