

Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 2, Ezra 3-4

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata in his teaching on Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 2, Ezra 3-4.

Open your Bibles to Ezra chapter 3. Remember that Ezra deals with a spiritual reformation; there is a physical reformation as well, but again, there is a spiritual reformation that's important here, and as we can see here, it starts with the sacrifices to God. For them, bringing sacrifices was a key part of their worship.

So, in chapter 3 we will see how they actually begin to build the altar so they can bring those sacrifices to the Lord. Chapter 3 verse 1 talks about the seventh month. When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

So, this is probably the seventh month after the return and the seventh month in the Jewish calendar is the month of Tishri. So, what we have here, you have the Jewish calendar and then you have our calendar so we can see how it's divided. So Tishri for them would be for us September, October.

As you can see there are a lot of the feasts, very important feasts here. You have the Jewish Rosh Hashanah, the new year, you have the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, and the Feast of Tabernacles which we will see that they will observe. So very important to understand when it's talking about Tishri where we are in the calendar.

So now they have to reinstitute the sacrificial system. The Bible says they came as one man, shows their unity of heart and purpose. So what they do first is they talk about, they have to come back to the sacrifices, to the sacrificial system.

So, in order to do that, they had to rebuild the altar. Verse 2 says, Then arose Joshua the son of Jerusalem with his fellow priests and Jeroboam the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel. The first thing they did was build the altar.

Remember the altar was outside, it was not inside the temple, it was right outside of the temple. To offer burnt offerings on it as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. Again, remember the parallels between Ezra and Nehemiah, the restoration and the exodus event.

Why mention the law of God, and why mention Moses? Because Moses was a key figure in the exodus event. Now, Ezra and Nehemiah are key figures in the return. So the returnees understand worship and the importance of worship through sacrifices.

Very, very important. And also, remember that by this time, this law of God is very well established. And this is very important to understand because scholars who believe in JADP, the documentary hypothesis, suggest that the law only appears sometime later in the 4th, 3rd, 2nd centuries BC.

But we see this by this time: there's actually a law of Moses present. Either it refers to the first five books of Moses or refers just to the book of Deuteronomy. We don't know but definitely there is a book of the law that Joshua actually talks about.

Also, here we have Ezra and Nehemiah. Now, they desire to obey the law even in the smallest of details. And they understand because they understand that in the Law of Moses, there was a strict correlation between obeying the law and God's blessings.

Verse 3, they said 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. So, what happened during the exile? Non-Jews settled in the land.

Now, these were the people who were not very happy with them coming back and rebuilding their temple. And these foreigners, again, the problem is not that they're foreigners; the problem is that they're not Yahweh worshippers and that they're against the people of God doing the work they were called to do. So, these people could include people from the surrounding nations.

Ammon, Moab, Edom, Samaria and Egypt. But the altar was key because on the altar they offered sacrifices. And notice please they brought in morning and evening.

Again Exodus 29, Numbers 28 gives us details about that. Not only did they bring sacrifices but they kept the festivals they couldn't keep when they were in exile. Verses 4-6, they kept the feast of booths.

Again, a very important parallel to the Exodus event. As it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by the number according to the rule as each day required. And after that the regular burnt offerings.

And offerings at the new moon. And at all the appointed feasts of the Lord. And offerings of everyone who made a free will offering to the Lord.

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. Think about Think about being in the imposed quarantine.

Not for seven days, weeks, or months, but for seven years. Or however much it was between 587 when they were here. But now they can come back and build and offer sacrifices.

Along with the Passover and the Day of Atonement on Kippur, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles was one of the three most important religious celebrations for the Jews. Remember the calendar? It was in Tishri 15. Again, September, October, our time.

It was primarily a Thanksgiving festival to the Lord, a way of showing gratitude to God for His provision during the Exodus event.

During the whole time, God provided for them, and God told them to remember. And that's what they are doing now. And it was even observed during the post-exilic period.

We see that in the 2 Chronicles. We see in Ezra. We see that in the book of Zechariah.

And even the early church observed this festival. This is the only festival where the Israelites were commanded to rejoice before the Lord. Leviticus 23:40.

So, we have this key of rejoicing that again we'll see in the book of Nehemiah. The joy of the Lord will be your strength. Very important the theme of joy.

