

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

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People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Ezra

Chapter Two

"If They Come, Will You Build It?"

Introduction

You don't always groan at reading or hearing a long list of names. For example: You are patient and listen to name after name with anticipation as your kids graduate from high school. I've even read through the printed list of graduating seniors to see who is going on to college, and what they've chosen as a field of study.

Your relationship to someone on the list is what makes hearing it or reading it meaningful.

When you're reading through the Bible, and you get to a list like chapter two of Ezra, it seems as if you have no relationship of any kind to anyone listed. But it becomes an exciting read once you see yourself in the text.

We didn't read it through because it's not the names themselves that make it meaningful to us. I don't see myself in relation to **the seven hundred and twenty-five... people of Lod, Hadid, and Ono** (v33). But we can (and we will) see ourselves in the text if we look at the groupings of individuals. There are at least nine different groups, and each one of them provides an example for us.

God's people were returning to rebuild God's Temple. It was therefore a building project. It involved stone, mortar, and timber; but even back then God was more interested in building the lives of His people.

We'll find ourselves in the text as we organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Are Jesus' Building Project, and #2 You Are Jesus' Building Partner.

#1 You Are Jesus' Building Project

Seventy years of captivity and exile in Babylon were ended. King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree allowing Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple, their city, and its walls. Many Jews remained in Persia and were stirred up by God to give towards the rebuilding project. Chapter two lists those who were stirred up to go.

Ezra 2:1 Now these *are* the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his *own* city.

It's always **people** that God is interested in. Any projects He leads will always be to the spiritual benefit of His people – never to their detriment.

We are always in a building project. In fact, we are both the *building* and its *builders*.

1. Individually, you are the temple on earth, the building, within which God dwells by means of the Holy Spirit (1Corinthians 6:19).
2. Corporately, all of us together as the Church are a building God inhabits by means of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:22).

When I read this chapter with the thought that people are Jesus' building project, a few things stand out. First I notice that the people are grouped either by their ancestral birth, or by their ancestral home city. You see these two groupings in verses three through thirty-five:

1. In verses three through twenty, the people are grouped by their birth. They are the people of some family – like **Parosh**, **Shephatiah**, or **Gibbar**.
2. From verse twenty-one through thirty-five, they are identified with their city – places like **Bethlehem**, **Anathoth**, and **Senaah**.

Birth is still important to Jesus' building project. Specifically, the new birth. You must be born-again. You were born once, physically. You must be born-again, born a second time, born spiritually. It happens when you trust Jesus to save you. It is the very beginning of His building project in your life.

A city is still important to you. It's not some earthly city you are looking back upon. It's a heavenly city, called the New Jerusalem, that you are looking ahead to. It's the city whose builder and maker is God. It's your real home, and it makes you a pilgrim and a stranger on earth as you long to be there where you belong.

There's another group of people that fit in thematically with the point we're making. They are the people in verses fifty-nine and sixty:

Ezra 2:59 And these *were* the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer; but they could not identify their father's house or their genealogy, whether they *were* of Israel:

Ezra 2:60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, six hundred and fifty-two;

They had been two generations in Babylon. Some of the people could not prove their birth genealogy; others had no record of land they owned in the city of their birth. They claimed to be of Israel, but they could not identify their birth or their city.

- being changed to bring change -

As long as we remain on earth, there will be those among God's people on earth who are not born-again, and who therefore are not citizens of the city whose builder and maker is God:

1. Some are unbelievers, and aware of it. They come to the gatherings of God's people for various reasons.
2. Others are described as tares among the wheat. They profess to be Christians, but do not possess salvation. They can do great things, it seems; but one day they learn that Jesus never knew them, because they were never saved.
3. Still others are imposters – false teachers and apostates – who creep into the Church seeking to destroy it from within.

As we begin to grapple with the issues of rebuilding our spiritual lives, it's good to begin at the beginning. Ask yourself, *Have I been born*

again? Am I looking ahead, longing for the city whose builder and maker is God?

Or, Am I only professing to be a Christian, but not possessing eternal life?

You probably have a horror story about some builder and the project you thought was going to take a week that is still not finished. *Jesus is not that kind of builder!* He began a work in you, and He will complete it – despite delays that you bring upon yourself. You are being changed day-by-day to be more like the Lord. You are predestined to be conformed by Him into His own image. One day, with great joy, Jesus will present you faultless in heaven before the throne of His Father.

You are the building project. But you are also considered a builder.

#2 You Are Jesus' Building Partner

In First Corinthians 3:10, the apostle Paul calls you both building and builder:

1 Corinthians 3:10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

- being changed to bring change -

There are some groups in Ezra that help you see yourself as a builder. The first group are those listed early in verse two:

Ezra 2:2 *Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah...*

Zerubbabel would be the most prominent of these men. The Temple they built is commonly called by historians Zerubbabel's Temple. (I don't think he would have liked it!). The **Nehemiah** in this verse is not the Nehemiah whose book we will read later. It was a common name.

These men were the leaders of the rebuilding. Just so, Jesus appoints leaders to partner with Him in building the Church on earth. They are men who hold certain offices within the Church. They are

the evangelists and pastor-teachers you read about in Ephesians 4, whose function is,

Ephesians 4:12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the **edifying** [building] of the body of Christ,

There's obviously a lot we could say about leadership. Sticking to our text, I like the words Ezra chose, **those who came with Zerubbabel** (and the others). They didn't just come along; they came with. They were in it together – supporting their leaders, following them (so long as they remained led by the Lord). You'll make more progress in your Christian walk if you support and follow good, godly leadership.

