

Lesson 8

Zerubbabel and Jeshua are mentioned together in 7 verses of the Bible. Verse 2 is the only one of these 7 verses in which Jeshua's name appears before Zerubbabel's name. The reason most likely is because this section is focused on worship.

1 Chronicles 3:19 tells us that Shelomith was the daughter of Zerubbabel. Archeologists have found a seal in which a woman named Shelomith is identified as the wife of Elnathan, the governor who is thought to have succeeded Zerubbabel.

The first thing the people did was build an altar. Building the altar before construction of the temple was also in line with the previous example of David, who had constructed an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah after the king had purchased the hilltop (2 Samuel 24:25). The place became the Temple Mount, which today is the most hotly contested piece of land in the world.

Ezra 4:2 and Jeremiah 41:5 indicate that there may have already been an altar there, which the Jews would have considered it defiled and unusable and would have taken down in order to put up their own. If so, that may explain some of the hostility that we are about to see. That previous altar would have been constructed by the Jews, Samaritans, and foreigners who lived near Jerusalem during the exile, and its destruction would have infuriated them. We will read about this hostility in Chapter 4.

But hostile or not, the people were right to take down the defiled altar and build a new one “as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God” (verse 2). A central theme of this book is that man must worship God as God desires (rather than as man desires), and we see that happening here in verse 2.

Just think for a moment about what it would be like if we were suddenly carried off into exile to a place where we did not speak the language, and then, 70 years later, our grandchildren (most of whom would have been born in that foreign land) returned to this city. Would any faithful people remain to rebuild this building and restore proper worship here? How would we ensure that would happen? This book is going to show us. In fact, verse 2 shows us: “as it is written.”

The Bible is the only authoritative rule for religious practice, and that message rings out very loudly in the book of Ezra.

What would have been offered on that altar? The daily offerings included a yearling male lamb offered each morning, with the appropriate accompanying cereal and drink offerings. (Leviticus 6:8–13; Exodus 29:38–42; Numbers 28:3–8). A similar offering was made in the evening.

How was the altar constructed? The answer to that question points us to a theme of the book that we have already seen and will continue to see – the events in this book are pointing us to the permanent eternal kingdom that was established in Jerusalem in Acts 2.

How does this altar do that? Exodus 20:25 – “And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.” The stones

of this altar were not to be shaped by human hands.

That immediately reminds us of the great stone of Daniel 2:44-45 – “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. 45 Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands...” “”

There is a connection that runs throughout the Bible between worship and human hands. In short, the two don't go together.

(Micah 5:13) “Thy graven images also will I cut off, and thy standing images out of the midst of thee; and thou shalt no more worship the work of thine hands.”

(Acts 17:24-25) “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.”

Those who think they can worship God today using a man-made instrument played with human hands (as opposed to using the instrument God made – the human voice) need to very carefully consider these verses.

What we see in this altar is what we see throughout the Bible when it comes to worship – worship must be done as God commands, and God is not worshipped with men's hands. (Acts 17:25)

Verse 2 mentions “Moses the man of God.” Moses is mentioned 10 times in Ezra and Nehemiah. Why? It stresses both of the major themes of the book – continuity and restoration. Continuity because these people are Moses' people, and restoration because these people are returning to the Law that Moses received from God.

We are also about to see physical continuity as the people work to restore the physical structures of the altar and the temple.

Ezra 3:3-6

3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; 5 And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD. 6 From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

Verse 3 tells us that “fear was upon them because of the people of those countries.” Yes, they were afraid, and they had reason to be. They were in a strange place surrounded by hostile people. Courage is not the lack of fear; courage is the will to act in spite of fear. And these people were courageous with a courage that came from their reliance on God.

At this point, the people had what one commentary called a “healthy fear.” It was a realistic recognition of the great challenges that faced them. It was a fear that drove them to be obedient to the will of God regardless of the circumstances, trusting in God for help and protection. But eventually this “healthy fear” would become a paralyzing fear, and the rebuilding would come to an end.

No matter who or what surrounds us, God’s people should never be a timid people. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:13 – “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.” And recall 2 Timothy 1:7 – “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”

The “peoples of the lands” likely included the surrounding peoples (Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, and Edom), those of foreign descent now living in Judah, and Jews who had remained behind and who had not maintained their faith but rather had compromised with the world. (One might have expected the Jews who remained in the land to be faithful and rebuild what had been destroyed, but that is not what happened. The faithful Jews were from the exiles, not from those who remained behind.)

Also, included are those who will be mentioned in 4:2 who had been settled there by the Assyrians. Each of these groups would have been hostile to what was now taking place. In fact, Ezra has much to say about how we should live in a hostile environment. (If we don’t find the world a hostile place, then perhaps we are too much like the world. We are told to expect persecution if we lead a Godly life. 1 Timothy 3:12)

As we see so often in the Old Testament, building an altar was a significant act that often marked a renewed dedication to following God. Verse 3 tells us that they set the altar in its place – which means they put it in the same position it occupied prior to the exile.

We also see that the daily sacrifices were restored. And how did they know what to do? They did “as it is written,” and they did “according to the custom [or rule].” Turning back to God’s word is the only possible path to restoration of proper worship and service to God.

Notice how careful they were to follow every detail. They set in the altar *in its place*. They performed the sacrifices *by number according to the rule*. There is a lesson there for us. Details are important, and we neglect them at our peril. If we don’t care about the “little” things, then that apathy very soon carries over to the “big” things—which perhaps should tell us that those “little” things are not really that little! When it comes to making sure our worship is pleasing to God, there are no little matters. God cares about the details, and so must we.

