



Ezra 3:1-13
 Ezra: Rebuilding
 “Joy and Sorrow: Rebuilding Expectations”

Rev. Brian North
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This morning we continue in our series in the book of Ezra that we started last Sunday. Last week we saw from chapter one and chapter two that the rebuilding of the temple, and rebuilding efforts in our lives begin with God’s initiative, stay centered on God through Worship, and that it takes everyone on the team being all in together. We see that clearly in their experience, and these principles apply in our context today as well – in our individual lives, our homes, and in our church – wherever some kind of rebuilding is taking place.

We pick up on that theme of everyone being in this together in the first verse this morning again, when the text tells us that “the people together assembled as one in Jerusalem.” There’s a sense of unity as they get going on the mission of rebuilding the Temple.

And then we get another principle about what is necessary in rebuilding. We read this in verse 3: “**Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation...**” (Ezra 3:3). There was a fear that they had about other people around them – meaning, other nations that bordered them, or different people groups that maybe had crept in to the region and so forth. They don’t have their usual defenses – no wall around the city, no organized military. They’re sitting ducks for anyone who wanted to raise a ruckus – which in their day was easy to do. Just because the order had come out from King Cyrus doesn’t mean that everyone followed it. And it could take weeks or months for word to get to the right official if someone were to attack the Israelites who had returned. So they’re vulnerable. And they have fear of those around them.

But in spite of that fear, they pressed on. This is courage. **Rebuilding takes courage. Courage is not the absence of fear. Rather, courage is doing what needs to be done in spite of our fears.** And any rebuilding is going to take courage. Whether it’s fear of enemies, fear of our own selves, fear of our past, or fear of the unknown outcome in the future because there are no absolute guarantees with a rebuilding effort...whatever it is that we may fear,

we need courage to push through. In the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 16:13 says, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13). You can sense the threat of something in this verse – “be on your guard” just as the Israelites felt threats around them. But courage is found in standing firm in our faith.

This gets back to what we talked about last week with God initiating things, and worship helping us to stay centered on God throughout our rebuilding efforts. We see in this passage that they worshipped God. They engaged in their worship practices. So, they celebrated their festivals, did their ritual sacrifices, brought their offerings, and so forth. They stayed centered on God through worship, which gave them courage. When we stay focused on the Lord and know he is with us and leading us, we can have courage in spite of our fears. Deuteronomy 31:6 makes this clear, **“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6)**. God is the source of our courage. We would do well to keep returning to acknowledging God’s presence with us, to worshipping him, staying centered on him, to keep us courageous in our rebuilding efforts.

So, they proceed forward with courage. In verses 7-10 we see some of the people who led the rebuilding efforts and we’re told of some of the progress that they made. And here we see the first step of actually rebuilding the Temple: They lay the foundation. **The foundation is arguably the most important step in their rebuilding of the Temple.**

When you think about building a building of some kind, it’s pretty easy to conceptualize that the foundation is the first step of constructing the building. I realize there may be some other steps that come before that – designing and engineering the building, maybe clearing away the building site from other stuff that’s in the way, and prepping the land where the foundation will be laid, for example. But in terms of actually adding something new to the plot of land, in terms of actual construction: the foundation is the first piece. And I think that’s fairly recognizable and easy to get our minds around.

Unfortunately, when it comes to rebuilding other stuff in our lives – relationships, churches, a business, whatever it may be – **It can be easy to skip this step, because in all these situations, the rebuilding isn't physical.** You're rebuilding something that's relational, or it's cultural, or it's mental, or it's some other facet of life that isn't visible or easily definable. And so it's easy to gloss over the foundation. But rebuilding without a solid foundation is only going to lead to a rebuilding effort that isn't very solid.

So, in our lives, as Christians, the foundation is Jesus. I know, that sounds very basic and elementary. But it's true. In fact, The New Testament gets even more particular when it speaks a few times of Jesus as the chief cornerstone. In traditional construction techniques, the cornerstone was the first stone laid in the foundation. It's the most important one, because everything is built off of that first stone. But what does it actually mean that Jesus is our foundation? That sounds kind of vague.

Well: **More “concretely” ☺...it means that Jesus' mission and vision is what we build upon.** We talked quite a bit about this back on September 19th. I would encourage you to read or watch that message at our website if you missed it, or re-visit it even if you were here that Sunday. But to say Jesus is our foundation isn't just a wishy-washy thing. It is more concrete than just a name and our own idea of what it means. Jesus gives us the foundation through his mission.

Since we looked at that in detail on the 19th, I won't rehash everything, but when you take the different iterations of Jesus' mission statement from what he himself said about it, you come up with something like this: **Jesus exists to reach the lost, heal the sick and infirmed, proclaim the good news, serve others (to the point of death) – all to set people free and make disciples who will then teach this mission so others can carry on this mission.** That sentence is a mash-up of things Jesus very specifically says are what he is about.

And so, that is our “Jesus foundation” in a more concrete sense. When we say with Jesus, “Jesus is the rock upon which my life and our church is built” or upon which our lives or our church are being *rebuilt*, this conglomeration

of Jesus' own teachings helps us understand. This is what we're built on. This is what we re-build on. And this isn't just for a church. Make this the foundation for family, your marriage, for your own life, so you build upon Jesus in a very real and concrete way.

