

This message continues our study of the book of Ezra. Last week, we saw how God moved in the heart of a pagan king named Cyrus to allow the Israelites to return home after decades of exile in Persia. It's the year 538 BC, and they've been in exile, most of them, for 50 years; some for 70 years. Most of them have never been to Jerusalem. They'd never seen the Temple. They were born in exile. It would take about four months to make the journey back to Jerusalem. There were about 50,000 of them—men, women, children, and the elderly on carts pulled by oxen. They all made this the slow trek back to Jerusalem.

What did they do when they arrived? Try to imagine it. They had no homes to live in. Undoubtedly, some would look up long lost relatives because not every Jewish person was taken into exile; some had stayed. You can imagine that scene: a knock on the door, "We used to live here sixty years ago. You don't know me, but I'm your Uncle Joe. These are my twelve children? And, by the way, we have nowhere to sleep tonight."

We're only given little glimpses here in Ezra. But we learn from the end of chapter 2 and the start of chapter 3 that many settled in towns, most likely the town their families came from. Chapter 3 begins, "*When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns...*"

Notice it's the seventh month. That doesn't mean they had been back for six months already, but rather shortly after they arrived back, it was the seventh month. The seventh month in the Hebrew calendar is the month of Tishri — September/October on our calendar. It's the most important month in the Hebrew calendar for the worship of God. All kinds of festivals occur during this month. Hashanah and the New Year occurs in the seventh month. You may ask, "Why does the new year begin in the seventh month?" Well, it's like we talk about the school year beginning in August; it's that kind of thing. The Feast of Trumpets occurred in the seventh month, Yom Kippur on the tenth day of the seventh month, and then the Day of Atonement and Feast of Tabernacles.

They'd been back a few weeks. Barely enough time to find somewhere to live, let alone find a job, and to make plans for the future — all of which would be perfectly understandable — but look what it says in the rest of verse 1, "the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem." They must have talked about it on the way back, that as soon as possible at the start of the seventh month because that month is so important, they would gather as one in Jerusalem.

You can imagine them on the temple mount. There are the charred remains of the stones that once formed the structure and edifice of the temple. Moss, grass, weeds had grown after decades of neglect. There's something of an altar there, most likely built by those who'd not been deported, but it wasn't the proper altar.

So, what are they doing? Why are they assembled together? As we'll see from the rest of this chapter, it's all about worship. They're restoring worship in Jerusalem. Why? Because they saw it as the center and goal of all they did as God's people. Maybe it's hard for us to imagine, but their worship of God-centered around a place, a temple with an altar in the holy city of Jerusalem. For 70 years, they couldn't be there and worship God as one people. It's not that they couldn't worship God in Persia, but it wasn't the same. Psalm 137 expresses how they felt so well, "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?*" (Psalm 137:1, 4). I must tell you I can relate to how they felt.

For almost 34 years, the center of my week has been Sunday at CPC. It's what I look forward to and work towards with great anticipation. But I never really understood how much it meant to me until this pandemic took it away. I know I can worship God at home or anywhere else, just like the Israelites could worship God in Babylon. And I know our worship isn't centered on a place or even only one day a week. But still, for me, it's not the same, and I long for those times when we're together as one worshipping the Lord.

What if I told you worship is really the ultimate goal of the church? Our mission is to make and mature more followers of Christ. But that's not the ultimate goal. The reason why we want to make and mature more followers of Christ is so more men and women might be brought to the feet of Jesus to worship Him. You see, when this age is over, when the "now" gives way to the "not yet," when millions of redeemed people fall on their faces before God, that mission to reach more people will be over. But worship will go on forever. So worship is the fuel and the goal of our mission. Worship is the ultimate "Why" of all we do. That's why the Westminster Confession of Faith starts with these words, "The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

And worship is really the focus of chapter three. Let's start by reading verses 2-7.

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. 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. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. 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. 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. Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus King of Persia.

Notice they were led by two men: Joshua and Zerubbabel. Joshua is important because he is a priest. He'll provide spiritual leadership. Zerubbabel is important because he's from the Davidic line of Kings. He'll provide political leadership. These two leaders play a significant role in the first six chapters of Ezra. By the way, Ezra doesn't actually show up until about 58 years later in chapter 7. But, again, the focus is worship. There's a lot we can learn about worship from this chapter. I want to focus on four things.

The Priority of Worship

The first point of focus we've already touched on, and that's the priority of worship. The way this chapter reads, it's like the first thing they did. Yes, they went to their towns and perhaps unpacked their bags and got settled, but the writer pays very little attention to that. Why? Because the most important thing was that they assembled together as soon as possible, and in time for the celebrations of the seventh month. They began with rebuilding the altar and offering sacrifices.