So, the people are coming back and they want to bring sacrifices to the Lord. They rebuild the altar. They bring sacrifices.

They observe the feasts. And then, besides the burnt offerings, you also have freewill offerings. Alan Ross explains that the freewill offering was an offering that could be made anytime.

The soul of the worshiper might simply be overflowing with joy over God and His benefits. Such freewill offerings were the essence of a living faith. Well, that's very practical for us.

When do we go to God with Thanksgiving? It should be spontaneous. Whenever we see God at work, and we see what God is doing, we should give Him thanks. It shouldn't just be a feast that we celebrate once a year.

It should be a daily attitude of thanksgiving. Of course they bring burnt offerings. They make atonement for sin.

Very important. Again, this goes back to Leviticus 14. The language employed affirms that physical impurity and you have purity, spiritual impurity, moral impurity, all these must be forgiven during this time through these sacrifices.

The law's intent was to ban all sacrifices offered to anyone else but Yahweh. So, if they need to rebuild they need materials to rebuild. And what we can see is they bring the very best.

Verse 7. So, they gave money to the masons and the carpenters and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrannians who brought cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea to Joppa according to the grant of the head from Cyrus king of Persia. For us, these might not mean much. But what we see here is that the preparation for the building of the temple parallels the building of the original temple during the Solomonic era.

Masons and stone cutters are employed. We have that in First Chronicles 22 along with carpenters. First Chronicles 22.

Payment is made in quantities of food, drink, and oil. Second Chronicles 2 10. Myers correctly points out that and I quote, no permission from Sidon and Tyre was required since it belonged to the king of Persia.

The food from Lebanon had special meaning always being used in special building projects and portrayed as superior in value. The wood, that is. Cyrus is credited not only with giving the edict which allowed the return of the Jews but also with paying part of the expenses necessary for the temple's construction.

Again, the Bible says there was a grant from the king of Persia. So, in verses 8 and 9, we see they begin to build. In the second year after they came to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Joshua 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 20 years old and upward to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. Joshua, with his sons and his brothers and Kadmiel and his sons and 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 their brothers.

So, the rebuilding of the temple starts in the second month as did the building of Solomon's temple.

First Kings 6 and Second Chronicles 3. The leaders of the project are named here, and here we have the names of God, both Yahweh and Elohim. Both of them are used and the fact that they are used here for the divine name can be seen in the fact you have the house of God Elohim and the house of Yahweh are used interchangeably. This is the God of Israel and, again, the connection to the book of Exodus, where God is revealing himself as I am.

This is the time of April and May. Why do they build? Why do they start building during this month? Well, it's the dry season in Israel. It would be the proper time to start building, and as they build, of course, they praise God.

Verses 10 and 11. And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward trumpets and the Levites and the sons of Asaph with symbols to praise the Lord according to the directions of David king of Israel and they sang responsibly praising and giving thanks to God for he is good for his steadfast love endures forever towards 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. So again, we see both a physical restoration, but also, we see the spiritual dimension of the restoration.

There's joy. There's joy in celebrating what God is doing. Again, this is a parallel to the joy that accompanied the building of the temple by Solomon in the second Chronicles 7:6. Trumpets are used.

Why not ram's horns? Well, the trumpets were calling the assembly in Numbers 10:2. The trumpets would sound the alarm in 2 Chronicles 13. And they were used for celebration in 1 Chronicles 16. But notice what they're singing.

His steadfast love endures forever. Was that a new concept? No, no, no. The steadfast love of the Lord the hesed, the loving kindness of the Lord that appears all throughout scripture.

It appears in chronicles first chronicles second chronicles. It appears in the Psalms so many times. The steadfast love of the Lord, and they are giving praise to God.

This love of God this hesed, again translated loyal love, translated loving kindness in our bibles. It's a reminder of God's covenantal love that he has for his people. And that is the reason they are celebrating.

Verses 12 and 13. But many of the priests and Levites and the head of father's houses were all men who had seen the first house. Oh, now we see a comparison between this and the previous temple.

