

“First Things First”

Ezra 3

June 7, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Post-exilic Israel has been cut down to the roots, and now we are seeing the first signs of new growth. A remnant of around 40,000 has returned to the land intent on working to rebuild the nation and not let it slide again into the idolatry that led to the exile in the first place. But where do you begin when there is such devastation? The destruction left by the Babylonian army decades ago is still evident. The temple is a pile of rubble, as are the walls surrounding Jerusalem. The primary institutions of society are non-existent, including governmental, religious and economic institutions. As a small analogy, think about what it feels like when you move from one house to another, immediately after the moving truck departs. Your house is filled with all your stuff, but very little has been put in order. It's hard to know where to start for the simple reason that every place your eye lands calls out for work to be done.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicle the three projects that dominated the efforts of the returning exiles. These books also introduce us to the primary leaders involved in these projects. Ezra 1-6 describes the rebuilding of the temple, led by Zerubbabel. The rest of Ezra is concerned with the reestablishment of the law, a project led by Ezra. And then Nehemiah is concerned with the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall. So think of these books as dominated by the temple, the law and the wall.

The teachings found in Ezra and Nehemiah are relevant to our time. We too find ourselves at a time of rebuilding. We are still in the middle of a pandemic which has brought great harm to the health of many, fatally so to a large number of people, and also great harm to our economy. At the same time, our hearts are grieving at the unjust killing of George Floyd and the reminder again that justice in our nation is still not blind to one's skin color. And then we see the sinful response of some as property is destroyed in the looting of many businesses. As Christians who love our neighbors, we want to help with all of these problems. We want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. But what do we do? What are the priorities to which we should give our attention? Today's passage helps us answer this question.

I. The Foundation before the Foundation – 3:1-7

Where do you start the work of restoring order when there is disarray everywhere you look? It is important to get started, but just as important to get started with the right action. When facing a chaotic situation, we often just

want to do something because it makes us feel better, not necessarily because it will help bring order to the chaos. Upon their return to Judah, these exiles began with worship. We can see the importance they assigned to this in the speed with which they began to worship. The text informs us that the events of this chapter occurred in the “seventh month.” Israel’s calendar was different than ours, and their seventh month, called “Tishri,” was during the fall, our September-October time frame. The fact that the author doesn’t mention the year suggests that this was their first year back in the land. They had likely left Babylon in the early spring for a journey that typically took about four months. Upon their arrival, they resettled in the towns of Judah and Benjamin that their families had lived in prior to the exile. And now they leave those homes to go to Jerusalem, after only living there for a few months.

What was so important to draw them away so soon from their homes, where there was so much work to be done, in order to gather together in Jerusalem? Three things happen when they gather. The very first thing they did was to rebuild the altar and begin offering on it the sacrifices prescribed in the Law of Moses. They exercised great care in the way they went about this, being careful to do everything as Moses had directed. So they **“set the altar in its place”** (3:3). God had said that he would tell them where they were to worship him, and he had directed that it be done in Jerusalem. So they set the altar in its appropriate place. And they also reestablished the regular morning and evening offerings, again as specified in the Law of Moses. It was their corrupted worship practices that had led to their exile, and they are clearly motivated to be faithful in those practices now that they are back in the land.

There was another motivation behind the establishment of the altar. **“Fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands”** (3:3). Who are these “peoples of the lands”? The land wasn’t empty when these exiles returned, and this phrase refers to the people the returning exiles found living in their towns and villages upon their arrival. According to 9:1, these were the Canaanites who had lived here prior to Israel’s first entry into the land back in the days of Joshua. Israel was returning to their land as immigrant refugees, and those who had moved in when Israel was taken into captivity seventy years prior to this were not pleased to see Israel show up again. We are going to see the opposition of this group throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We’re not told here of the exact nature of this opposition, but it was enough to bring fear upon Israel. And what did they do to address that fear? They worshipped.