The priority of worship is seen not only in that they began to rebuild so quickly but also in two other factors. First, verse 3 tells us they did this despite their fear of the people around them. Another translation says, *"they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands."* Some of them were Jews who'd remained in Jerusalem during the exile but had lost touch with their faith. But it also includes others who weren't Jewish: Samaritans, people from Ashdod, Moab, and Edom. Whoever these people were, they were opposed to what God's people were doing in restoring worship. We'll dive more into that next week, but it shows us that when we chose to worship, we always do it despite something else. There will always be things that get in the way; there will always be tensions to overcome; there will always be people who just don't get it and somehow oppose what we're doing.

The second factor displaying the priority of worship is they sacrificed to make it happen. They made freewill offerings (v. 5) and gave money (v. 7) as they began to prepare to rebuild the temple. We saw this first at the end of chapter 2, *"When they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site" (v. 68).* We say this all the time — giving is an act of worship. That means we give first and foremost to the Lord, not to a leader or even to a church. We give to the Lord, and this shows the priority he holds in our lives. We don't give because we're forced to; we don't give to have a building or a bench named after us. We give because everything we have comes from God and because we care about His name being exalted. We want more and more people to join the company of the redeemed who worship him.

So let me ask you a question: If you returned home in these circumstances, would you make worship the first thing you did? Would you worship despite all the pressures around you not to? Would you worship by reaching into your pocket and supporting what God is doing? To worship with God's people, in whatever form it takes, ought to be the highest priority in our lives.

The Boundaries of Worship

The second thing we learn about worship is the boundaries of worship. Notice in verse 2 as they begin to build the altar they do so *"in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses..."* And then again, in verse 4, it says they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles in accordance with what is written. And they offer these various offerings with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. Later, in verse 10, as they began to worship, it says, they did so *"as prescribed by David king of Israel."* So it's quite clear as they reinstitute worship, they were working within the boundaries previously established in God's word.

This is really quite amazing! Remember, most of these people had never worshipped in Jerusalem, having been born in exile. They'd never offered a sacrifice. They'd never seen the Temple. They'd heard about all these things, and they'd read about them in the Torah, but never experienced them. But, still, they're very careful to do things properly and in accordance with their scriptures.

I believe we downplay this in our day and age to our peril. We say it doesn't matter where or when or how you worship. It's all very loosey goosey. The only thing that matters is your heart is in the right place. And of course, it's important our heart is in the right place, but that doesn't mean we ignore the boundaries God's word places around our worship.

Do you recall Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well? Much of it was about worship. The woman said to Jesus, *"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20).* The Jews said the Jerusalem Temple was where true worship took place, while the Samaritans said it was on Mt. Gerizim.

Do you remember what Jesus said in response to her? First, he said, *"...a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John 4:21).* So, clearly, the place we worship is no longer crucial.

But then he said this,

"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." John 4:23-24

What does it mean to worship in spirit? He's not talking about the Holy Spirit, but the human spirit, in the depth of our inner being. So it's true — real worship isn't about where we are; it's about something that takes place in the core of our being — our heart. But it's not only about that. We also worship him in truth. Truth is found in God's word.

In God's word, we learn the truth about who this God is we worship. We also learn about what he's done for us, particularly in what we call the Gospel. In God's word, we learn about the ordinances of worship: baptism and the Lord's Supper. In God's word, we learn about proper acts of worship like confession, praise, thanksgiving, and the proclamation of God's word.

Proper worship also involves offering sacrifices to God. Ezra 3 puts a lot of emphasis on the sacrifices these people made at the newly constructed altar. We offer sacrifices as well. The apostle Peter said we offer "*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5).

What are those sacrifices? Listen to Hebrews 13,

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Hebrews 13:15-16

Those verses begin and end with the word "sacrifice." We make sacrifices too, but what are they? Two things: There's the sacrifice of praise, and there's the sacrifice of sharing with others. It's the fruit of our lips and the fruit of our hands. Together, that's what we put on the altar, that's what we offer to God; that's proper worship.

The Focus of Worship

The third thing we learn here has to do with the focus of worship. The focus of worship starts with remembering what God has done. Notice in Ezra 3:4, it says, "*...they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day.*" Do you know what they did to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles? They all came together and camped out in tents. That's why it's also called the Feast of Booths. You see, they were remembering how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, how he led them in the wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan, and how they'd lived in tents. Every year, they were to remember what God had done in delivering them and providing for them in the wilderness. It was no mistake that they celebrated this during the Fall because that's when grapes and olives were harvested. So this was also a time to thank God for His provision and to remind themselves of how dependent they were on Him.

This was a joyful time. Children loved the Feast of Tabernacles. What kid doesn't like to camp? I'm not sure the parents liked it, but the kids had a blast! They'd prop up their tents. They'd enjoy the outdoors with their cousins and friends. They'd be together for a week with no physical distancing! I can see them out there throwing frisbees, singing, dancing, and grilling lamb and leeks.

What's really interesting is this would have been the first time most of them had celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. They'd heard all about it, but now they're keeping it. And now it really made sense because God had just brought them out of Babylon as he'd brought their forefathers out of Egypt.