We've already mentioned the two groups in verses three through thirty-five. The next grouping of persons are the **priests** (in verses thirty-six through thirty-nine). In Israel, only the direct descendants of Aaron could serve as priests.

After the priests, the **Levites** are listed as a group in verses forty through forty-two. Aaron was a descendant of Levi. All priests were, therefore, Levites; but not all Levites were priests. The Levites assisted the priests in their work.

After the Levites, the **Nethinim** are listed as a group in verses forty-three through fifty-four. These were another class of Temple servants. Later in Ezra (8:20) they are identified as men King David had appointed to help the Levites in their serving.

The priests, Levites, and Nethinim remind us of a couple of things:

1. First, they remind us of how important God considers His house on the earth. In the Old Testament, Jewish life revolved around His presence in the Temple. In the New Testament, Jesus is present whenever two or more gather together in His name. He promised to make His presence manifest by walking in the midst of gatherings of believers on earth. Your life, to some extent, ought to revolve around your participation in a local fellowship of believers.
2. Second, these guys remind us that each and every believer in God's Temple on earth has a unique gift and function to

perform. The Holy Spirit gives you gifts as He sees fit in order that the whole Church you are affiliated with would be blessed and built-up.

In verses fifty-five through fifty-eight you are introduced to another grouping. They are **the sons of Solomon's servants**. Just as the high priest and priests had assistance from the Levites and the Nethinim, so the king had assistants, and they were descended from Solomon's original guys.

Jesus is our King. We are His servants. So this speaks to me about our sons (and daughters). It speaks to me about the need to raise-up the next generation of servants and leaders within the Church. We should be discipling and training young people to continue the work after we're gone.

Continuing through the groupings we find... We already mentioned the people in verses fifty-nine and sixty, who could not **identify... whether they were of Israel**. The last group is in verses sixty-one through sixty-three.

Ezra 2:61 and of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, and the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name.

Ezra 2:62 These sought their listing *among* those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they *were excluded* from the priesthood as defiled.

Ezra 2:63 And the governor said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim.

These were men claiming to be priests, but who could not prove their genealogy. They were not allowed to serve as priests until a priest could **consult with the Urim and Thummim**. The Urim and Thummim were believed to be two stones on the high priest's breastplate he wore which were somehow involved in determining God's will.

We saw that not everyone who was among the returnees **could identify... whether they were of Israel**. The same was true of those claiming to be priests. The application for us is to understand that people will sometimes promote themselves in an area of ministry, but God has not called them, or gifted them. Over the years I've

encountered a lot of guys who thought they were called to be pastors, but who did not have a gift for teaching God's Word. This is true in all areas of service.

We should consult the Lord; we should wait on the Lord; to see if He is raising-up a person in a particular capacity. We should be looking for spiritual fruit in their ministry.

We've briefly mentioned nine major groups of people, taking us through verse sixty-three. Next we see slaves and singers:

Ezra 2:64 The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred *and sixty*,
Ezra 2:65 besides their male and female servants, of whom *there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven*; and they had two hundred men and women singers.

A slave was someone who had become indebted in some way and had voluntarily sold themselves into servitude for a period not to exceed seven years in order to repay the debt. Some of them, at the end of the seven years, would desire to remain slaves for life. They were taken to the doorpost of the house, where their ear was pierced and an earring was put in it to identify them as a bonds slave.

We are the bondslaves of our Master, Jesus Christ. He has set us free from sin and death; but the only genuine reaction to freedom is to want to serve Him for the rest of our lives.

They had *two hundred men and women singers*. That tells you singing to the Lord was important in their worship. It adds an element of romance to the relationship. It's easy to get caught-up in the mechanics of the functions of the priests, Levites, and Nethinim. It's easy to get discouraged serving others. But singing was (and is) a reminder that the Lord is alive and wants to love and be loved.

I'm not sure if we should call them a group or not, but we next are told about certain wealthy individuals among them:

Ezra 2:66 Their horses *were seven hundred and thirty-six*, their mules two hundred and forty-five,

Ezra 2:67 their camels four hundred and thirty-five, and *their* donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

Ezra 2:68 *Some* of the heads of the fathers' *houses*, when they came to the house of the LORD which *is* in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place:

Ezra 2:69 According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work sixty-one thousand gold drachmas, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly garments.

Though the work of building for God is essentially spiritual, it requires physical resources. Part of partnering with Jesus as a builder is being a generous steward of the things He has given to you.

They offered freely. Offer freely, according to your ability, and give to God's work.

Ezra 2:70 So the priests and the Levites, *some* of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

Just when you thought we were done identifying groups, you are told of the **gatekeepers**. A passage in the Book of Ezekiel tells you that some of the Levites had fallen into idolatry before the Babylonian exile. Their behavior stumbled others. Their descendants would therefore not be able to serve as Levites, but would be relegated to being **gatekeepers** in the Temple (Ezekiel 44:10-14).

It reminds us that, as building partners with Jesus, we must see ourselves in relation to one another at all times. We must be cautious to not stumble our brothers and sisters.

One final thought before we make our application. In verse sixty-eight your told that they **came to the house of the Lord**. What they came to was a ruin. But it was, to them, the house of the Lord. It still existed in their hearts and minds; they saw its potential to be rebuilt.

All good builders see potential. *Jesus certainly sees it in us!* We must see it in others and then build them up

Applying the Word

How do you discover your place as a builder in the building? It's simple, really. First, you need to come and be among God's people as they gather. Then, you hang around. Finally, you volunteer and you get involved. It's how I ended-up discovering I was called into the ministry as a pastor.

First and foremost – *Determine if you are a part of the building!* You must be born-again and on your way to the city whose builder and maker is God.

