

Sessions – Action

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Taking Action - A look at a Biblical example, from Ezra 3

You know, there are many people in the world who talk much but do little. I'm one of them too often. I want to be a person who sees God use me in massive ways for his Kingdom. I get frustrated with the politics and small-mindedness of church life, as well as with my own weaknesses, as we all do.

But from this part of Ezra in the Bible, we want to look and be encouraged, see what's possible and how we get from the start to the end of achieving something for God, as he calls us.

Examples

Write down on pieces of paper things that you want to see happen for God in your life and through your life. These can be dreams, visions, ideas that you or others have had. Be realistic in dreaming big and even seemingly impossible things.

As Rick Warren says, he's crossed out 'impossible' in his dictionary, because the Bible says nothing is impossible for God. (Luke 1.37, the Angel speaking to Mary - who subsequently accepted what had been said in faith - please notice - "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said.")

Ezra 3

Read out Ezra Chapter 3. Get someone to read it who feels comfortable reading in front of others and make it as powerful as possible.

Have some powerful music underneath the reading. Get the right balance when doing music like this - not too quiet and not too loud. Too quiet means people go quiet. Too loud is plain distracting!

Plan Of Action - On A3 or A4 Paper

Write down a plan of action of achieving something. That something is to create an underground football pitch under your church, but part of your church. Or think of something topical to your group. What you're looking for is either pictures / words, or both, explaining how you will get from what your church is now - to having the pitch built. What are the very general stages?

For example it could look like this: (although don't show this to your group, get them to do their own)

Draw up the plans --> Present to leader's meeting --> Present to Church Meeting --> Consult Widely across church --> Back to

leadership meeting --> Agree On Builders and Budget --> Final presentation to church meeting and then to wider church family --> Decide when to start building and how to sort finances --> Start building work --> Keep church informed --> Complete building work --> Open Venue

The stages

Let's look at the actual stages that we find in Ezra 3 and look at how this applies to us practically in our everyday and big life decisions. Let's see what we can learn together..

Background

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book and they should be read and taken together. We find the context of the books that King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, fulfilling a prophecy of Jeremiah.

The project for the people was the rebuilding of the Temple.

Making The Decision and Acting On It

We find that Jeshua, Zerubbabel and other priests joined together to begin to build the altar of the God of Israel, in accordance with the Teachings of Moses.

So the very first step in achieving a plan of action, was to have a plan in the first place. This takes the decision of one or more people, and often it takes a team. Often, but not always, this comes from the spiritual leaders (in this case the priests). But this isn't always the case. It can be an idea God puts in your heart. It's a good idea to take it to the spiritual leaders. However, some amazing ministries have sprung out of individual actions (CT Studd, Jackie Pullinger) where others haven't supported them. But it's a good place to start!

Notice that the plan of action was put into effect. Unlike many churches, it doesn't say 'the priests joined together to talk about building the altar..' although I'm sure they did. No, the essential part is that they came together and **began to build**. We are part of building God's Kingdom, but it does need building, bit by bit, but always moving forward.

Remember that these guys had to communicate the idea to the people. They were also to help lead it, they were the pioneers. Maybe this is something you could be good at - pioneering new ministries. It can actually be a spiritual gift. A good example of a pioneer in the Bible (apart from Jesus!) is the apostle, Paul.

Go on - be a Jeshua or a Zerubbabel..!

Focus on God, obedience

A key phrase comes from Verse 3 where the Bible says '...just as it is written in the Teachings of Moses, the man of God.' So although Jeshua, Zerubbabel and the others had the idea, it wasn't just them off on one - it was inspired by the Word of God and was in obedience to the Word of God.

So, when we have ideas, we must make sure it lines up with God's Word - if not in direct obedience, then in principle. So for example, your ministry may be doing a skating ministry. We don't find skating in the Bible - but if your heart is to reach others with the Gospel through your skills, then we can find plenty Biblical basis and principles for that !

