

Lean Times 1

Based on a series by Andy Cook

Ezra 1, 3, 8

Series summary: Millions of Americans find themselves facing the greatest struggles of their lives today, squeezed financially by rising energy costs, rising unemployment rates, fears of a national recession – or even a depression. The housing market has changed dramatically, stock market losses have taken huge bites out of once-healthy retirement accounts, and credit that was once easily obtained is suddenly in a lock-down mode. It adds up to a shocking new way of life: These are “Lean Times.”

Naturally, “lean times” might apply to some other areas of life, too. Relationships can hit hard times, grief can leave a person in emotional ruins, and disease can attack with the fury of an armed enemy. When you face “lean times,” you’d better have a good foundation on which you can “lean.”

What’s the message of the Bible? By leaning on your relationship with Jesus Christ, you won’t just survive in lean times. You can thrive in tough times. Over the next few weeks we will learn some lessons from the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are going to see that they led a people who were facing far more difficult circumstances than we are. And through them God brought revival, a new vitality, to His people.

Illustration: If you drive through Atlanta, Georgia today, it’s nearly impossible remember the worst days in the city’s history. Today, more than 5 million people live in the metro-Atlanta area, fighting gridlock as they drive among the gleaming skyscrapers, past the great sports stadiums, college campuses, and the state’s gold-domed capital building.

It’s nearly impossible picture the aftermath of the Civil War, when the city smoldered after a relentless, 36-day shelling from Sherman’s Union troops. Not a building stood untouched by the battle, and the people left behind were there only because they were too poor, or too wounded, to leave.

The shelling finally stopped on Aug. 9, 1864, and a handful of people sorted through the burned-out embers, wondering how in the world they might possibly rebuild the city. In the early days, it must have been impossible to imagine that within a century, Atlanta would be one of the largest, most prosperous cities in America.

No, the Atlanta of the 21st century was far beyond the imagination of those living in the lean times of Civil War Reconstruction. For them, just finding enough food, and finding good shelter, took all their work, all their time and energy. In those days, imagining a mega city in its steel and glass glory was simply not possible. And yet Atlanta would rise from the ashes, bigger and more fantastic than could have ever been imagined just 14 decades ago.

Biblical background: Ezra and Nehemiah faced a similar reconstruction project. Instead of Atlanta, it was Jerusalem that had been destroyed. The great city had lain in ruins for decades.

Lean times? When Ezra and Nehemiah returned, they found that no one had attempted to rebuild either the Temple, or the city. The task was simply too big. The stones were overturned, the gates were burned, and anything of value had long ago been taken by scavengers. Jerusalem was ruined, and no one had the energy to rebuild it.

When they arrived home, Ezra and Nehemiah changed all of that. One man was a Bible teacher, and the other was a motivator. One knew the law, and the other one knew people. One was committed to preaching, one was committed to action. Together, the two men were used by God to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, its Temple, and its walls. These men and others they led did their work in the hardest times they had ever known.

Lean times? They were desperately short of food, security, and sleep. They had to move stones weighing two tons, and build gates that would withstand the attacks of well-trained armies. They worked with a trowel in one hand, and a sword in the other. They worked in an environment that was overwhelmingly negative, with each day's news reports explaining why they couldn't do ... exactly what they were doing.

In the depth of these lean times, they succeeded. In the worst of all the bad days, they were victorious. When people insisted they couldn't make it, they did more than simply survive. They thrived.

Connection with today: The news reports tell us that we're in hard times, right now. House prices have fallen dramatically, and still aren't selling. A tank of gas feels like a major purchase, and many people are out of work with no way to provide for their families. So compared to more prosperous times, these are "lean times."

Actually, our version of "hard times" won't sell very well in the rest of the world, or in the past pages of history. And we're thankful for that. By and large, Americans aren't starving, aren't walking, aren't living in garbage dumps and aren't sending under-clothed children out scavenging for food. Many people in other places around the world are facing those things daily.

Nevertheless, we've got a lot of people hurting. Every community has seen slow-downs, layoffs, foreclosures, bankruptcies, and angry tears among the end of countless dreams. The down-turn in the economy has affected everyone, every industry, every organization, every church.

