

Worship Is Restored

Devotional Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Background Scripture: Ezra 3:1-13

Ezra 3:1-6, 10-13

¹ When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. ² Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices. ⁴ Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. ⁵ After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD. 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.

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

“He is good;
his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³ No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

Key Text

All the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

—Ezra 3:11b

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 3: Special Offerings and the Sanctuary

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Outline the history of Judah’s exile to Babylon and return to Jerusalem.
2. Summarize the behaviors of those who had returned from exile in light of their fear, joy, and sorrow.
3. Write a prayer that identifies an area where fear must be overcome so that godly service is not hindered.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Work as a Response to Grace
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Introduction

A. Weeping and Rejoicing Today

For over 25 years, my friend Sandra has served as a missionary in several countries, including Croatia, Ukraine, and Iran. Sandra reports asking an Iranian friend how she came to faith in Christ. The friend told Sandra, “When I was walking across Turkey trying to get away, I had a vision of Jesus Christ. He told me, ‘I will be with you.’” Sandra then taught her friend more about what being a Christian meant in light of God’s mercy and love.

We are wise to be skeptical of claimed visions, lest Revelation 22:19 be violated (compare Hebrews 1:1). But a claimed vision that aligns with the teaching of the Bible deserves further investigation. Such an occurrence may be the first step in being called to a saving relationship with God through Christ.

The experiences of Sandra and her friend remind us that Christians live in a world characterized by both pain and pleasure, grief and joy (compare John 16:21). And so it is with the Judeans of the mid-sixth century BC, today’s lesson from the book of Ezra.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Ezra tells how Jews from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin returned to their homeland from exile in Babylon. That happened shortly after the fall of the Babylonian Empire to the Persians in 538 BC (Ezra 1:1–2:1), when the Persian king, Cyrus, issued a decree that allowed the return (Ezra 1:1-4; compare 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicle the return in three distinct phases. Ezra 2:64-65 reveals about 50,000 people in the first wave, making the arduous trip of over 800 miles. A later wave of returnees, coming under the leadership of Ezra, took exactly four months (Ezra 7:8-9).

The primary purpose of the journey was to “[re]build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5). When that city was destroyed in 586 BC, there remained no nation of Judah, no capital city of Jerusalem, no temple, no royal

palace, and no walls (2 Kings 25:8-17; compare 2 Chronicles 36:15-21). Normally, it would be impossible for a nation to come into existence again after an absence of more than half a century. But God was in this situation, and the impossible became not just possible but a reality. As Jeremiah stated, nothing is too difficult for God (Jeremiah 32:17).

The temple's rebuilding would require much effort, money, time, labor, and good leadership. An easier and quicker task would be to start rebuilding the temple's altar of burnt offerings (see description in Exodus 38:1-7 and use in Leviticus 1:1-17; 6:8-13; also see lesson 4). And that's where we begin our lesson.

I. Rebuilding the Altar

(Ezra 3:1-6)

A. People Gather (v. 1)

1. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem.

The story's setting in *the seventh month* places it in late September or early October. By this time, the Jews had two calendars: a civic calendar and a religious calendar. The reference here is to the seventh month of the religious calendar, the first month on the civic calendar. By name, the month was called "Ethanym" (possibly meaning "gifts" or "flowing water") before the exile (1 Kings 8:2) and "Tishri" (meaning "beginning") after the exile.

By the time of the event described in the verse before us, those who had returned from exile had already dispersed to live in their ancestral villages (Ezra 2:70). Apparently, few wanted to live in Jerusalem itself, leading to a situation where one in every ten individuals was eventually selected by lot to inhabit the city (Nehemiah 11:1-2).

This seventh month of the Jewish religious year included four observances that would have drawn the people to Jerusalem. These were the blowing of trumpets on the first day (Leviticus 23:23-25), the Day of Atonement on the tenth day (23:26-32; see also lesson 5), the Festival of Tabernacles on days 15 through 21 (23:33-36a,

39-43), and an assembly of the eighth day on day 22 (23:36b). But the reason *the people assembled together as one to Jerusalem* may not be any of these, as we shall see.

What Do You Think?

What do you think is the value of having large numbers of Christians from a wide area attend a worship event?

