



## YEAR 3—The God Who Pursues Relationship: A Story of God's People

### *Module 5: The Message of the Prophets*

#### *Lesson 3: Rebuilding The Temple—Ezra 3; 6-7*

### BIBLICAL REFLECTION

*(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)*

#### GOD'S STORY

God tried to get Israel's attention to return before they were overtaken by the Babylonians and put into captivity. They didn't listen, and so the Lord allowed them to be disciplined under the hand of a foreign nation. The books of Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah span the time that the Israelites were captured and what happened after they were released back to Jerusalem.

The people began to rebuild everything, starting with the temple itself. This was God's directive for them, serving as a reminder that they needed to get their lives right with Him individually and collectively. Sadly, even amidst the celebrating when the foundation was laid a group of older people in the community began to weep because they remembered how the temple once was (Ezra 3:10-13).

Unfortunately, external opposition began to develop from those who disliked God and His people. Those in the surrounding area began to mock the Jews to discourage them from following through on what God commanded. These scoffers even used legal channels to stop the work for sixteen years. King Darius of Persia had to issue an official decree to make sure the work could continue.

Once the Jews completed the work, they celebrated the Passover to recall their unique relationship with the Lord. Ezra's friendship with the king eventually led to yet another exodus of Israelites back to return to Jerusalem. Ezra 7:6 states, "The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him."

#### OUR STORY

Dedicating your life to God is more than a decision. Real dedication involves creating conditions for growth in your life; much like growing a plant requires sunlight, good soil, constant care, pruning and water. Ezra modeled this well by setting his heart to study the law of the Lord (Ezra 7:10). It's likely why King Darius held him up with such integrity.

As Ezra put priority on having a heart of integrity, the Jews made rebuilding the temple a priority. They began as soon as they returned from their captivity. There will be times we need to restore ourselves back to God, too. This is ultimately surrendering our lives to the Holy Spirit, but it may begin one detail at a time.

For example, if you give God what's left instead of what's right, you may need to start giving Him the first burst of your finances instead of the last remnant. You should look at your plans throughout the week and ask God what needs to be subtracted or who needs to be included. Likewise, you can take long-term character goals and turn them into short-term disciplines that spur you on. These types of actions include cleansing ourselves from bad habits and confessing our sins to recognize the importance of our relationship with the Lord.

We could also end up like the older Israelites, weeping over our past losses. After coming back to our relationship with God after a season of withdrawing, we may realize the lost and wasted time that could have been used more productively. To avoid such tears of sorrow, we should work toward laying a foundation of something long-lasting today and receive the Lord's grace to start over.

### **OTHERS' STORY**

Your dedication to God, especially if it's sincere, will at times make other people feel awkward. Part of being in a relationship with God means you let His whisper matter more than their yelling. It's like how a husband and wife when they're newly married don't care who knows they're crazy about each other, and should hold onto that boldness throughout the years.

Just as the Israelites had to deal with critics around them, you will also have critics. Some even within your own Christian community will think you shouldn't be passionate for Christ in ways that are outspoken and potentially offensive. It's as if others attempt to reverse-evangelize us away from our relationship with the Lord at the same time we're trying to lead them to Him.

A relationship is your gateway to bridging this tension with others. When you personally know someone, you become more in tune with their interests, questions and objections. In turn, this enables you to read up and pray for them before your next conversation. By preparing now for what will happen then, you'll likely be less anxious about what they say and more able to interact with them as an unashamed God-lover. Follow the Holy Spirit's leading to be audacious and caring in your efforts. You'll end up loving even those you disagree with and give them exposure to how much the Lord loves them, too.

### **THE WORLD'S STORY**

The world has its own form of worship. For example, concerts are opportunities for people to gather around a person or group sing out songs that they like, much like the music in church. Television talk shows get applause from the audience when people like what they hear, similar to when a congregation says "Amen!" to what a pastor says. Disaster relief telethons or volunteer service projects are ways people can do something tangible to help the world, which is what mission trips and benevolence ministries aim to do. In every area of life, it seems the world tries to match what the church is doing.

There's only one thing missing in the world's efforts—making God the focal point. While the world may at times even perform a good deed better than the church might, it remains a temporary band-aid while the real issue of sin is often unaddressed. Without lifting up Christ or making Him the core of what is done in word and deed, even the world's best and longest-lasting efforts won't solve the eternal issue of a relationship with God.

We can become critical of this, or we can find ways to affirm the heart of what's being done without compromising our own mission. Ezra was from the line of Aaron, and therefore a priest. His partnership with Zerubbabel, a descendent of King David, reveal a complementary ideal where God's people find ways to work with those in power who also have a heart for the Lord. In this sense, there is both rebuilding and cleansing happening at once.

Ezra did warn the Jews against "intermarrying" with pagan people, though. This is a thought Jesus rounded out by saying "whoever is not against us is for us." (Ezra 9:6-15; Mark 9:40) The summary seems to be that there is a lot of good being done in the world by people who aren't in a relationship with God, but we can't let our respect for their nice work compromise our identity nor calling to reach them for Christ.