

CHAPTER THREE



The Best of My Time and All of My Heart

READ: EZRA CHAPTER 3 AND LEVITICUS 23:23-44

Reading Chapter 3, I couldn't help but notice the way the Israelites embarked on their mission. Assembled together in Jerusalem, they set out to rebuild the temple. What's interesting to me however, is not so much that they were rebuilding the temple; it's how they started and what transpired as they were building. It's the order in which they did things that got my attention.

We read,

And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening. (Ezra 3:3, KJV)

What that says to me is that they prioritized their relationship with God above everything else.

If it were me, I might have said, "These people are getting restless, let's get the walls up first. Let's ensure our safety before we start holding morning and evening services."

But they weren't like me. They were more faithful to God than the average person. They didn't run, they didn't start building walls, and they didn't give up. They went to the altar where they found safety and strength. And then, verse 4 tells us that they celebrated the weeklong Feast of Tabernacles.

They did all of this before they started building the walls. Their priority wasn't to run and hide from the enemy, it was to worship God and live in obedience to Him. This is important to note. Why? Because the battle is not against flesh and blood.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:12, KJV)

THERE'S A WAR TAKING PLACE

There's a spiritual battle behind every physical war. Facing your problem without going to prayer is like picking a weed without destroying the root. In order to get to the root of the problem we need go to the altar, lay down our burden, and meet God in prayer.

The devil will try, but he won't be triumphant. Not as long as you're standing with God and standing in faith.

≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

The temporary dwellings (Sukkot) they constructed for The Feast of Tabernacles were a physical reminder of what their ancestors had to live in for over 40 years as they wandered through the desert on their way to the promised land. This feast is still widely celebrated today.

Our first thought should always be prayer. Whether we're folding laundry, standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes, or driving in our cars, we must be armed and ready for battle.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

Whether we realize it or not, there's a war taking place in the spiritual realm. While God is at work in our lives, there's an enemy with a bow in his hand, and he's aiming straight for your heart.

≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

Tishrei is the first month of the civil year and the seventh month of the ecclesiastical year (which they were using at this time). And so, this chapter marks the start of a new year. In particular, verse 6 corresponds with Rosh Hashanah, which is New Year's Day on the Jewish calendar.

GUARD YOUR HEART

Protect your heart and you protect your life, because everything you do stems from the heart. The choices you make, the people you're drawn to, your likes and dislikes.

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. (Proverbs 4:23, KJV)

How do we do this? How do we guard our hearts? By pulling weeds, and planting seeds. Get into God's Word and start planting those seeds, walk away from your sin and start pulling those weeds. Watch what goes in and control what comes out. Like we said in the last chapter, examine yourself to see what needs to change and how you can grow closer to God.

Get Into God's Word

Pray. Make the altar a priority in your life. The first place you run to each day.

≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

Some of the older men wept out loud when they saw the foundation of this new temple laid because it paled in comparison to Solomon's temple. What they didn't realize, however, was that the glory of this temple would be greater than that of the former (see Haggai 2:9).

Why? Because Jesus Himself would set foot in that temple one day.

PUT THE LORD FIRST

We all have busy lives. I know what it's like to have young kids, to have a full-time job, to have a boatload of work waiting to get done... But here's the thing: while there's a million things competing to get our attention, only one holds the title of utmost importance. Which one? Well, that all depends on your heart. What is it that you prioritize most in your life? Is it family? Is it your job? Is it your marriage? Or, is it your Lord?

Jesus says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33, KJV)

What He's telling us here is to prioritize God above everything else. Let your faith be the funnel through which everything flows. The way you treat your husband, the way you raise your children, and the way you present yourself to the outside world. It should always begin with a desire to please God and put Him first in your life.

Putting Him first means giving my best. Not just a bit of my time and a piece of my heart, but the best of my time, and all of my heart.



Who were the two men that began the building of the altar?

When did they start building the temple?

Verse 2 says that they built the altar as it was written in the law of Moses. How large was the altar that Moses built (in feet)? See Exodus 27:1.

They used cedar logs to build the temple. How did they get them?

What did they do during that week-long celebration, and why?

CHAPTER FOUR



Clothed with the Righteousness of Christ

READ: EZRA CHAPTER 4 AND ZECHARIAH CHAPTER 3

Anytime I'm working on an article, a new idea for Time-Warp Wife, or a Bible study like this one, I get the same little voice telling me that I can't.

"You couldn't possibly know what to write," it says. "There are so many better writers out there... You failed grade 12 English... You're getting old and your ideas aren't so relevant anymore..."

