

Text: Ezra 4-5 (Pew Bible, pg.461)

Title: “Overcoming Obstacles”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – I have some friends who have a very strange hobby. They like to run in races, but not just an ordinary race. It is called a “Mud Run.” It’s really an obstacle course. PHOTO 1 - It involves feats like running through muddy pits of water. PHOTO 2 – Crawling under barbed wire. PHOTO 3 – Running through fire. PHOTO 4 – Climbing over obstacles.

You know, anyone who takes seriously the challenge of rebuilding their broken world will find that it isn’t easy. Whether you’re trying to rebuild a broken life or a broken marriage ... whether you feel called by God to move into some broken part of your world and help to rebuild it ... there will be obstacles, pitfalls and setbacks. Count on it. My aim this morning is to encourage you from God’s word to persevere.

Let’s open our Bibles to Ezra 2. In these weeks were focusing on a part of the OT that may not be familiar to us. But Ezra contains an amazing story of some people whom God used to rebuild their broken world. Specifically they were called by God to rebuild their broken city of Jerusalem and the broken Temple within Jerusalem. For seventy years or so the Jews had been in exile in Babylon. But God was moving. In Ezra 1 we saw how God purposed that Jerusalem would once again be a shining light to the nations. He moved the heart of a Persian king named Cyrus to let the captives go free to rebuild their broken city. And God moved the hearts of the people to do it.

We’re on our way to Ezra 4, but notice in Ezra 2 a long list of names. Don’t worry, I’m not going to preach on that, nor am I going to read it all. However, all of God’s word is inspired by God and is profitable for our study and obedience. And what you have in Ezra 2 is a listing of the people who move from Babylon back to Jerusalem. And it also lists their belongings. You see, in rebuilding God starts with what’s left ... the remnant and their resources.

REMINDER: Don’t focus on what’s lost; focus on what’s left. If you spend your life just regretting what you’ve lost, you’ll never get around to rebuilding. Don’t focus on what’s lost; focus on what’s left, no matter how little it may be. That’s what God will use to rebuild.

Now look at Ezra 3. Next week I’ll come back to this chapter. But just notice that the first thing the survivors do is to start to rebuild the altar ... the part of the Temple where offerings were sacrificed in atonement for the sins of the people of God.

Ezra 3:3 - Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

Here is the first indication that this job of rebuilding their broken world and their broken worship isn’t going to be easy. There will be obstacles and roadblocks and opposition just about every step of the way. But remember, God is in control. Doing the will of God does not mean there will be no obstacles. God set them to this task, and immediately they faced opposition. It won’t be easy, but because it has been ordained by God it will be sustained by God.

Now beginning in Ezra 4 and going into Ezra 5 this opposition becomes very intense. We can learn from the people of God on the pages of Ezra how to overcome the obstacles.

1. OUR OBSTACLES

OBSTACLE #1 – SUBTLE COMPROMISE (Ezra 4:1-3)

Ezra 4:1 - When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel,

Now these “enemies” are people who have populated Judah and Jerusalem during the years that the Jews were in exile. Some of them were Jews who intermarried with pagans who worshipped other gods. These were the descendants of the Samaritans that we read about in the Gospels. So when the exiles moved from Babylon back to Jerusalem and Judah they were not moving into empty cities and towns. You can imagine what hostility existed among these “people of the land” (as they were called) toward the Jews who were coming home.

Ezra 4:2 - they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him ...

They may have been seeking God and sacrificing to Him, but they were also at the same time seeking and sacrificing to their pagan gods. Their offer to help was not sincere, and the leaders had the spiritual discernment to see it. The work of rebuilding the Temple was to be done by the authentic people of God.

Ezra 4:3 - But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”

God has a right way to rebuild your broken world. God’s work of rebuilding your broken world must be done God’s way. Even though the need is great, don’t lower your standards or compromise your convictions as you rebuild.

Now when that tactic doesn’t work, they try something else...

