

# RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 5: Ezra 3:8-13



# INTRODUCTION

It is a well known fact that there is power in the number three - particularly in its use in language. It is a device that is used in slogans to make them more memorable or to give them more impact. An example we would all be familiar with is "Stop, Look, and Listen" keeping people safe as they cross the road for decades now. A more classical reference would be "Veni, vidi, vici (I came, I saw, I conquered)." Well, this is our fifth Sunday looking at the book of Ezra and as we have seen over the past few weeks God has been faithfully leading his people giving them an opportunity to follow their own "rule of three" the three R's - no, not reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic, or reduce, re-use, recycle, but to return, repair, and restore. Return to worship God, repair their relationship with him, and restore their identity as his people. The rebuilding of the altar last time was an act that united the Jews and began those tasks of returning, repairing, and restoring and taught us that we as a church need to be united, work together, and focused on Jesus (another example of the rule of three - did it help you remember from last week?!).

This week we move on to the rest of the temple reconstruction. I say reconstruction but don't get any grand ideas, at this stage it was more like making the place usable rather than restoring it to its former glory. But, nevertheless, it was a grand and significant moment given the destruction that had previously befallen it. That leaves us with one question - the question that we face every time we come to the Bible - what does this passage, of an event that happened hundreds of years ago, have to say to us today as we seek a way forward as God's representatives on earth? It will show us that we are witnesses to God's kingdom, and as those witnesses it impacts how we live and how we worship.

# REMEMBERING OUR ROOTS

The phrase "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it" is well known and I am sure we can all think of examples like Napoleon and then later Hitler misjudging the Russian winter or perhaps from your own experience of returning to an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend only to realise they have not changed and you break up for the same reasons as before. This is usually done unknowingly but sometimes we purposely remember the past so we can repeat it! For example, we all have our Christmas traditions; there are married couples who return to their honeymoon location; and there are some people who love books so much that they re-read them every year. Some things are worth repeating! Well that is exactly what is happening in our passage today.

Throughout our passage on the rebuilding of the temple there are numerous echoes of the erection of Solomon's temple all those years ago. We saw the first example of this last time in Ezra 3:7 where the ordering of cedar trees for the temple from the Sidonians and the Tyrians in exchange for food, drink, and oil is the same exact process that King Solomon undertook when the original temple was built (1 Kgs 5:7-12). The second similarity is the timing of the construction of the temple which occurs in the second month of the year, the same as Solomon's (1 Kgs 6:1); and finally, the celebrations at the establishment of the temple match, almost like for like, the ceremony for the first temple (2 Chr. 5:13). Mirroring the construction of Solomon's temple was significant for the returning Jews.

Why was it significant? Well, we have to remember that this is a nation trying to return to worship God, repair their relationship with him, and restore their identity as his people. When we combine this with the fact that it was God who provided the original plans for his temple (1 Chr. 28:11-21) to repeat what happened in the past was not just a pleasant reminder of better days, but was an act that showed the concern the Jews had for the proper worship of God. To connect to their history was to connect to the intentions of God himself for God does not leave it to humanity to define the type of worship they will offer him, but rather he provides the instructions.

What do we see when we look to our roots, to our history of worshipping God? Last week we spoke about how we should be focused on Jesus and that is what we are going to do now because in many ways Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the foundation of our worship. In Jesus we find two great principles which should be part of the foundation for our worship. Firstly, our worship should be thanking God for what he has done and what he has provided. We see Jesus do this throughout the gospels: when he fed the 5,000, he gave thanks for the five loaves and two fish (Jn 6:11); he gave thanks to God before he called Lazarus out from the tomb (Jn 11:41); and he gave thanks as he introduced the new covenant meal at the last supper (Lk. 22:14-20). Not only is Jesus an example for us to follow, but he also gives us the inspiration for our own thanks. In his incarnation, death, and resurrection Jesus Christ takes on our humanity and defeats death's hold over us and unites us in his resurrection. Is there any better reason for why our worship should have thanks to God at its foundation?!

Secondly, our worship should be sacrificial because ultimately it is not about us, it is about God. Everything that Jesus did, his life, his death, and his resurrection, was to glorify God. It was not about his own individual needs but was a sacrificial life putting those things to one side and sacrificially following God. Our worship should do likewise be that sacrificing a lie-in on

Sunday morning to attend church, or an evening to pray for those in need, or our finances, using our money to glorify God rather than for our own purposes.

When we focus on the cross of Christ, when we remember the roots of our faith, we remind ourselves of how our own proper worship of God should be.

## GOD'S TEMPLE: THEN & NOW

Our worship should be thankful and sacrificial - but where does that worship take place? For the Jews at the time of Ezra their worship had always been at the temple up until it was destroyed and so for them it made sense to return to that way of worship. Not only that but the temple itself had significance for the Jewish people. Last time, we spoke about the significance of the altar, how it was a place where God was glorified, where communion with God took place, and how it acted as a testimony to God's work. The temple too has significance - it is not just a shell that houses an altar.