Our obedience to God should be complete. We find that in verses 3-6, the people obeyed various commands from God - observing different festivals. In verse 4 we find they celebrated the Feast of Shelters 'to obey what was written.' Then in verse 5 they had regular daily sacrifices, as well as sacrifices for the New Moon, '...and all the festivals commanded by the Lord.'

Remember that in order to obey God's Word, we need to know God's Word, study it, think about it (as Proverbs 4 tells us). We also need to have a copy of it. I know of some alleged Christians without Bibles, many others that don't read it. You can have a new computer. But unless you read the instructions, you will never understand it fully or get the most from it. Think about it.

So the first stage of the project for all the people was obedience to the Word of God, obeying in full, all that God had commanded. This was in spite of the truth that we find in verse 3, that the people were afraid of the people living around them. So the fear of man is very real, but God asks us and helps us get through this. Fear should not hold us back from our obedience. In fact, when we get God in the right place in our life, fear and any other thing, doesn't seem so important in comparison. Is this a challenge to you in your school, home, college, work place? You and I need to stand in obedience and faith, even when we feel fear and uncertainty. God is with us (what the word, 'Emmanuel' translates as)

Worship Preceding And Inspiring Action

What is worship? Often we use it to describe a time of singing in Sunday church services or in citywide events. But as we know, it's much more than that. In fact, we don't really talk about it enough - let alone practice it! The Biblical scholar, Derek Prince, studied the word 'worship' throughout the Old and New Testament and found that each time it was associated with a response in our physical bodies.. kneeling, bowing, hands in the air, lying flat on our faces before God etc. How tame are most of our churches in comparison and how little we give to God in thanks and praise. Worship is how we live our lives, how we respond to

God, in the light of the revelation of God in our lives. It is 24/7 and incorporates our lives in private and public.

In Ezra 3, we find 7 different expressions of worship:

1. Building the altar (verse 2). 2. Obedience to the Word of God through Moses. 3. Putting God first, in spite of their fear. 4. Offering burnt sacrifices to God (for forgiveness and praise - we do it differently these days!) 5. Celebrating the Feasts together. 6. Gave special offerings brought as gifts to God. 7. Were inspired into action.

In verse 7, we begin to find the practical stages of the rebuilding of the Temple. We find that only after praise and worship to God, did the people even begin to think about the rebuilding. Verse 6, 'On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.'

So, specific worship and obedience preceded the building. In your life, before you act on major decisions, visions, you must spend time with God. This is a time of testing, of committing to God, of seeing if it's from God, asking for God's blessing and favour. And it's also a right order. Because God is and should be first in our lives, it is essential we offer what we are and want to do, to God. We're saying, 'God, you're number one, this is all about and for you.'

Worship also inspires action - in the place of prayer, resting before God, we hear from God and God breathes his vision and life into us. If you're uncertain today, feel you have no vision, or have a vision you want to act on, get before God today, right now.

(Have a time of prayer and committing ideas, visions to God. You may also want to have some 'sung worship' here according to your group and the atmosphere)

Action itself

Where I live (and probably where you live), there are events within the citywide churches / youth ministries. These are great, but too often they don't go anywhere or lead to any action. This is where things like Soul In The City and Merseyfest are great. James says, 'My brothers and sisters, if people say they have faith, but do nothing, their faith is worth nothing.'

In Ezra, we find people putting their money where their mouth is (another challenge for us today).

Preparation, resourcing, financing and management

When we first started our outreach event called Revelation, we funded the event ourselves. It took time, money, finding resources, creating visuals, contacting performers - and this was just the first mini event. It's changed just a bit since! Most things we do require resourcing, in different ways.

The rebuilding of the temple was a major thing and needed resourcing and management. The same is true for what we do, if we want to help make things a success. Careful planning, deciding what we need, what things will look like, what materials are needed, how and when they arrive etc. are all essential, even in basic things we do. So let's look into Ezra 3..

1. Money - the people gave money to the bricklayers and carpenters. Maybe you will be called to give money to projects, maybe you will need to ask others to support you.

2. Food, wine, oil (practical resourcing) - some people in our church have a ministry buying and serving food. They are vital and well valued. Maybe this is an area you could help. This can be serving - finding things for a holiday club for example. If you are running something, you need to think about resourcing like this, find people, and get them on side.