There were some old people who saw the glory of the first house, and now when they see the second one, the bible says, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid though many shouted loud for joy so that people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping for the people shouted to the great shout and the sound was heard far away. Why would some people cry, and why would some people rejoice? The prophet Haggai gives us insight into this. In Haggai 2-3, God is posing a series of questions.

Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is not as nothing among you who saw this house in its former glory? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? It seems that the older people who had seen the glory of Solomon's temple were barely disappointed when they saw this rebuilt temple. The foundation alone told them that the rebuilt temple would not rise to the level of the original temple. It could be that the stones were smaller and would not compare to the big stones of Solomon's temple.

We do not know. What we do know is that the weeping of the older people clashed with the sound of rejoicing of the younger people. So, what lesson can we learn? Could it be that we can learn from the past, but we should not live in the past? I don't know.

But the lessons from Ezra 3 are very important for today's Christian leader and for today's followers of Christ. Worship should be a response to who God is and what he has done. That's what worship is and we worship through teaching, we worship through singing, we worship through giving, we worship in many ways.

We should not always think that worship is music. We can worship through music but there is music that is not worship. Very, very important to think about those things today.

But worship is a response to who God is and what he has done. According to the Apostle Paul, our spiritual worship will be acceptable to God when we bring the sacrifice to God and we need to bring ourselves first. Very important to understand the kind of sacrifice God desires.

Again, it is in Romans 12, the first two verses where we are reminded what Paul says, I appeal to you therefore by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Everybody stood and applauded.

Yes? No, no, no. Chapter four tells us that they will encounter great opposition. Chapter four talks about the source of opposition, the persistence of opposition, the many faces of opposition and then the consequences of opposition.

First, we have the source of opposition. Chapter four introduces us to the idea of opposition to the work of God. Now, when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the father's houses and said to them, let us build with you for we worship your God as you do.

And we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here. So, we see here a glimpse, a little bit of a glimpse of who these people are. Remember, during the exilic period, these people were brought in to fill in because a lot of the people were taken into exile.

So, they identified themselves with foreigners who were brought in during the Assyrian captivity to repopulate the land. Again, this is not an unusual thing, it happened in other places. And you might say well let us build with you, it's not a bad thing.

Well, they say they want to rebuild because they worship your God as you do. But if we read the book of the rest of the Bible, we see that these people are not Yahweh worshippers, but they are worshipping other gods. They feared the Lord, 2 Kings tells us, they feared the Lord but also served their own gods after the manner of the nations from which they had been carried away, 2 Kings 17:33. So these are not just any people; they are Samaritans, and they are people who are worshipping other gods, not just Yahweh.

And the people of God here have discernment, verse 3. But Zerubbabel, Yeshua, and the rest of the heads of the father's houses in Israel said to them, you have nothing to do with us in building a house of our God, but we alone will build to the Lord the God of Israel and King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us. You might say wait a second, and these people are very exclusivistic. Well, that is true and they have to be.

God needs to give us discernment as well to understand there are not many ways to God, but as Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. There is only one way, and here God gives these people, these leaders, understanding, and discernment that these people don't want to do good, but they want to harm the word of God. And, of course, they make reference to Cyrus's edict in chapter 1. But the opposition doesn't stop there.

We see that the people who oppose God's work are persistent. The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah (verse 4), made them afraid to build, and

bribed counselors to frustrate their purpose from the days of Cyrus, king of Persia, until the reign of Darius, king of Persia. Notice, please, the weapons used by the opposition.

First of all, discouragement and then discouragement leads to fear. So, when you have fear, a lot of times you are paralyzed, and you cannot do the work of God. And notice that it succeeded for a while and sometimes we are the same way.

We are discouraged, and sometimes we're paralyzed by fear. Thankfully, that did not last. But we see here that's not just discouragement, not just fear, but you have corruption.

Corruption was alive and well, and the opposition found corrupt counselors to carry out their plans. So please understand that what's happening in the world today is nothing new. This is always the case where the opposition to the work of God is done through corrupt ways and corrupt people.

We are reminded here that opposition is not necessarily a sign that we're doing something wrong. Sometimes, opposition is a sign that we're doing something right. And that's what's happening here.