It shouldn't surprise us that the Bible has a message for lean times, for the God's word speaks to us in every season of life. Here, says the Bible, is an opportunity to thrive. Here, says the Bible, is an opportunity to grow your faith. In fact, says the Bible, lean times might be the very best times, ever, in which you can take major steps forward in your faith.

Ezra and Nehemiah wouldn't be impressed with our version of hard times, but they probably would have a simple message for us. Lean times, they would tell us, will demand either defeat, or a victory. Their path to victory? Faith.

The history that takes us into the story of Ezra and Nehemiah is pretty simple. After seeing its best days ever under David, and then Solomon, Israel foolishly divided with a Civil War. The northern kingdom became known as Israel, and it had almost all of the natural resources, and the very best cash flow. The southern kingdom was known as Judah, and its best claim to power was Jerusalem, its capitol and the spiritual center of the people.

In time, the northern kingdom was completely destroyed by the Assyrians. The writers of the Bible blame that destruction on ungodly leadership. There wasn't a single king in the north that was godly. They led the people away from the true God to worship false gods.

Once the northern kingdom was gone, the southern kingdom was a sitting duck. The Babylonians finally took the people captive, 136 years later, and transported most of them to the area of the world we now know as Iraq and Iran. The exile would last for 70 years.

Miraculously, the people were given permission to return to Judah. They were allowed to go back to Jerusalem. And this is Ezra and Nehemiah's story, for they were the men who inspired those who had returned to re-build. They were the men who decided to trust God in very difficult circumstances. They lead the reconstruction of Jerusalem, of the Temple, and of God's people.

Ezra 1:1-11 (NKJV)

- 1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,
- 2 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.
- 3 Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem.
- 4 And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.
- 5 Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.
- 6 And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered.
- 7 King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods;
- 8 and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.
- 9 This is the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives,
- 10 thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind, and one thousand other articles.

11 All the articles of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Can we comprehend it? According to Ezra 2:64-65 almost 50,000 returned from captivity. Their trip would take today, about four hours by air, even counting for a security check at the airport. They needed four months. They walked, they carried their supplies, they made very slow time. Those who chose to leave were also leaving a fairly comfortable environment, and headed toward a very tough one. They willingly headed straight into tough times.

Here's where this gets important. As they went back to Jerusalem, they were making a huge faith statement. They were trusting God to take care of them, they were accepting God's challenge to do something great, and they were confident that they were in the heart of God's will as they took action.

Or, if I could put it this way, they were leaning on God. When lean times come, you'd better have a secure foundation on which you can lean.

I just want to point out three lessons from the book of Ezra for us to take to heart today.

EZRA: God's Worship, Word, Work and Way

I. God's Worship must be restored (1:1 - 6:22).

Worship is absolutely necessary. In fact it is primary. It is so necessary that God ensured that the people understood that His place of worship must be built. When enthusiasm for restoring the temple quickly died under opposition, God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to encourage His people to complete the task. Nothing must come before the worship of God by His people.

II. God's Word must be taught and obeyed (7:1 - 8:36).

Obedience to God is not optional. It is what God expects of us and empowers us to do. Sometimes obedience to God is very costly.

III. God's Way must be followed (9 - 10)

Godly uniqueness should characterize God's people. Intimate relations with those who are not God's people endangers godly character. Correcting worldly entanglements can be sad and very expensive. God said his people should not marry those who are not his people. When they did, they had to pay a painful price to correct the problem.

A. Following God Won't Always be Easy. (Ezra 3:12)

Even though this book of the Bible is called Ezra, Ezra himself does not appear in the record until chapter seven. There were at least three major groups of Israelites that returned over a period of almost 90 years. The first group was led by Sheshbazzar or Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest. The second group came with Ezra many years later. Nehemiah led the third group about 12 years after Ezra arrived.

In the first group, Zerubbabel took the lead re-building the temple. Workers cleared the Temple Mount, quarried new stones, cleaned old stones, and finally, they laid the foundation for the Temple. This was a really, really big day, and there was lots of music, and lots of celebration. But there was also this:

Ezra 3:12-13

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off.

Before we get started on the challenge, let us take a moment and admit this. Lean times hurt. Lean times, tough times, are difficult. If your health starts to disappear, weeping is OK. If your mother or father or brother or sister or friend gets sick and requires constant care, that's tough. If they die, it's unbelievably tough.