3. Using practical resourcing to create contracts - a contract is an agreement between two parties (2 people / 3 companies etc.) This is essential. In Ezra 3, the food, wine and oil were given to the cities of Sidon and Tyre in order to float cedar logs from Lebanon to another town called Joppa. You may well need to sort agreements between people, especially where money is involved. How much will you pay people for services etc. You may need to budget for this.

4. Working and delegating - We find that the people started to work. Note that this was led by Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the fellow priests. To be a leader you need to be more committed, more hard working than the others around you. You need to be an example, get your hands dirty. As I've said before, leading means being there first, leaving last. It also means believing in people, releasing and empowering - delegating. You can't always do it all yourself - especially when you're re-building a temple! In Ezra 3 we find delegation with the Levites aged over 20 placed in charge of the building.

5. The foundations were built first - Well, yeah, you say. But this is something we often forget. What is the foundation of our faith, or who? It's Jesus. Why do we do what we do? Because of and for Jesus. But we lose sight of this. We can get caught up in doing for the sake of doing.

Other times the work we do becomes an end in itself and Jesus gets pushed aside by accident. Don't let this happen with what you do.

There is another part to this and that is - don't get ahead of yourself. Sometimes a visionary is so far down the path to achieving the vision, they forget that everyone else is back down the track behind them. Building the foundation is essential in a business too. Get yourself on a fairly safe and stable place before you try to push too far. A business that over-stretches itself is usually a business that fails. Often progress is slower than people like me want it, but building up in the right order and right way is essential.

6. Notice, finally - that it is OK to invest in a building. Some people say 'church is the people, we don't think we should spend money on a building.' But while this is true, it's not the full picture. If you have a church in ruins, a church that looks shabby, what kind of example is that setting? Who would want to tread foot in a dump of a building? Who would hire it? Which children and young people would feel safe or easy about being there? Very few. A good building, good facilities, especially where used effectively for Kingdom of God work, is a massively good witness. A shabby, skanky old church, is not a good witness. So yes, it can be right to invest in practical buildings and facilities.

Passionate Worship - Keeping Focus On God

It's so important we keep our focus on God, in obedience and worship.

In Ezra 3.10-13 we find that after the foundations of the temple had been built, the people laid down their tools and began to thank and praise God. It was a full ceremony, with robes, trumpets, cymbals - praising the Lord of Israel, 'just as King David had said to do.' This was one serious worship service.

The people at Hillsong church in Australia produce massively high quality music. They believe that worship can also be like a gig, with people excited and involved. Some people do not agree with this. But I'm with Hillsong (and I think their church speaks of the effectiveness and Godliness of their ministry!)

Here in Ezra we have a massive gig. People put on their best robes (Adidas robes all round, haha!) Then they got out their musical instruments and started making a massive noise to the Lord. Can you imagine what loads of trumpets and cymbals being played would have sounded like. And the people showed real emotion - the older people cried when they saw the foundations of the temple as they were so moved. The others praised God, shouting. This wasn't normal levels of shouting. This was loud and passionate - 'The people made so much noise it could be heard far away..'

Now that is a church of worshippers pouring out true praise and thanks to the living God of Heaven. At least they were noticed. Too many churches are irrelevant to local communities. Many more communities don't even know there's a church there.

Prayer

Think about what has been said. On a piece of paper, write down something where God has challenged you. Write down how you will make a change, or achieve this thing, with the help of God.

Dear God, thank you for vision. Your Word says that where there is no vision the people perish. But thank you that the opposite is also true - where there is vision, the people prosper. Lord, we want to prosper for your name. We want to see amazing things done for you through our lives. Lord, give us vision and dreams. Help us to know they are from you. Help us to make them a reality. We want to keep our focus on you, be passionate in word and action for you. Thank you that you are God, that you will never leave or help us. Thank you for what you've done in our lives and what you will do. We pray in faith that you would use us to do way more than we could possibly imagine or dream. Thank you Lord. Amen.