They're doing the work of God, and there's opposition, and there's persistent opposition. And we see that this opposition comes in many ways and we see the many faces of opposition. Verse 6, and in the reign of Ahasuerus at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

And here in the chapter, then we have in chapter 4, starting in verse 8, you have Aramaic writing. I say, why the switch to Aramaic? Well, Aramaic was the lingua franca of the day. That was the language of commerce and business.

And if a king would write something like a royal decree, it would be in Aramaic. And that's what we have here. Ezra 4, starting in verse 8, all the way to chapter 6, verse 18, is in Aramaic.

And they're writing this letter to the king. Verse 12: be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding their rebellious and wicked city.

Wow. The same people who see the city as the center of their religion because of the temple are called by the opposition rebellious and wicked. They're basically giving a report to the king.

They're finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. Now be known to the king that if the city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute again. Everything goes around money.

They will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. Verse 16, we make known to the king that if the city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no position in the province beyond the river. What happens when someone rejects the truth? Well, when you reject the truth, you have to replace it with a lie.

And that's exactly what's happening here. The truth was that these people, the Israelites, were rebuilding the temple to sacrifice to their God and to worship their God. And the opposition is lying and replacing the truth with a lie.

And they're put in writing to send to the king. By the way, who are these people that are in the opposition? They are not lower-class citizens but rather scribes, commanders, judges, governors, and officials who were foreigners deported to Judah during the Assyrian invasion. Yamauchi, in his book *Persia and the Bible*, suggests that the taxes that could have been paid were estimated between 20 million and 35 million in today's money.

And they were collected annually by the Persian king. So, what does the king do? The king does research. He does his research, starting in verse 17.

The king sent an answer to Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province beyond the river. Again, beyond the river is an expression to talk about what's happening beyond the Tigris and Euphrates. And now the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me.

And I made a decree and search has been made and has been found that the city from old has risen against kings and the rebellion and sedition have been made in it. And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem who ruled over the whole province beyond the river to whom tribute custom and toll were paid. Therefore make a decree that these men may cease and the city will not be rebuilt until a decree is made by me and take care not to be slack in this matter.

Why should damage grow to hurt the king? Now, we don't know what his research involved. Could it be that in his research he found about Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria in 2 Kings 18? We don't know. We know that Jehoiakim and Hezekiah both rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar in 2 Kings 24, and both suffered the consequences of that rebellion.

We don't know what it is, but it seems that the opposition was successful, at least for a while. So, the kings that are mentioned here are Esarhaddon king of Assyria. Again, they're mentioning the previous administration of Assyria and they're mentioning Artaxerxes I who was king during this time.

So again, there's a new king. This is not Cyrus. This is not Cyrus who gives it, this is much, much later.

So, you have Artaxerxes I and we see that actually this the opposition is working and the work is stopped. Verses 23 and 24. So you have here a switch in chronology.

Remember, we are not talking about chronological order from beginning to end. So, you have a narrative that switches from the time of Artaxerxes back to the time of Darius. This is a chronological anomaly that occurs in the book of Ezra because Artaxerxes lived again 465 to 424 BC.

Darius goes back to 522 when he's talking about when the temple was actually completed. So, you have a chronological anomaly here where you don't follow a strict chronological line but you have a gap in history. Ezra tells the story out of order.

Basically, that's what's going on here. Why? To remind us that in spite of opposition King Darius supported the work of reconstruction. Indeed, under Darius, the Persian empire reached its greatest power and splendor.

So again, it's important to understand that we don't have a clear chronological line here. The conditions are different. But the points are clear.

Opposition to God's work did not originate with Ezra and Nehemiah, and they will not stop with Ezra and Nehemiah. Opposition to God's work includes lies, pressures, and persecutions. But even so, God's work will go on, and God will succeed because it's not God's, it's not man's. It's God's work.

I don't know about you, but this truth should be a great comfort to all of us and a great encouragement to us who follow Christ today in all times and places. Even though the church is persecuted in the entire world today, God's work will be done, and God will succeed.

You have to read the entire Bible to understand that God keeps his promises, and even though we go through persecution and the opposition lies and throws a lot of things at us, God's work will be done. We're also reminded that the Christian life is not a playground. It's a battlefield. We fight every single day, and sometimes it seems that opposition will succeed, but it's only temporary.

Ultimately, God's work will be done.

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