Nothing in the message of Ezra and Nehemiah comes free of pain. In fact, it'll all be immersed in pain, in hard work, in disappointment and discouragement, and in exhaustion.

Just don't get stuck in the pain.

Let's also consider one of the major lessons Ezra and Nehemiah teaches us. Lean times may be tough but ...

B. God Is in Control. (Ezra 1:1)

The very first words of Ezra's story are these:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. (Ezra 1:1-2)

Cyrus, ruler of the world, doing something just because God had chosen, years before, decades before, to speak a promise to his people through a prophet who made his mark on the Bible in part by crying so much. We read earlier those words of Jeremiah 29:10-13,

For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

The most powerful world leader of Ezra's day was under God's control. Look at the prophecy of Isaiah. At the end of chapter 44 and beginning of chapter 45, God speaks to Isaiah about Cyrus:

Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid.'" "Thus says the LORD to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held; To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut:

God called this pagan king His shepherd and His anointed. God says that He holds Cyrus' hand and that Cyrus will perform at His pleasure. The same is true today. No matter how powerful, world leaders are as puppets in the hands of God. From Pharaoh of Egypt to the top world leaders of today, all of them are under God's control. In the history covered by Ezra and Nehemiah, several world leaders work to carry out God's plan.

Is the world and its leaders still under God's control? Absolutely. We may not understand it, but you can count on it. God was not surprised by the recession. God did not scratch His head in frustration when Barak Obama was elected or when the democrats lost control of congress in the last election. God is in control. Complete control.

So lean on Him, not on our elected officials. Lean on the Lord, not on your bank account. Lean on the Lord, He is in control of all. The answer for our lean times will not be found in the halls of congress, or the White House. It will not be found in the stock market or the banks. It will not come from military power. The answer for our problems is the Lord Jesus Christ alone. We must humble ourselves before Him, confess our sin before Him, return our hearts to Him, and seek His face above all else.

Here is a third lesson for us today. Of all the problems in "lean times,"

C. Dealing with Sin is Issue No. 1. (Ezra 3:1-2, 8:35)

At two key moments, two key leaders built altars in Jerusalem, and offered burnt sacrifices there. Zerubbabel the governor, and Jeshua the priest led the first effort, recorded in Chapter 3, and Ezra led the second sacrifice, recorded in Ezra 8.

In both cases, the entire nation – all of those people living in the midst of lean times – gathered around the altar and worshipped God. They saw animals being killed, right in front of their eyes, and they saw the blood collected. They saw rituals that would be very strange and very repulsive to us, but in their minds, in their hearts, they knew exactly what was happening.

The blood of those sacrificed animals was the symbolic moment when God was forgiving the sins of His people. As the people gathered with repentant hearts the blood shed on such an altar provided cleansing for sin.

The priorities must stay in proper order. There might be famine, hardship, bankruptcy, national emergencies or personal crisis. But without the sin problem being solved, all of the other problems will pale in comparison.

If you don't know the power of forgiven sin, you're more bankrupt, more in trouble, more destitute, more stricken, than any other kind of human being. For if the Bible is right, and life lasts forever, then being in a right relationship with God is critically important.

And we believe the Bible's message is crystal clear. We believe that when Jesus died on the cross, he was the ultimate offering, the final sacrifice, needed for the forgiveness of sin. The Bible says having your sin forgiven by God is priority No. 1. Frankly, today's a great day to deal with that problem. God is always ready to hear the prayer of someone who says, *"God, I'm sorry for my sin. I've been wrong. I accept the gift of salvation, the gift of forgiveness, that Jesus gave me on the cross."*

That is a sweet, sweet offering to the heart of God, and in return, God removes all your sin from His record.

Challenges in Ezra:

Magnify the importance of worship, prayer and the Word of God.

Don't be afraid to change, to pull up stakes and move for God. (like the exiles returning from Exile).

Be a separate, unique, distinctive people of God – yet avoid racism and isolationism.

Be willing to work hard and give generously for the work of God.

Ensure God's Word is taught by trained teachers.

Be willing to openly confess our sin and to make corrections.