

“When Your Temple is a Shack”

Reading: Zechariah 8:1-13; Ezra 3:7-13

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

How many times do we go through life dealing with a reality that fails our expectations? You look forward to a long, happy life with your family, only to have it marred by sickness or strife. You lean on a friend in your time of need, and they let you down. You get your pizza home and open the box, only to find that they gave you a sausage pizza instead of a pepperoni pizza. You stop for a visit at a place that was special to you in your childhood, a house or an amusement park or a school building, and you find that it isn't as big as it was when you were half as tall as you are now. You start working on a project that is exciting and enjoyable to you, but your hand slips, and now you've got a glob of glue or a gash from a carving knife or a sloppy cake in place of what you had envisioned.

Life's full of disappointments, they say, and at the risk of being pessimistic, they're often right. Reality and expectations do not always meet up. Life is just too complex for us to be able to accurately predict how things will turn out; none of us can tell what the future holds. So we make plans and we craft our expectations and we look forward to what tomorrow brings, and hopefully, more often than not, we won't be too disappointed. But then there are the other times. Some disappointments aren't a big deal and they can be ignored or forgotten about with a minimum of inconvenience. Some disappointments linger. Sometimes reality is cruel. Sometimes the unexpected things aren't just disappointments; sometimes they're examples of evil at work — evil perpetrated by another person, evil planned out by our enemy, or the natural evils of disaster and disease that come from our broken, sin-stained world.

One of the things that makes the Bible such a remarkable, enduring book is that it deals honestly with the reality of disappointment and pain. Anyone who thinks that Christianity is a pie-in-the-sky religion that is disconnected from reality hasn't read the Bible, because the biblical authors ask some very hard questions and wrestle with the pain of life. The psalmist cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That doesn't seem like the most reverent thing to ask God, but there it is. “Everything is meaningless!” says the writer of Ecclesiastes as he ponders life's troubles. And then there is Job, who suffers to an extent that few of us can imagine, and he and his friends debate his pain's meaning.

What do we do with that pain of disappointment? What does the bitterness of reality mean for our faith? How does God answer our heart's cries of grief? You may not be in that place right now; you may not be wandering in the valley of the shadow of death at the moment, but you will eventually. We all do. Life's full of disappointments. It's gloomy but true.

We've been telling the story of how God has worked with His people throughout history, and we've arrived at that time when God has brought them out of exile. They had been rejecting Him for generations, and finally it got to the point where God's patience would no longer be enough for them to return to Him, so God sent the Babylonians to take away their nation and take them into exile in a faraway land. Call it a punishment, call it a time-out, call it a time for them to realize how much they were missing in their covenant relationship with God; they were in exile.

We are now at that point when a new king comes to power and wants to consolidate his support among the nations his predecessors have conquered, so he decides to play nice. He sets free those nations that have been taken into exile, including the Jews. Part of his motivation is probably to curry favor with all these foreign gods, because if you're a great king, you might as well try to get as many gods on your side as you can. What's more, he funds their building projects to rebuild their nations; he sends the Jews home with the authority to rebuild their temple.

And here's where expectations and reality collide. These people have been waiting something like seventy years to return to their homeland. Not many of them have firsthand memories of Jerusalem; those who do would have been taken from their home at a young age and would be quite old by now. The younger generations have grown up in Babylon, first under Babylonian rule and then under the Persians, and life in exile is really all they've ever known. They've lived hearing the stories of what Jerusalem was like, the magnificence of the Lord's temple, the smells and sounds of the sacrifices, the chants and melodies of pilgrims singing the psalms, the prayerful meditations on the law of Moses. Maybe that entire community of exiled people prayed daily for their return home; surely at least some of them did. And now the day has come, and they've arrived among the ruins that they've heard so many stories about. And they hold in their hands the authorization from the great king giving them approval to rebuild that temple that was the focal point of so many stories and songs. They're ready to begin rebuilding that most glorious place, the wonder of the world, the temple of the Lord.

