



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 2:1-70

Topic

42,360 exiles march 900 miles over a period of four months to return to Jerusalem

Title

*“When Jews Come Marching Home Again...
Hurrah! Hurrah!”*

Building contractors have notoriously bad reputations. I think it's a case of a few bad apples spoiling the whole bunch. Nevertheless, too many of us have a horror story to tell.

You should probably watch *The Money Pit* before hiring a contractor. I haven't seen it in a while, but it's rated PG, so I think I'm on safe ground.

It stars Tom Hanks and Shelley Long as a couple who buy a house badly needing remodeling. It's a million dollar distress sale mansion on the market for a mere \$200,000.00.

From the moment they take possession of the house, it begins to hilariously fall apart. At one point, there's no hot water for bathing, so Tom Hanks is forced to boil water on the stove to fill the upstairs bathtub. It triggers an electrical fire that destroys the kitchen. Hanks' clothing is burned, and he is singed, but he manages to bring the water upstairs. When he pours it, the tub crashes through the ceiling.

The contractor keeps insisting the remodel will take two weeks, well into it taking months. Hanks dubs the project "the money pit."

He has the opposite problem in *Sleepless in Seattle*. In that film, *he is the contractor* - and he's a good one - whose client is constantly changing her mind about the remodel.

Then, in arguably his greatest acting performance - as Ray Peterson in *The Burbs* - he ends up blowing-up his neighbor's house.

(*The Burbs* has nothing whatsoever to do with the study, but I couldn't help myself).

Most of you who are in Christ know that individual believers, and believers gathered together, are compared to a **building project**:

- Regarding our individual bodies, we read in 1Corinthians 6:19, "... do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"
- Regarding us as a corporate body, we read in Ephesians 2:22, "... you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

The apostle Paul considered himself and the first century apostles and prophets as subcontractors:

- We read in Ephesians 2:20 that we have “been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets...”
- We read in 1Corinthians 3:10, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation...”

Jesus is most definitely the contractor:

- He promised to finish the work He has begun in you, personally; and that work is none other than conforming you into His image.
- He has promised to present the church to His Father in Heaven without spot or blemish.

In our text, God’s people were returning to rebuild His Temple. It was a massive building project, requiring stone, mortar, and timber.

But the first thing we encounter isn’t a list of the building supplies. It’s a list of the returnees - it’s a list of the people, God’s people. Sure, they were returning to build; **but the real building project was them.**

With that in mind, I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 When Jesus Is Building, You're Grateful To Serve, and #2 When Jesus Is Building, You're Glad To Sacrifice.

#1 When Jesus Is Building, You're Grateful To Serve

(v1-67)

Let me alleviate your fears: I'm not going to read most of the names in these seventy verses. You can relax.

We see ourselves in the text if we look not at individuals, but at the groupings of individuals.

Let me quickly catch us up. Seventy years of Jewish 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. Chapter two is the list of those who went in the first of three returns.

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.

This first wave of returnees - they were pioneers, facing a daunting task.

Pioneering a work for the Lord can be difficult. Let me amend that: **It will be difficult.**

Many of you were with us meeting at the YMCA for eighteen years. It wasn't easy; you had to really, really want to come to Calvary Hanford to get past all the discomfort and inconveniences.

You were pioneers. While we are certainly grateful for this facility - you should also be grateful God counted you worthy to pioneer.

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

These men were the leaders of the return.

The Nehemiah in this verse is not the Nehemiah whose book we will read later. It was a common name. Neither is Mordecai the uncle of Esther.

Zerubbabel would be the most prominent of these men. The Temple they built is commonly called by historians Zerubbabel's Temple.

I shouldn't speak for him, but don't think he would have liked it. Determine for yourself to not seek the accolades of men. You serve only to hear Jesus say, "Well done."

From the end of verse two through verse thirty-five, we get the list of "the number of the men of the people of Israel."

- Through verse twenty, those listed could prove their ancestry.
- From verses twenty-one through thirty-five, those listed could prove a claim to property, or residence in a city.

All these could claim, and prove, to be Israelites.

From that we can ask, “Can I claim, and prove, that I am in Christ, and therefore a citizen of Heaven?”

What is the proof? A changed and empowered life on account of being the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

The next grouping of persons are the priests (in verses thirty-six through thirty-nine). In Israel, only Levites that were the direct descendants of Aaron, Israel’s first High Priest, could serve as priests.

All priests were Levites; but not all Levites were priests. The remaining Levites are listed as a group in verse forty. The Levites who weren’t from Aaron assisted the priests in their work.

Two other Temple servants are quickly listed in verses forty-one and forty two: “singers” and “sons of the gatekeepers.”

The Nethinim are listed as a group in verses forty-three through fifty-four.

These were another class of Temple servants. They were descended from men King David had appointed to help the Levites.

Lots of Temple servants, all with various callings, and giftings. It's the same with us, corporately, as the Temple of God on the earth.

In verses fifty-five through fifty-eight you are introduced to “the sons of Solomon’s servants.” Solomon reigned over a united Israel about four centuries before the events of Ezra. How these sons of his servants remained distinct is unknown, but they were deliberately raised-up from generation to generation to serve the king.

It speaks to us about the need to raise-up the next generation of servants and leaders within the church.

We’ve been blessed here to have younger guys who are capable and competent to minister. They are the best young guys anywhere.

It's getting to the point that they are not so young anymore. No worries: They are busy raising up even younger guys.

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;

Some Jews had no documentation proving any ancestry or claim to property. Nevertheless, they came along - wanting to be a part of what God was doing, no matter their status in the community. They wanted to be with God, and among His people.