You see, part of worship is finding ways to remember what God has done. As we remember, we respond with thanksgiving and praise, and we refresh our dependence on Him. And as those who live under a New

Covenant, we have so much more to remember than even they did! We have Jesus! We have our own story of deliverance. God sent his Son who lived, died, and was raised up to set us free from sin, death, and the devil. We remember this every time we meet together, and every time we break the bread of communion. That's our feast! The early church celebrated communion over more than a tiny cracker and a vial of grape juice. They had a meal together! There was joy, fellowship, and gratitude.

The focus of our worship is on what God has done for us, but it's also on who God is. In verses 8 and 9, we're told how six months later, they began work on the foundation of the Temple under the supervision of the Levites. They sent money way up north to the land of the Phoenicians. That's where the big trees were, like our beautiful Redwood forests here in California. Those trees would be cut, felled, prepared, and brought by ship along the Mediterranean, down to Joppa, and then up to Jerusalem. Solomon had done the same with the first Temple. It would take a while, and that's why it's six months later. Much of this was financed, by the way, by Cyrus, King of Persia! How cool is that! A pagan king was buying supplies for the Temple!

Let's pick it up in verse 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. 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. vv. 10-11

Notice the focus here on who God is. "With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: 'He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.'" That's straight out of Psalm 107, "*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.*" Who is God? What is he like? God is good. His love endures forever!

This past week we lost a man who was a giant in the faith — J.I. Packer. He was 93 years old and spent the last few decades at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. This man had a huge influence on me through his writings. One of his books changed my life. It's called *Knowing God*, published in 1973. In that book, he challenges us to a lifelong quest to know and enjoy this glorious being we call God. He wrote, "Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord." Isn't that great? He also said, "Your faith will not fail while God sustains it; you are not strong enough to fall away while God is resolved to hold you." What's he saying? He's saying even when you think you've fallen away from him; you can't because he's resolved to hold you. He's saying God's love endures forever! When a truth like this gets a hold of you, you can't help but worship him. The focus of our worship is on who God is and what he's done for us.

The Impediment to Worship

But if we're honest, sometimes our worship isn't quite as satisfying and thrilling as we'd like. And that was true of some of the Israelites who were in Jerusalem to worship. Look what happened as all these people are praising the Lord

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. 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. vv. 12-13

The foundation for the Temple has been laid. Why are some of them weeping while others rejoice? You see, there were some older folks there, perhaps in their eighties, who could remember the former Temple. They're thinking, "I saw Solomon's Temple. I saw the glory of God fill that place. This doesn't hold a candle to that." And that attitude, that mindset, impeded their worship. They should be rejoicing in what God was doing right in front of them, but because it was different from what they'd experienced in the past, they couldn't.

We know the prophet Haggai ministered during this exact time in Israel's history. Listen to what God said to him,

"Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty." Haggai 2:2-4

Do you see what God is saying thru Haggai? He says, "Don't let what I did in the past, keep you from embracing what I'm doing now." You see, to do that shows a terrible ingratitude for the present and robs us of joy. God had worked to bring them back and called them to rebuild the Temple, yet all they can say is, "It's not like it used to be." And in saying that, they're showing ingratitude for what God was doing in the present. And as we'll see in the coming weeks, eventually, that attitude would cripple God's people and bring the building of the Temple to a grinding halt.

Every church has these people, and I'd say this is especially true for those over 60 (haha!). I mean, don't we sometimes long for the old days, the glory days, as we like to say? Maybe I was doing that a little bit in reflecting on J.I. Packer. But that can happen in church. "Oh, it's never been the same since so-and-so left." Or, "You should have been here back in the 80s. The Spirit of God was really here. This place was rocking."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

I have a pastor friend who works in a church with a storied history and a former pastor who wrote dozens of books and had a worldwide impact. He gets so sick of hearing about it from the older people in his church. Why? Because they're so caught up in what God did 30 years ago that they can't see and rejoice in what God is doing now. It's like some of us are right now with the SF Giants — we can't embrace this present team because we can't let go of the glory years when they won three championships. It's like, "I want Timmy Lincecum back!"

I feel like this every time I watch one of our services on a screen. First of all, do you know how hard it is to watch yourself preach? It's brutal. But, beyond that, I can't help but long for the old days when we could all meet together, and the Spirit of God moved among us. But here's the point: If all we can see is the former glory, we'll never be able to embrace what God is doing now right in front of us. Yes, remember God's deeds in the past, but don't let nostalgia impede your worship. Embrace what God is doing now. You can't live on yesterday's manna; you have to gather it afresh every day.

So all of this is what took place as the Israelites restored worship in the city of God. It shows us that restoring worship requires we see it as the center and goal of all we do as the people of God. Church, will you make worship your highest priority? Will you worship according to the boundaries set in God's word? Will you focus in your worship on who God is and what he's done? And will you embrace what God is doing in the present instead of murmuring about how it doesn't match up with the former glory? Will you say, today, with joy and gratitude in your hearts, "He is good. His love endures forever!"

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