Digging Deeper

How can we maintain unity among dispersed believers when gathering regularly in person is impossible?

B. Leaders Lead (v. 2)

2a. Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel

The important leaders *Joshua son of Jozadak* and *Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel* are mentioned together in a dozen Old Testament verses (here and Ezra 2:2; 3:8; 4:3; 5:2; Nehemiah 7:7; 12:1; Haggai 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4). These occurrences reveal that Joshua was the high priest and Zerubbabel was the governor. In these passages, we see Judah's religious leader and political leader working together to ensure the successful rebuilding of community and religious life. That rebuilding included *the altar of the God of Israel* in its traditional place in the temple courtyard, even though the temple remained in ruins.

We may call their activity here "leadership by example." The reconstruction of the altar was necessary, and it appears that the direct engagement of these two leaders played a key role in making it happen. When we read of the temple that "Solomon built in Jerusalem" (1 Chronicles 6:10), it suggests he funded and authorized the temple's construction rather than doing the physical work himself. However, considering the activities mentioned in the verse before us, the term *build* appears to have a more personal connotation.

Even so, it wasn't just Joshua and Zerubbabel doing the work. The *associates* of each pitched in.

RESTORED FOR WORSHIP.

Visual for Lesson 12. *Display this visual and allow learners one minute for silent reflection on the ways that the Lord has restored them for worship.*

The *priests* who had returned from exile were 4,289 in number, so there was no shortage of available labor (Ezra 2:36-39). However, so many trying to work together to build the altar would result in people getting in each other's way. A more manageable number of priests helping the two leaders would be the 19 leaders of priests named in Nehemiah 12:1-7. The number of individuals associated with Zerubbabel who assisted in the task remains unknown.

2b. to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

The function of the altar *to sacrifice burnt offerings on it* clarifies that this was the altar of burnt offerings, not the golden altar of incense, given how each had been used in both tabernacle and temple. These two altars are distinguished *in the Law of Moses* in Exodus 27:1-8; 30:1-10; 37:25-28; 38:1-7; 40:5-6. The Law of Moses gave specifications for the construction and function of the altar (Leviticus 1; see lesson 4; see also Numbers 28:1-6).

C. Sacrifices Offered (vv. 3-5)

3. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

The fact that *the altar* was constructed *on the temple's foundation* reveals reconstruction on the

footprint of the one destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 BC. The rebuilt altar thus became the fixed point around which the rest of the rebuilding work could proceed.

The duration of time required to rebuild the altar is uncertain. Workers might have labored rather quickly because of their *fear of the peoples around them*. We read the actions of those enemies later (Ezra 4:1-5; Nehemiah 4; etc.). At this point, the nature of their threat is not evident. It may have been a threat of a physical nature, designed to intimidate and demoralize the people (compare Nehemiah 6:1-15). Or the threat may have been perceived as spiritual—contact with unholy people making the altar, etc., impure. The text is not specific on this point.

With the altar rebuilt, the priests reestablished the twice-daily sacrifices on behalf of all the people as commanded in Exodus 29:38-46 and Numbers 28:1-8. It also permitted burnt offerings designed to inaugurate worship (see lesson 4).

The Mammoth Hunt

The young hunter was terrified, wanting to flee. But the pressure of his father's hand on his shoulder told him to wait, wait, wait until the command came: *Now!* The two leaped from their hiding place and hurled their spears with banshee screams into the startled herd. The startled mammoths tried to stop, turn around, and step to the side all at once. But to their right, the level terrain just . . . ended. All five tumbled down a 90-foot precipice to their deaths on the rocky shoreline of the river below. The courage of the two hunters meant food for an entire village in the coming winter.

Since prehistoric times, fear has been a normal

How to Say It

Ethanim	<i>Eth-uh-nim.</i>
Jozadak	<i>Joz-uh-dak.</i>
Judeans	<i>Joo-dee-unz.</i>
Nebuchadnezzar	<i>Neb-yuh-kud-nez-er.</i>
Shealtiel	<i>She-al-tee-el.</i>
Tishri	<i>Tish-ree.</i>
Zerubbabel	<i>Zeh-rub-uh-bul.</i>

and necessary human emotion. Whether you're a mammoth hunter or a modern mom, fear heightens the senses and prepares the body to fight or flee as necessary.

