

The History Channel
Ancient Marvels, Part I: Rebuilding the Temple
Ezra 1:1-5; 3:10-13; 4:4-5

Intro: Today and for the next two weeks we will be in the last era of history recorded in the Old Testament, that time when the exiles return from Babylon and rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem. This will bring us almost to the end of the timeline of the OT. Of course, we are not done with the OT itself. We have the writings of the POETS and the PROPHETS to consider, and this we will do during the summer months.

The OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah used to be one book. They were divided on the basis of their two main characters. Each one contains official government decrees and lists of people and property that returned to Israel from Babylon.

The Book of Ezra begins by reporting a wave of exiles returning to the Israel from Babylon about 50 years after the destruction of Jerusalem during the years 539 (time of Cyrus' decree in Chapter 1) to 516 B.C. Ezra himself returns with a second wave around 458 B.C. Nehemiah, who helped repair the walls and whom we will examine next week, returned around 445 B.C.

As the Book of Ezra opens we expect that Daniel is still living in Babylon as an old man. I will preach from the Book of Daniel in July. In chapter four, the work on the Temple is delayed for about 15 years. Two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, are mentioned in chapter 5 of Ezra. The time frame is around 520 B.C. The rebuilding of the Temple is completed in 516 B.C. and appropriate celebrations are held in Jerusalem. That constitutes the first six chapters of Ezra.

The second section of Ezra takes place 50 years after the dedication of the rebuilt temple. It is during this 50-year interlude that we suspect the events of the Book of Esther take place.

Ezra himself is a priest sent back to Jerusalem by the decree of the Persian King Artaxerxes. He comes with quite a large group of exiles. He discovers that the Jews have already begun to intermarry with their idolatrous neighbors. He mourns over their sin, and he leads the people in repentance.

Ezra reads the Book of the Law to the people in Jerusalem as recorded in Nehemiah. This foreshadows the development of the synagogue system. The synagogue becomes a place of instruction and learning for the Jews who are living outside of Jerusalem. In the synagogue the reading and learning of the Law, rather than the sacrificial system, is central to worship. Jews scattered around the world did not have access to the temple. Only in the temple could sacrifices be made. So they gathered to read and learn the Law. This is why the early church, made up mostly of Jews, spread throughout Asia Minor. Synagogues were opened to the Apostle Paul and others, and a nucleus of believers in Jesus as Messiah could be established in the widely scattered settlements of Jews in the Roman Empire.

The theme of rebuilding and renewal is familiar to us and important to us. We are engaged in a long process of rebuilding both the work of God in our community and the community itself. Many parallels exist between our own situation and that of the Jews who returned from the exile.

Ezra is about the rebuilding of the temple primarily. We now know, as they were discovering through their focus on the Law, that the physical house of worship is secondary to the heart. So let's see how you Rebuild Your Spiritual Life.

I. Jumpstart Your Heart with the Word of God: ...in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah—Ezra 1:1.

***Here recently I had to help someone jumpstart their vehicle. You take the energy from your engine and run it through the battery of the other vehicle and into those spark plugs. When the ignition takes place, the stalled car begins to generate its own energy for operation.

A. They remembered the prophecy in Jeremiah 25:8-11, that the time of exile in Babylon would be 70 years.

B. Connect changes in your life to the word of God and to prayer. Remember what you ask for, and see how God answers. Remember what God says, and see how it comes to pass.

C. Confess the Sovereignty of God. Part of the work that God's word does in our hearts is to exalt the Lord God in our own experience. At this historical time, some people might have given all the credit to King Cyrus and his gracious decree. But people who knew the word of God knew that this return was already forecast through God's prophet and that this decree was the work of God upon the heart of the king.

D. Ezra deliberately and systematically introduces the word of God into the lives of the people who return to Jerusalem. They had forgotten so much in that generation of exile. It had been hundreds of years since they really kept the Feast of Booths. The Book of Nehemiah records an extensive reading of the Book of the Law to all the people in Jerusalem. This begins an education process that continues in many ways right up to and beyond the time of Jesus and his disciples.

E. The Scripture says, "He sent his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions" (Psalm 107:20).

II. Lay the Foundation of Praise: With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "*He is good; his love to Israel endures forever*" (Ezra 3:11).

A. This celebration occurs at the laying of the foundation of the House of God. The first impulse in the return from Babylon is to restore the house of God. This was the specific decree of King Cyrus. Cyrus felt called by "the God of heaven" to build a temple for him at Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2).

B. Praise is the true foundation of our worship. Beyond education and petition, our worship exalts the God of the Universe to the pinnacle of all things and to the highest place in our hearts.

C. Praise is a response to the GOODNESS AND LOVE OF GOD. The worshipers in Ezra's day, at the laying of the foundation of the temple, use a text that was used by David when they returned to Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and by Solomon at the dedication of the First Temple: He is good; his love to Israel endures forever (Ezra 3:11).

D. I love to hear you sing. I especially love to hear you sing when I am troubled of heart, discouraged, or confused. The singing of praise to God is the most important dimension of the uplifting of my own heart.

I am delighted that God has brought Robert Comeaux to be our chief musician and leader of praise. He has a great heart. He has tremendous giftedness in vocal, instrumental, and choral conducting. He has a great ear for music.

III. Prepare for Opposition: Then the people around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building (Ezra 4:4).

A. No good work goes unopposed. Well-meaning people will insist that "our new home is Babylon, and we need to stay put." Others will wish you well in your effort to seek renewal and restoration, but they will not help in any way. They will watch from the sidelines. Still others will oppose you openly and seek to frustrate your purposes in getting back to a true walk with God.

B. DISCOURAGEMENT is the great tool of the Enemy. He does not need to eliminate you if he can just discourage you. If you get discouraged not only will you stop making progress in your

own return to God but you will discourage others who are trying to do the same. You are useful to the Enemy when you are discouraged.

I don't know how the people of the land worked to discourage the Jews from rebuilding their temple and restoring the true worship of God in their land. I know that they "hired counselors to work against them" (Ezra 4:5).

1. [The agents of discouragement belittle the goal.](#) What will a temple add to this burned out rubble? Do you think going to church is really going to change you? People don't change.

2. [The agents of discouragement belittle the effort.](#) When they were rebuilding the wall with Nehemiah the enemies said, "If a fox runs on this wall it will fall down."

The agents of discouragement often point out the lengthy nature of the task. "You'll never get this done—not in your lifetime." We are rebuilding, the Jews would reply, not just for our generation but for generations to come. We are **LOVING ACROSS TIME** with this effort to restore what has been broken for our children and our grandchildren.

3. [The agents of discouragement belittle you and your friends.](#) "Who do you think you are, trying to rebuild this wall?" When Jesus cleansed the temple that is exactly what the religious authorities asked him, "By what authority do you do these things?" (Matthew 21:23).

Conclusion: After Katrina we wanted to get this building up and running. This was also our first impulse when we returned from our evacuation. As soon as we were able, we plunged into the work. The challenge is that EXILE may undercut your faith in God. The Jews had lived in Babylon for many years. Most of them had never seen the first temple. The promises of God seemed very far away for some of them. And some of them were surely wondering if God was going to care for them.

God moved their hearts. Did you catch that in the first chapter? God wants to move your heart. Then your feet and hands and lips will move. But first comes your heart.