Here's the weird thing about accusations--a lot of them are true. I am getting old, and there are a lot of better writers out there. I failed grade 12 English, and when it comes to spelling and grammar I'm not so great. But true or not, accusations should never stop me from doing God's work.

As I'm sitting here tuning out the voice, I'm reminded of the voices we find in Ezra Chapter 4. The voice of the enemy trying to stop the Israelites from doing God's work.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

As we dive into this chapter, we see how their adversary is a little craftier than he's been in the past. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing, they're deceptive. The enemy offers to help.

"We worship the same God," they said. "And we've been sacrificing to Him for years."

When the Israelites refused to work with them, they went to the king with their accusations hoping to have the work stopped.

NO ONE IS RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE

What's interesting to note about this story is that the accusations were true, just as they often are, and sadly the men stopped building the temple.

As much as we might like to think highly of some people, the Bible tells us that no one is righteous, not even one. Yes, we are sinners, and yes, we have failed just like every other believer that's gone on before us. But here's the thing about God: where sin abounds, His grace abounds all the more! Don't let Satan stop you from doing the work you are called to do. Don't let your past dictate your future. Don't let insecurity cause you to doubt the power of God working in you and through you.

OUR ENEMY, THE ACCUSER

Digging a little deeper, we see something interesting taking place behind the scenes of this chapter. It's found in Zechariah's vision in Zechariah Chapter 3. And, once again, I'm reminded that there's a spiritual war behind every battle we face.

We see Joshua the High Priest standing before the Lord, and who is standing beside him? The accuser. He accused Joshua of his sin, he accused Job, and even today he accuses you and I, but just as he starts to point out Joshua's sin, the Lord rebukes him.

And he shewed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him.

And the LORD said unto Satan, The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan; even the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? (Zechariah 3:1-2, KJV)

Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes before the Lord. There's no denying that. In the same way that you and I are guilty of sin, he was guilty of the accusations set before him. But let me say this again: where sin abounds, His grace abounds all the more!

≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

Many scholars believe that the name "Ahasuerus" (Xerxes) is the title of a Persian monarch rather than an actual name. Its use is similar to that of Pharaoh or Caesar. In fact, you'll find the name Ahasuerus appearing in the book of Daniel, Ezra, and Esther.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

"I have taken away your sin," He says, "and I will put fine garments upon you."

If that sounds familiar to you, it should. It's a foretelling of the righteousness of Christ. The righteousness that clothes each and every believer who puts their faith in God. That we might stand blameless before the King, not having our own righteousness but that of our Lord Jesus Christ who was perfect in every way.

As I think of those words, "I have taken away your sin." I'm reminded of some artwork I was working on the other day. I was writing on a white canvas with a thick black marker. Without realizing it, I missed a letter in my sentence.

His Grace Abounds More!

“No problem,” I thought. “I’ll just cover it over with some white paint!”

Unfortunately, I was wrong. After painting over it several times, the black marker was still seeping through. So it is with our sin--as much as we want to cover it up, it’s still there. But here’s the thing about God: He doesn’t bury or camouflage our sin, He removes it. He takes away our sin, just as he took away Joshua’s filthy garments, and then He clothes us with the righteousness of Christ.

As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12, KJV)

≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

While the Old Testament was almost entirely written in Hebrew, a notation in the New King James Version points out that the original language of Ezra 4:8 through 6:18 is Aramaic.

WHO IS ARTAXERXES?

Finally, I wanted to address the king’s name in this chapter. In the King James version of the Bible we see the name Ahasuerus (Xerxes in the NIV). This can be a bit confusing, because Esther’s husband was also called, Ahasuerus. The thing is however that this chapter takes place around 530 BC and Esther goes to the palace in 486 BC., so unless her husband was very old, this was likely not the same man.

But here’s the thing: in chapter 7:1, the name pops up again. Many Bible scholars believe that this was likely Esther’s son or her step-son. Even more interesting is the fact that Nehemiah was a cup bearer in the king’s palace in Susa, and so it’s likely that their paths had crossed. This same King Ahasuerus, the one believed to be Esther’s son, assisted Nehemiah with his return to build the wall in Judah.

≡ DID YOU KNOW ≡

Seven purported Persian decrees of kings or letters to and from high officials are quoted in Ezra. (Wikipedia)

Did they really seek God the way that the Israelites did? Or was that a lie?
What does 2 Kings 17:33 tell us?

How did the enemy get the officials to work against the people of Judah?

What does 2 Kings 17:24 tell us about this group of people from Samaria?
How did they arrive there?

What are two of the accusations made against the people of Judah found in verse 15?

What happened after the king's letter was read to Rehum and Shimshai?

Have you ever felt guilty for something you have done in the past even though you know that God has forgiven you for it?