The second thing they did was to observe the Feast of Booths. The Law directed Israel to assemble together in Jerusalem three times per year. The first was to celebrate Passover in the early spring, the second was the Feast of Weeks in the summer, and the third was this Feast in the fall. This was a feast to remember Israel’s wilderness wanderings when they lived in tents. They would celebrate it by once again living in tents during the week of this feast and remembering God’s faithfulness and provision for them during that time.

The third thing they did was to arrange for the rebuilding of the temple, giving money for the supplies that would be needed and arranging for those materials to be delivered.

This passage leads to an important application. When you are faced with the brokenness of this world, to what do you give priority? This is a relevant question for us all today. Covid-19 is still a significant threat to us, as is the economic damage it has done to so many small businesses and those employed by them. And now we have all been painfully reminded of the injustices faced by many African-Americans among us. As if that weren't enough, some have responded to these injustices with looting and destruction of property, a sinful response that will only make things worse for everyone. As Christians, we want to be used of God to bring healing, justice and peace. We want to see order brought where there has been chaos. But what do we do? Where do we begin?

I believe this passage helps answer this question. We must keep first things first, and the matter of first importance is gospel worship. What is gospel worship? It is worship at the altar of sacrifice. For us, the altar of sacrifice isn't the place where animal sacrifices were made, but the place where the ultimate sacrifice for sins was made, the cross. This speaks of our need to be humble and to confess our sins and receive the forgiveness available to us through Jesus' blood. The gospel reverses our natural tendency to think that the problem with the world lies outside of us. Republicans think Democrats are the problem and Democrats think Republicans are the problem. My position, and I believe that of the Bible, is the same as that once expressed by G. K. Chesterton. The *London Times* once asked a number of writers for essays on the topic "What's Wrong with the World?" Chesterton sent the shortest reply, and I would imagine the most profoundly honest one. "Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton." I don't mean to suggest that we need not bother with good political solutions or demands for justice. Those are good and necessary things. But without addressing the need of the sinful human heart, they will ultimately fail.

I notice too that this is the prescription for fear. **"They set the altar in place, for fear was on them."** Gospel worship delivers us from fear. How does that work? It does so by redefining what is the biggest thing in our lives. For the fearful, the biggest things are the threats they face, which very often are threats you can do nothing about. The gospel, on the other hand, says that the biggest thing in your life is your sin, your innate tendency to love yourself instead of God. But it also says that God's love is bigger even than that. When that love is received and experienced, it releases us from all other fears.

II. A Foundation of Small Beginnings – 3:8-13

We are given another time stamp for the events surrounding the beginning of construction for this rebuilt temple. It is now the second month of the second year, which makes it about 6-7 months after the events described in the previous paragraph. It had probably taken that long to accumulate the materials needed for the construction of the foundation. The construction commences, supervised by the Levitical priests. When the foundation is finished, they pause for a celebration.

It is a celebration of worship, and the text describes what happened. The priests have removed their work clothes and put on their vestments. Many of the priests focused on music, and at least two instruments are named—trumpets and cymbals. And then we read that they worshiped **“according to the directions of David king of Israel”** (3:10). Since David had lived and reigned five centuries before this, these were five-hundred year-old worship practices. As an aside, our blended worship style here attempts to hold on to the best of the historic worship practices of the Church while also contextualizing to more modern tastes.

They sang a hymn, and the words focus on the love of God. **“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel”** (3:11). As we saw last week, God is determined to make a home with his people. Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden didn’t stop him. The sin of Israel over many centuries, sin that led to the exile, will not stop him either. He is a faithful God who will never forsake his people, even when they fall into sin. He is like the father in the prodigal son parable, welcoming his children back home again. When this truth becomes more than mental assent, when it becomes part of our real experience by the power of the Holy Spirit, we want to celebrate.

But not everyone was in a celebrating mood on this occasion. The older generation had seen the former temple before its destruction, and when they see this foundation they can’t help but compare it with Solomon’s great temple. This one comes up short in the comparison, and they respond with weeping. So we’ve got two loud emotions, rejoicing and weeping, creating a cacophony of sound.