And they begin their work, and the younger generations are pleased with what they're doing; they're making manifest those stories they grew up with. But those who remember what the temple used to look like are weeping. This isn't the temple they remember; this isn't even close to the glory of Solomon's temple. This isn't that much more than a shack in comparison. And so they weep at what they've lost, and the anguish of all those years of loss come pouring out.

What do you do when your glorious temple turns out to be a shack? What do you do when you've lost so much and you have no hope of regaining it? What do you do when those hopes get dashed to the ground and you realize that those expectations you've cherished will never come into being? We can't know for sure what went through the minds of those weeping elders that day by the foundations of the temple, but I can't help but think that their weeping was mostly grief, that as they looked at that temple that was so much more humble than the one they remembered, they were confronted by that realization that things have changed, and they will not change back. They've lost their past. They've lost their hope in what the future would look like. They're grieving.

While we tend to think of grief taking place at the death of a loved one, the reality is that we can and often do grieve any serious loss. When we go through times of trauma, whether it's physical, emotional, relational, or mental, it leaves a scar that must heal, and healing takes time. Grief is our natural, human method of healing from those mental, emotional scars. Many of the Jews in our chapter of the story for today were faced with an undeniable awareness of everything they had been through in the previous decades, and now, as they see that shack of a temple in front of them, they are keenly aware of how things can never go back to the way they were. Trauma is a lot easier to cope with when we can expect things to return back to normal eventually. But when your life is forever changed, and you've lost something dear to you, and you cannot get it back, you're left with a shack where your glorious temple once was, and you need to grieve.

Grief is very uncomfortable. Many of you know it much better than I do; you know what it's like to grieve. Some of the Jews were weeping at their loss, others were cheering at what they saw as progress, and I have to imagine that at least a few were wondering why those elderly weepers couldn't get with the program and cheer like everyone else. Our society allows people to grieve the most when they lose a spouse or close family member, but even then, we really only give them about six months of grief, and then we expect them to get over it. We don't really allow people to grieve over much other than death; if you lose a job or a marriage or a friendship or a house or a memory, you're not really given room to grieve. It's too uncomfortable for the rest of us. But in reality, even when grief isn't complicated, it takes one or two years for a person to truly grieve a spouse.

We want to fix things for those who grieve, but we can't. "But look at this nice new temple," we might say. It's not the same; it's a shack in the place of one of the wonders of the world. "But you can have more children," we might say to grieving parents. It's just a shack; you can't replace what they've lost. "God works out all things for the best," we might say, but God does not need us to defend Him. "They're in a better place," we might say, or "you're better off now that so-and-so has left," but that's just a shack, and as well-intended as we are, anything we say that is trying to take away their right to grieve that loss is just a shack. A mourner does not need our explanations and rationalizations. What they need is for those who are not as close to the trauma to support them, to pray for them, and, more often than not, they need them to keep their mouths shut.

We need to tolerate our discomfort around the grieving, because that's what they need. It is uncomfortable, though. Grief is unpredictable. We all know the usual stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — but we want people to move through the stages quickly and cleanly, and they rarely do. Sometimes the stages repeat, or they come and go in waves, or they recur at unexpected times with unexpected triggers. It takes time for us to grieve because we have to come to a point of a new and unexpected normal, a normal that is based on less than what we had and knew before. We have to get used to worshiping in this little, humble temple instead of what we once knew. We have to go through life without someone we've lived with for so many years, or we have to adjust to life in a strange place, or without the financial stability we'd hoped for. It's coming to terms with that new normal that grief is centered on. Finding balance when your center has changed. Learning how to worship in a shack instead of Solomon's temple.

What we want to do is arrive at that point of learning that God is still present in that shack, just like He was in the temple. We want to come to terms with the new reality that the present is not like the past, and that reality may always hurt, but we can still worship and grow in God. We can join in with that refrain that God's people sang at the dedication of their temple, that the Lord is good, and His love endures forever. That's a proclamation of hope and trust in our God and His love. We can look back over the story of our lives and see the ways in which He has been good and His love has endured, and because of His love in the past, in spite of the pain of grief, we can join in that song. The Lord is good; His love endures forever.



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