To truly see the significance of the temple, we need to look back to what came before - the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a 'sanctuary' for God to dwell with his people (Ex. 25:8) and, just like the temple, detailed instructions were given regarding its construction (Ex. 25 - 27). The detailed instructions for both the tabernacle and the temple were given so that the place of worship for the Jews was as close an approximation to the place of worship that God receives in heaven (Heb. 8:5). It is here we see the significance of the temple building. The temple represents heaven on earth and God's ongoing presence among his people. The altar represented God's becoming present at the sacrifice, the temple building represented his permanent presence among his people. This permanence is enhanced when we realise that the temple was an improvement on the tabernacle. Where God's presence used to be represented by an ornate but movable tent, in the temple God's presence became fixed. This represented God establishing his kingdom rather than just travelling along with nomadic tribes people.

With the establishment of his kingdom, the temple also represented a new era for the Jews, much as it does for the returned exiles. Solomon's temple represented the end to years of wars and bloodshed for the inhabitants of the promised land had finally been driven out and peace was with the Jews at last. Zerubbabel's temple inaugurated a new period of history for the Jews as well, one where they were with God once more, focused on his ways, and no longer in exile.

The temple was significant as God's permanent presence in his kingdom and represented a new era for his people.

But what does that have to do with us? Well, today we have no need for such a temple. In Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross the altar was made redundant (Heb. 7:27); in the tearing of the temple curtain God's dwelling place broke free from the temple allowing all direct access to him making the temple redundant as a place for God to dwell; and on Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked God's dwelling inside his people and the start of a new period of history as God's people became his living temple (Acts 17:24; 1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are God's temple today and as such, our lives should take on the same functions as the temple did for Zerubbabel. Our lives, everything we do with our bodies, from our actions to our thinking should be a witness to God's presence among his people. This witnessing to God's presence incorporates what we were speaking about earlier about our worship. Our worship is thankful and sacrificial because it witnesses to God's presence among his people. More than that though, as his temple our whole lives are now an act of worship. This means that our whole lives should be full of thanks and sacrifice in God's name.

As God's presence on earth his ways, not ours, should be our primary motivation not just for our worship but for all we do e.g. we love our family as an expression of God's love for his family which we have been adopted into; we campaign for justice with the Black Lives Matter groups as an expression of our God who stands alongside the oppressed; and we give to our church as an expression of thanks for all that God has given us. In this our lives follow the instructions of Jesus who said, "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16). Our whole lives should be transformed, either in action, motivation, or both, in light of being the living temple of God and witnesses to his presence here on earth.

## GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

You may think that all of this sounds rather daunting and in many ways it is - we are God's representatives on earth! What a burden of responsibility that is! But do not fear, because in Ezra 3:1-13 we receive some much needed encouragement. These verse deal with the opening ceremony of the temple. The foundation has been laid, and although the restoration is by no means near finished, it is now in a state where worship can take place in it once more. Within this celebration of trumpets blaring and cymbals crashing we hear this song of praise and thanksgiving: "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." This is followed up with a great

shout for joy (Ezr. 3:11). It would have been quite the celebration - like New Years, Christmas, and your birthday all rolled into one! For the Jews, who had suffered for so long, the restoration of the temple, even to this limited degree, would have been a testimony to God's faithfulness to his people and so it is hardly a surprise that they sang "For he [God] is good, his steadfast love endures forever towards Israel."

This song of praise is not just true for Israel but is true for all God's people - God's steadfast love endures forever. God loves us, he loves us so much that he sent his son to die for us so we might have eternal life with him, and, as we have seen in previous weeks when looking at Ezra, God is faithful, he keeps his promises and will not abandon us. We see this in the fact that we are his temple here on earth which only happens through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit inside us. The sending of his Holy Spirit was a promise made by Jesus that was fulfilled on Pentecost and within this promise is the guarantee that his Spirit will not abandon us (Jn 14:16). We can live in confidence knowing that even if we get things wrong and turn away from him like Israel did, we will not be exiled away from God's presence, but instead he will continue to dwell in us and love us.

This is not to diminish our responsibility to be witnesses to God's love, to be his people and his presence on earth. It is not an excuse to hide our light under a basket (Mt. 5:15) but rather it gives us the confidence to be his light knowing that he will be with us as we live out our earthly responsibility as his living temple. Not only that but he will be there to support us when we face opposition, either from those outside of the Church or from within. Zerubbabel faced opposition to his rebuilding of the temple, in Ezra 3:12 we read that "many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid." At first this may seem innocuous, a bit of healthy mourning, but when we look to the prophet Haggai who was around at the time we see that this was more like numerous complaining voices slowly chipping away at your efforts and undermining your work (Hg 2:1-9). Yes, Zerubbabel's temple was nowhere near the grandeur of Solomon's temple, but it was never going to be. Solomon's was built at the height of Israel's power, Zerubbabel's is built at practically its lowest. What mattered, and what God cares about, is that Zerubbabel and most of the Jews were acting faithfully, trying to return to worship God, repair their relationship with him, and restore their identity as his people.

This shows us that there is no place in God's Church for people who undermine the efforts of others to live out their calling to be God's temple on earth, rather in all things we should be looking to support one another in our

efforts to live as the light of the world and not let negative voices take a foothold and again we can draw on God's dwelling inside us and his faithfulness to support us along the way.

The rebuilding of the temple reminds us that as God's living temple we are his witnesses here on earth. This fact impacts our worship and our lifestyles which should be marked by sacrifice and thanksgiving all in God's name. We can confidently live out this lifestyle, even in the face of opposition, because we know that God's Spirit is with us and will remain with us always.

Amen.