OBSTACLE #2 – FEARFUL DISCOURAGEMENT (Ezra 4:4-5)

Ezra 4:4 - Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.

ILLUSTRATION – Remember as children when we climbed on what we called “monkey bars”? As you’re reaching from one bar to the next one your hands and your arms start getting tired and you soon no longer have the strength to hold on and you have to let go.

That's the picture painted here. The word "discourage" actually translates two words which mean "to weakened the hands." You know how that feels, don't you? You know what it's like to be at a point where you just don't think you can hold on any longer. And this discouragement is mixed with fear. The enemies wanted to "make them afraid to go on building." How would they accomplish this?

Ezra 4:5 - They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Setbacks and delays can be awfully discouraging ... everything you try to do is met with resistance and opposition. Things are tied up in court, or in a government office somewhere, and it's easy to get discouraged and afraid. This opposition proved to be very effective for a period of time.

Ezra 4:24 - Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

But there's another kind of obstacle they face.

OBSTACLE #3 – FALSE ACCUSATIONS (Ezra 4:6-23)

Now the attack on the work will get personal. What Ezra does here in the next verses beginning in Ezra 4:6 is to leapfrog over the time of King Cyrus and King Darius to a time about 50 years later when Xerxes is king of Persia. The attacks are relentless. Fifty years and three to four kings later these vicious forces are still on the attack. By now the Temple has been rebuilt, and they are just beginning to rebuild the walls of the city.

Ezra 4:6 - At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

And then many years later ...

Ezra 4:8 - Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:

And you can read on down and see that the letter was filled with all kinds of patronizing lies that slandered and misrepresented the intentions of the Jews in rebuilding. And these lies succeed in persuading the king ... a least for a while. Artaxerxes said...

Ezra 4:21 - Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.

False accusations are demoralizing. One of the chief ways that Jesus' ministry was resisted was by false accusations. And all of this is inspired by the chief accuser, Satan himself. In Revelation 12:10 Satan is called the accuser of the brothers. The Bible says that one day He will be defeated by the power of God and the authority of Christ, but in the meantime we need to know that one of Satan's main tactics is false accusation.

But now back to the days of the rebuilding of the Temple that began under King Cyrus and then were halted until the days of King Darius.

Ezra 4:24 - Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Now there's another obstacle that you need to see. It is not stated directly, but it is certainly there.

OBSTACLE #4 – PARALYZING COMPLACENCY (Ezra 5:1-2)

Sometimes the challenge can be so great and our strength so small that it's easy just to quit trying altogether. Sometimes when you've failed at something you're afraid to start again for fear of failing again.

ILLUSTRATION –When I was a teenager I ran on my school's track team. In the sprint races you get in the starting blocks, wait for the gun to go off and hopefully explode off out of the blocks (I don't think what I did could really be considered exploding, but whatever). But if you got a little too anxious and moved too quick the gun would fire again quickly to signal a false start. If you get one false start, and then get another, you're disqualified. So when I jumped the gun and got caught, the next time we lined up I was slow getting out of the blocks. I had failed once; I didn't want to be completely disqualified from the race.

And that easily happens to us when we have failed at something, it's hard to get back to rebuilding for fear of failing. Maybe it's your marriage, or your battles with an addiction, or something else you're trying to rebuild.

Now we see this not directly but indirectly in the first verses of the next chapter.

Ezra 5:1 - Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet ... prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.

Now Haggai and Zechariah's messages to the Jews as they faced the rebuilding of their broken world are not recorded in Ezra. But they are recorded in the books of these two Minor Prophets. And from their messages we see that the Jews had become complacent about rebuilding the temple and their worship.

Haggai 1:2 - This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

In other words, the Jews over time became complacent. And friends, this can be one of the greatest obstacles to rebuilding our broken world. It was easier just to focus on their own houses and neglect the house of the Lord.

Now this leads us to the next part of this equation. We've looked at our obstacles; now let's look at our overcoming ... how we overcome obstacles.