But, rebuilding efforts are not easy. Especially when you've got a large team, sometimes the rebuilding efforts have challenges from within. Maybe some people aren't *really* all in, maybe some people aren't as on board with the mission, maybe some people have their own agendas, maybe some people want to rebuild exactly as the original thing was...there can be a host of difficulties that enter in and need to be overcome. And we see that here in verse 12. **“But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.”**

Now, you have to remember that although the exile happened 70 years ago, that really was the initial breaking apart of the power structures and important leaders and their families and so forth. Those leaders and families were carted off, along with many other people. But some people would stay behind. They're still under the governance of the conquering kingdom, so they can't just rebuild the city right then and re-establish themselves as a nation, but they're still there. But after a while, living there may have become less desirable for a variety of reasons – desire to be closer to other family that were physically exiled, lack of resources and infrastructure, and so forth. And so over time, more people would vacate Jerusalem or other parts of Israel, than originally did. In particular, scholars say that the first 20 years after the exile began, you would have seen this. In fact, the Old Testament records it happening in a couple phases. So, some people upon returning had been gone maybe 50 years. Undoubtedly there were quite a few who had been gone even less than that.

So, they remember what the old temple was like; they were old enough to have been to it and remember what it used to be like. And: When they see the foundation for the new one, their hearts are broken. It's clearly not going to be as big and as grand as the former one. And so what we learn is that:

Sometimes, in a rebuild, there's disappointment. Too often, some people just want to recreate the past, rather than rebuild for the future.

This last week there were a bunch of headlines about a German museum that commissioned Danish artist Jens Haaning to create two works for an exhibit. The museum loaned him the equivalent of \$84,000 to get it done, with the money to be a part of the exhibit. This is what he's known for, actually, is using money in art, as a way of commenting on money and power. In particular this was supposed to be a recreation – a rebuilding – of a previous art piece he'd done. But Haaning had a different vision. Instead of rebuilding the former art pieces, he came up with something totally different: He gave the museum two blank canvases and audaciously titled them, "Take The Money And Run." I don't know if it's legal, and I certainly don't want to encourage illegal behavior, but what he did, with the title he gave it, is brilliant. It's genius – and I don't mean just for his pocketbook. The art-piece, titled as it is, is brilliant.

The museum, of course, is disappointed. In fact, they've asked for their money back. But they've probably gotten more publicity out of this than if he'd done the work they asked them to. He envisioned and anticipated a better future than they did, because they were focused on the past. Similarly, some people who remembered the former Temple, and just wanted to re-create it, were disappointed when they saw the foundation of the new one.

But here's the thing: **When a rebuild happens, you're not just trying to recreate the past.** Every now and then you'll hear about a husband and wife who get divorced and then end up re-marrying – each other. If all they try to do is re-create the first marriage, they're doomed. It takes something completely different. Other rebuilding efforts are much the same. And for anyone who is attached to the former way things were, if we don't rebuild our expectations, and have them grounded in the mission and the purpose for the rebuild, then there's bound to be disappointment. Because a rebuild is not about the past; You're not trying to recreate the past; it's about the future. You're creating a new future that God is leading you into.

As we continue to rebuild here at Rose Hill, there have been some changes made that have probably disappointed some people. Maybe some of you wish we could have just kept certain things exactly the same as they were. If so, you've kept me blissfully unaware! ☺ Thank you! In fact, you've been very supportive. But what we see from this passage is that: Rebuilding leads to something new and different. Some people will call it "better" others may call it "worse." But the goal is to rebuild in such a way as to live into the mission that Jesus has given us. This should be no surprise, however. Jesus is all about the new creation, the do-over. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, **"There is a new Creation. The old has gone and the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).**

Jesus says in Revelation, "Behold I make all things new." Jesus uses the metaphor of putting new wine into new wineskins, and not old ones, because the old ones will burst. You can't just carry the old way of doing things into the future. Jesus is all about transformation, re-creation, and building a whole new you. That's the goal of Jesus' mission, isn't it? To cleanse us from our sinful past and all that holds us down and separates us from God, so we'd be rebuilt into something fit for standing in the holy presence of the God of the Universe and dwell with him for eternity. It's a "whole new you" that Jesus makes in each of us.

And our rebuilding efforts are in that same mold – whether it's your marriage, your church, your business, your scholastics...whatever. **And really, this is good news, because it means your past need not be your future.** The sin, the brokenness, the pain...all that stuff can be left behind in a rebuilding. So, really, as tough as it can be to acknowledge this sometimes, and as much as we might grieve the former way like in this passage, you really don't want a rebuild "thing" like the old way of doing things. It just won't work. So: **When rebuilding: have courage (grounded in faith and worship), have a solid foundation (Jesus and his mission), and expect that the rebuilt "thing" will be different than what it was.** This will bring glory and honor to God, as he leads us through whatever rebuilding efforts we engage in and into the future he's calling us to. Let's pray...Amen.