God is always moving in our gatherings, even if we don't see its visible manifestation. A sense of expectation will help us be a part of what He is doing right here, right now.

The next 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.

These guys claimed to be priests, but they could not prove their ancestry, so they could not serve.

I talked earlier about being sure someone is, in fact, a believer. We could go a step further and ask if they are called by God to serve in a certain capacity. Waiting to confirm God's gifting isn't always a bad thing.

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.

The “Urim and Thummim” were stones on the High Priest breastplate that, when consulted, revealed the will of God. The Jewish Talmud describes how questions were put to the breastplate, and the stones would light up to spell out the answer. We really aren’t sure how they communicated.

The stones were lost to history while the Jews were in exile. The returnees were hoping they would be found, or returned, so that they might be consulted. They never were.

Aren’t you grateful that you can ‘consult’ with God anytime, anywhere? That you can know His will, and be led by His Spirit?

Next we see slaves and more 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 bondslave.

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

They had two hundred men and women “singers.” These seem to be in addition to the singers who would serve in the Temple. It has been suggested that they were a kind of choir that sang for the returnees along their arduous journey - a kind of USO for Israel.

Camp life was joyful. Pilgrims were sung to, and sang. It reminds us to celebrate the joy of our salvation along our pilgrim journey home.

The list ends with a nod to their animals:

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.

These were beasts of burden, provided to lighten the labor of the returnees.

Jesus described our relationship with Him as if we were oxen yoked together, saying His yoke was easy, and His burden light. We can be grateful for such a competent, conquering yokefellow.

Mick Jagger will “never be your beast of burden,” but Jesus encourages you to cast all your cares upon Him.

Since in the Gospel of John He called Himself our friend, we could say that Jesus is our *Bestie of Burden*. (See what I did there?).

Of course, the greatest 'yoke' Jesus bore was the Cross He carried to Calvary. He bore our sin; He bore our shame. Our 'burden' is indeed light - salvation is all of Him.

When it comes to the ongoing spiritual building projects - our lives and the church - any change of plans, any delay, any miscommunication, cannot be the fault of the contractor, or any of His first-century sub-contractors.

No, if there is a problem, it's us. We tend to blame the Lord, especially when things aren't going our way. But it can't be His fault.

In everything, because it's Jesus Who is building, be we can instead be grateful, and always give thanks.

#2 When Jesus Is Building, You're Glad To Sacrifice

(v68-70)

It's been called the "Sunday morning stickup" - the manipulative pressure tactics pastors and churches use to get your money.

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Ezra 2:1-70

"When Jews Come Marching Home Again"

That's not really giving, is it? Your giving ought to be willing, regular, sacrificial, and joyful.

No believer should be treated that way, but we must acknowledge that ministry requires money.

How much, on average, do Americans give to their church each year? In 2017, it was estimated at \$818.00. That's annually. It comes out to \$15.75 per week.

I'm not going to guilt you by pointing out you probably spend more than that at Starbucks.

Anyone here work for Starbucks? **I will guilt you for buying terrible coffee.** Go to a real coffee shop. Better: Learn how to make your own; I'll help you. It's not as time consuming as being 25th in the drive thru lane.

Though the work of building for God is essentially spiritual, it always requires physical resources.

I want to say this: If you give to Calvary Hanford, any amount, **Thank you.** It is appreciated more than you know.

The building project Zerubbabel and the other 42,359 exiles were staring at would require finances. One way God provided was through the sacrificial giving of the people.

Ezra 2:68 *Some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem... [Stop there]*

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.

It's one thing for you to give to a specific, physical project; a new building, or a remodel, or some such thing. Most of your giving is intangible. Your giving is building the lives of others, as folks get saved, then grow in the Lord. Each person will be a part of your joy and your crown when Jesus says, "Well done."

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:

If churches had an exit poll, one great question would be, “Did you give freely?” We ought to be able to answer, “Yes,” both because we were *not* coerced into giving, AND because we *did* give.

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.

It's hard to be exact, but scholars put the monetary value between a quarter million and \$1.3mil.

“According to their ability” is one word in the original, and it's hard to translate. One version captures what I think is meant, saying they “gave all they could.” They were generous; they looked at their budget, and gave as much as they could.

Any decent financial advisor would have told them it was uncertain times, and they should save as much as they could. They saw the Temple as a worthy spiritual investment.

So here is another good and grace-filled principle for your giving to the on-going building project: Give “freely,” and “all that you can.”

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.

The priests and other Temple servants were scattered throughout Judah so that when not serving the Temple on their rotation, they could be available to serve the people in other capacities.

Everyone was in place to build. But, remember, the Lord was also building them.

Whatever they might build *outwardly*, Jesus would exceed in building them *inwardly*, if they remained yielded to Him.

I mentioned last week that several Old Testament books record aspects of this return: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Malachi records what Jesus was building:

Malachi 3:16 Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, And the LORD listened and heard *them*; So a book of remembrance was written before Him For those who fear the LORD And who meditate on His name.

Malachi 3:17 "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "On the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them As a man spares his own son who serves him."

The exiles came back to ruins; but they saw its future in the Lord.

You and I, spiritually speaking, ain't much to look at. Jesus not only sees our future, He's promised to get us there - not "practically perfect," but "*actually* perfect in every way."

Spoiler alert: *The Money Pit* ends with a wedding in front of the restored house.

Our current story will end and our future one begin with us at a wedding in Heaven, leading to a restored creation.

Jesus compared himself to a Bridegroom, and us His bride - that's how much He loves us.

“Even so, Come Lord Jesus!”