2. OUR OVERCOMING

OVERCOMING FACTOR #1 – THE WORD OF GOD (Ezra 5:1-2)

Ezra 5:1 - Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet ... prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.

We all need biblical preaching for a variety of reasons. People are saved through the preaching of the Gospel. And believers are encouraged and edified and established through the preaching of the Word of God. So it stands to reason that when the Jews in Jerusalem were weakened by all the obstacles and attacks and setbacks, God raised up prophets to to proclaim God's Word to them.

Again, we have the benefit of knowing exactly what Haggai and Zechariah said to the people to help them. Just a couple of examples:

Haggai 2:4 - But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty.

And Zechariah also had a message for the leader Zerubbabel:

Zechariah 4:9 - "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.

Remember that one of the great obstacles is discouragement, which means the weakening of the hands. Zechariah says, "Zerubbabel, your hands will be made strong to complete the work.

ILLUSTRATION – A young college student was in town visiting her grandparents last weekend. After the worship service she came up to me with her face glowing. She said, "God was here today. He spoke to me and encouraged me through the worship today, and I want to encourage you. She opened her Bible to a passage in Isaiah and began to read those words to me. And as I listened to her I knew I was listening to God. Then she said, "Pastor, may I pray for you?" And she prayed the most anointed prayer. God used that young lady to encourage this pastor's heart!

So as a result of these encouraging voices:

Ezra 5:2 - Then Zerubbabel ... set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.

How did the prophets help them? By keeping them encouraged in the Word of God.

OVERCOMING FACTOR #2 – THE FAVOR OF GOD (Ezra 5:5)

The task God gave the Jews could not be done in their own strength. They would need the resources of God's grace and favor to help them push through the obstacles.

Well, there's another attack, this time from a guy named Tattenai. He's the Persian governor of the region. He and some of his cronies show up at the construction site one day and inquired:

Ezra 5:3 - At that time Tattenai (and some of his associates) ... asked, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore this structure?"

Ezra 5:4 They also asked, "What are the names of the men constructing this building?"

So typical of the bureaucrat-types! "Who gave you permission to do this? I'm taking down your names, and I'm going to tell on you." But this nonsense doesn't stop the work. Why?

Ezra 5:5 - But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.

Remember this all started with God. It was God who moved the heart of Cyrus to release the exiles and to send them back with ample resources to begin rebuilding their broken world. It was God who moved on the hearts of the Jews to go back and take up the assignment of rebuilding their broken world. God will accomplish this great work. His eye is on His people and the work He has for them to do.

2 Chronicles 16:9a (NASB) - "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.

And the way you know that the eye of the Lord is on someone or something in this way is that the work will succeed. This afternoon just take time to read Ezra 6:3-12 and see how God miraculously provided for the work to be completed. It's amazing! Every obstacle was removed and every resource was placed at the disposal of the rebuilders.

Now there's one more overcoming factor ...

OVERCOMING FACTOR #3 – THE MISSION OF GOD (Ezra 5:11)

You can overcome your obstacles if you don't forget you have a mission that God has given to you. Don't give up.

In this letter that is sent to King Darius from the bureaucrats they unwittingly tell us something about the motivation of the Jews as they are rebuilding their broken world. Tattenai said, "King, I've looked into this matter and I have confronted the Jews about the work they are doing to rebuild the Temple and this is what they said..."

Ezra 5:11 - "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

Do you see it? They knew they were doing something great that God had assigned them to do. And they go on to say, "We know why our world is broken. It is because we sinned against God. But

God has heard our cries to Him, and He put it on the heart of Cyrus to help us rebuild the city and the Temple.”

Ezra 5:16b – “From then until now it has been under construction and it is not yet completed.’

Yes, our broken world is under construction, but it is not yet complete. Don’t take your eye off the mission of rebuilding your life, or your marriage or some, or some part of your broken community that God has called you to rebuild.

CONCLUSION

Now what barrier or barriers have you been facing? Compromise, discouragement, fear of failure, complacency? Give it to God today and get on with the work of rebuilding your broken world.