How should we interpret this weeping? There are two possibilities. One possibility is that their weeping arose from the realization that nothing this side of being home with God will ever completely satisfy. This temple fell short of their hopes, desires and expectations. They had high ideals, and the reality of this temple fell short of their ideals.

A second possibility is more negative. They were people who more easily saw what was wrong with something than what was right. They had a favorable view of “the good ole days,” perhaps unrealistically favorable, and saw this current effort as falling short of the past.

I think there's some truth in both of these. This side of heaven, reality almost always falls a little short of our ideals. No church is ever all that we want it to be. No pastor fully meets our desires and expectations. No job, no house, no spouse, no parents and no children fully satisfy. That is just life in this fallen world. The issue is how we respond to that gap between reality and our ideals, and it seems to me that this older generation responded inappropriately. One indication of that is something written in Zechariah about this very incident. **"For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice"** (4:10). Another indication that this weeping was inappropriate is what we're going to see in the coming chapters. Work on the temple stopped for the next twenty years. They completed the foundation, and there it sat in its incomplete state for almost two decades. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah will write to these exiles about this, rebuking them for focusing on the rebuilding of their own homes while neglecting God's home. A negative message, such as the one communicated by this weeping, is a powerful force for discouragement. Have you ever noticed how much louder criticism is in your ears than affirmation? I confess that if I hear ten affirmations of a sermon I preach and only one criticism, the criticism is much louder in my ears than the affirmation.

So what's the lesson in this? It is to look for and affirm whatever God is doing, no matter how small. This temple may not have measured up to Solomon's, but it was the thing God was doing in this day. But the gloomy older generation missed this, and in missing it they also missed the opportunity for joy. There is certainly a time to mourn, but it's not when God has been gracious to us. That's the time to celebrate.

One of the applications of this is to recognize the power of celebration. Has it ever occurred to you that this is one of the reasons we gather for worship every Sunday? We gather to celebrate the gifts and grace of God. I love the words to that old hymn we sing, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty." One stanza says, "Hast thou not seen, how thy desires all have been granted in what he ordaineth?" I think, too, that this is a great principle to follow in our parenting. Look for what God is doing, and celebrate that. It is good for teachers, for disciplers and for coaches. If you can't see the good God is doing in someone's life, then ask God for eyes to see.

CONCLUSION:

This passage ought to encourage our hope. God is at work in our day, just as he was in Ezra's day. Even in our current dark times, we can be optimistic that God is at work to make a home for us and make sure we get there.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Ezra 3:1-13

1. When the exiles moved from Babylon back to Judah, it must have been a difficult move. What's the most difficult move you've ever had to make?
2. Our nation is currently undergoing several difficulties, and the difficulties are bringing to the surface many of the divisions that have been dormant for a time. Do you think the same thing is happening to the Church? What would you say is the most important thing the Church could do to heal divisions and promote unity within?
3. The returning exiles gave priority to worship, and that was the source of their unity. How does worship serve to unite God's people? In particular, how does gospel worship unite? That gospel worship is pictured for us in the altar of sacrifice, which to us refers to the place of the sacrifice of Jesus, the cross.
4. The entire nation of Israel was commanded to come together for corporate worship three times a year. The first of those was for Passover in the early spring, then the Feast of Weeks in the summer and finally the Feast of Booths in the fall, which is the feast being celebrated in this passage. Great effort would be required for this gathering, particularly for those living at a great distance from Jerusalem. How have you been affected by our inability to gather for worship as a congregation during this pandemic?
5. When the foundation of the temple was completed, many rejoiced while others wept. It was the older generation that wept, the ones who had seen Solomon's temple before its destruction. Do you think this weeping was normal and acceptable or blameworthy?
6. How have you experienced the power of affirmation or the power of a discouraging word?
7. As you think about our day, what do you see God doing that can be affirmed?