That same impulse may kick in when God asks people to do hard things. The great heroes of the faith were often fearful when God called them. Think of Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Gideon, and Jeremiah. The essence of faith is not that we don't feel fear. Instead, it's that we don't let that fear overcome our faith. —A. W.

4. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day.

The Festival of Tabernacles was one of the three annual pilgrimage festivals to Jerusalem. Exodus 23:15-17 and 34:18-25 name these three festivals.

At first reading of those passages, it may appear that there are more than three festivals and that the Festival of Tabernacles is not among them. But there are indeed three considering that (1) the two Festivals of Unleavened Bread and Passover were often regarded as a singular observance, as they took place consecutively, and (2) the various festivals go by different names (example: the Festival of Tabernacles is the same as the Festival of Ingathering).

The phrase *what is written* witnesses the concern for rooting practice firmly in the Law of Moses. Given the reality of and reason for the Babylonian exile, it's understandable that this became very important during the postexilic period. All this may lead us to conclude that the reason "the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem" (Ezra 3:1, above) was for this festival. But that little word *then* should cause us to not be too hasty in this conclusion. That word may indicate that a celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles wasn't the primary purpose of the gathering. Instead, the broader context of being able to resume burnt offerings could have been the main reason. (See commentary on Ezra 3:6, below.) For the nature of the *burnt offerings prescribed for each day* see reference to the twice-daily sacrifices noted in 3:3, above.

5. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD.

This verse indicates the comprehensive reintroduction of the functions of the altar as established in Numbers 28 and 29. The sacrificial system was fully reinstituted from the earliest possible moment after the Judeans had reestablished themselves.

The contexts of these offerings are summarized in terms of (1) those that are *regular*, (2) those of *the New Moon*, (3) *all the appointed sacred festivals of the Lord*, and (4) those categorized as *freewill*. Having already discussed the first of these, we now briefly examine the second. The ancient Jews used a lunar-solar calendar, with the passage of months determined by the phases of the moon (Isaiah 66:23). A new moon, which is the opposite of a full moon, marked the first day of a new month; the burnt offerings prescribed for this day are outlined in Numbers 28:11-15 (contrast Colossians 2:16). The third summarization includes the full array of festivals listed in the commentary on Ezra 3 to this point. Freewill offerings, the fourth summarization, are burnt offerings connected with vows (Leviticus 22:18, 21, 23; etc.).

The carrying out of the sacrifices also required the reestablishment of animal husbandry and pasture management throughout the area around Jerusalem. This fact, in turn, implies a restoration of the basic mechanisms of ensuring that shepherds were paid, flocks protected, water sources managed, and so on. A return to something approaching normal life had begun.

What Do You Think?

How do annual celebrations like Christmas or Easter impact your faith?

Digging Deeper

How have you used these celebrations as opportunities to share the gospel message with unbelieving friends and family members?

D. Status Summarized (v. 6)

6a. On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD,

This verse supports the suggestion that the primary reason for the people to have “assembled together as one in Jerusalem” (Ezra 3:1, above) was not the Festival of Tabernacles but the Festival of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1-6). For the significance of *the seventh month*, see commentary on Ezra 3:1, above.

6b. though the foundation of the LORD’s temple had not yet been laid.

The rebuilding of the altar allowed the Judeans to restart the prescribed worship of God. However, a gap remained in that *the Lord’s temple* was absent. Its destruction in 586 BC had been complete (2 Kings 25:9). Even its *foundation*, originally *laid* in 966 BC (1 Kings 6:1, 37), would need to be laid anew.

What Do You Think?

How much preparation does it take for you to do things for God?

Digging Deeper

In what situations would it be better for you to get started on those things even though you feel unprepared?

II. Laying a Foundation

(Ezra 3:10-13)

A. Musical Praise (vv. 10-11)

10. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel.

The laying of *the foundation of the temple of the Lord* took about a year and a half (compare Ezra 3:1 with 3:8). The identity of *the builders* and the source of at least some of the construction material is found in Ezra 3:7-9, which is not part of today’s text. The *vestments* for *the priests* undoubtedly included the 100 priestly garments donated in Ezra 2:69.

The *trumpets* mentioned here are not the kind made from a ram’s horn (as in Exodus 19:13, 16, 19). Instead, the word being translated for trumpets as used here is the same one that refers to those made from silver in Numbers 10:1-10. The prescriptions of *David king of Israel*, for the organization of musicians, is found in 1 Chronicles 6:31-46 (compare 15:19-22). *Levites* as temple musicians are associated with various musical instruments in 2 Chronicles 29:25. By adhering to David’s ordinance, the broader aim was not to discard the positive aspects of Judah’s past but to renew them.

11. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

Here, we see another renewed connection with the past as the musicians sing of God’s *love* and enduring goodness. These lyrics go back to King David, centuries earlier (1 Chronicles 16:34, 41; compare Psalms 107:1; 136:1).

B. Mixed Reactions (vv. 12-13)

12. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.

The temple had been destroyed in 586 BC, and the year was about 536 BC as the singing continued. Thus, it had been just about 50 years in between. Those who had been 20 years old when they witnessed the destruction of Solomon’s magnificent temple had become *older priests and Levites and family heads*. The fact that they *wept* bitterly is quite understandable. They had to have been thinking of the sins of their generation that resulted in the destruction of that *former temple* (Haggai 2:3).

By contrast, those who *shouted for joy* were undoubtedly young enough never to have seen Solomon’s temple. The excitement of this accomplishment was to them unprecedented and thrilling.

The computation of the 50-year interval mentioned above doesn't conflict with the prophecy of 70 years of oppression in Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10. The oppression of exile occurred in the three waves of 605, 597, and 586 BC. Similarly, the return from exile occurred in three waves: 538, 458, and 444 BC. Thus, the computation of 70 years depends on selecting which starting and ending points apply (compare time identifiers in 2 Kings 24-25; 2 Chronicles 36:11-21; Ezekiel 1:1; Daniel 1:1-2).

How to Waste 50 Years—or Not

A new patient had been admitted for treatment, so the hospital chaplain dropped by his room to introduce himself and check on the patient's needs. The new patient was out for a medical procedure, but his wife was there. On seeing the chaplain enter, she said almost immediately, "My husband thinks he wasted 50 years of his life because he didn't become a Christian until age 50."

After the two had chatted for a few minutes, the husband returned. On seeing the chaplain, he immediately exclaimed, "Chaplain, I wasted 50 years of my life!" His joy at being a Christian seemed to be overshadowed by the regret of those pre-Christian years.

That happened in the late 1980s, and I was that hospital chaplain. I remember not disagreeing with him. But I assured him it was better to waste 50 years than to waste an eternity. How will you spend the years ahead? —R. L. N.

13. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

As time progressed beyond this high emotion, it's easy to imagine excitement becoming disappointment and disillusionment. That's because the next 20 years turned out to be a tug-of-war between outsiders on whether or not the work on the temple should continue (Ezra 4:1-6:12). Opposition to construction was eventually defeated. Still, the intervening years resulted in lethargy on the part of the Judeans. The Lord

himself had to intervene to get the project back on track (Haggai 1:1-2:9). The result was that the temple remained unfinished for two decades, not being completed until 516 BC (Ezra 6:15).

What Do You Think?

What is an occasion of your life that was so emotionally powerful it brought out tears of joy?

Digging Deeper

What is a situation where you were sad or grieving but had hope because of your confidence in God?

Conclusion

A. Work as a Response to Grace

Today's Scripture text points not only to human endeavor but also to God's mercy. His mercy makes our every endeavor possible and allows results. The story also signals God's actions, to which humans respond. God had brought the Judeans home in something of a "second exodus," allowing them to rebuild their world. The key question at that point was: *Would their world also be his world?* That question rings across the centuries to confront us today: *Is your world his world?*

What Do You Think?

What is your most surprising takeaway from studying this Scripture text?

Digging Deeper

How can that insight be applied in your life this week?

B. Prayer

Father, help us to remember that there is always a bigger picture. We lose sight of that bigger picture when we shift our focus to life's obstacles. May we never be guilty of such a shift nor of being the obstacles themselves. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Praise God for his enduring mercy!