Zechariah 4:10 – “For who hath despised the day of small things?” The “small things” in that verse referred to what the people were now doing. Some apparently thought that it was just not worth doing at all because it would never be as grand as the first temple. God was seeking obedience and faithfulness in his people, and whether they were constructing a giant temple or “small things” did

not matter if they were following God's commands. The problem with men is that we are not a good judge of what is a "small thing," and sadly for many or most in the religious world today, they have classified as "small things" that which God has classified as big things! Obedience is always a big thing!

Now that the remnant had a restored altar, they were once again able to follow the commanded calendar of events.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths in the fall was one of the three most important Jewish celebrations, with the other two being Passover in the spring and Pentecost in the summer. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the people lived for seven days in booths or tents to remind them of God's protection of their ancestors in the wilderness. It will be at this same feast that Ezra will read the law to the people much later in Nehemiah 8:14-18.

The Feast of the Tabernacles must have been particularly meaningful to the returned exiles. Those who had participated in the second exodus were having a feast to remember the first exodus. They had just experienced God's protection themselves as they traveled back from Babylon.

The purpose of this feast was to remind the people of the fragility of this life and of their dependence on God for all things. That is a reminder that we all need. Modern man thinks he is secure apart from God – but there is no security apart from God. God offers the only security that matters, and that is why the people celebrated this feast.

Verse 5 mentions "the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons." What is that? At first, it seems odd to see this mention of a heavenly body because of the frequent prohibitions against the worship of such:

(Deuteronomy 4:19) "And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven."

But, of course, the people here were not worshipping the moon – they were instead using the moon to determine the time of certain events – which is one of the reasons why God gave us the moon:

(Genesis 1:14) "And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years."

The Jews followed a lunar calendar in which each month consisted of a full revolution of the moon. So a new moon marked the beginning of a new month. The burnt offerings of the new moons in verse 5 were the burnt offering commanded in Numbers 28:11 – "And in the beginnings of your months ye shall offer a burnt offering unto the LORD."

One of the most important events in the Jewish calendar is not mentioned here – the Day of Atonement. Why? Possibly because it was a very solemn day and did not fit in with the joyous theme of this chapter. But another possible reason is that it could not be observed because the ark of the covenant was no longer in existence. As described in Leviticus 16, the blood of the sacrificed goat was to be sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark on the Day of Atonement, and that was no longer possible.

What was the purpose of the Jewish sacrifices? They were offered for the sins of the people (Hebrews 7:27). They were a remembrance of sins (Hebrews 10:3), but they could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:4, 11). Only the perfect sacrifice was able to take away sin.

(Hebrews 10:11-14) “And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: 12 But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; 13 From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. 14 For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”

And yet forgiveness is promised under the Old Law. “And the priest shall make an atonement for his sin that he hath committed, and it shall be forgiven him.” (Leviticus 4:35) How can there be forgiveness if the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin? The answer is that for the faithful Jews of the Old Testament, that forgiveness came later from the blood of Christ – the perfect sacrifice. We sometimes describe this as a “rolling forward” of their sin.

Christians today do not operate under that system. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

But for those under the Old Covenant, what happened when the sacrifices ceased? What happened was that there was no longer a rolling forward of that sin. Instead, that sin, so to speak, just piled up year after year. There must have been incredible joy among the people when the sacrifices were reinstated.

This was not the first time the sacrifices had been restored. They had started about 1000 years earlier, and they had had to be restored at least twice before – under Joash in 2 Chronicles 24:14 and under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29:7, 27-29. Each time the procedure for restoration was simple – Step (A): Read God’s word. Step (B): Do what you read in God’s word. And there is no Step (C). Sometimes the people had an earlier step – locate God’s word – but that is no problem for us. We are surrounded by Bibles. Some people say that truth is scarce, and perhaps it is, but, at least in our day, the supply has always exceeded the demand!

The restoration of God’s temple had a special meaning for these exiles for another reason. For 70 years they had been surrounded on all sides by pagan temples to false gods. About 50 temples are mentioned in Babylonian texts, along with 180 shrines to Ishtar, 300 shrines for the Igigi gods, and 1200 shrines for the Anunnaki gods. Every time they saw one of those false temples or shrines, they must have remembered the true temple that had been destroyed.

Freewill gifts were offered in verse 5. They are described in Leviticus 22:18-23, and they were the only sacrifices that non-Jews were allowed to offer to God.

The heart that loves God desires to worship him in a way that pleases him, and these people had that heart. We see that heart in these freewill offerings. These people were not just doing what was required – they were going beyond what was required. They made the offerings that God had commanded, and then they made additional offerings.

Verse 6 ends with a “but” – “But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.” One point of this statement is that even though the sacrificial system had been reinstated, there was much that remained to be done.

A partial restoration is not a restoration at all; it is more of a reformation. And while a reformation may accomplish some needed reforms, those reforms are not enough unless they proceed toward a complete restoration of proper worship. Ezra is not describing a *reformation* movement; Ezra is describing a *restoration* movement. There is a huge difference between the two.

But there is another lesson in verse 6, and once again we have a lesson pointing us forward to the church. I think the final phrase in verse 6 has both a negative lesson and a positive lesson. We just saw the negative lesson – there was much left to be done. What is the positive lesson?

What verse 6 is telling us is that the worship of God on the Temple Mount had been reinstated, even though no temple existed. In fact, not even the foundations for the second temple had yet been laid.

Jeremiah had told them before the exile that they should trust in God rather than in the temple.

(Jeremiah 7:4) Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.

(Jeremiah 7:11) Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD.

(Jeremiah 7:14-15) Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. 15 And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim.

Although their forefathers had placed their trust in the sanctuary rather than in the Lord of that sanctuary, these people, their descendants, had learned in their land of exile that God's presence and God's worship did not require a building.

That realization must have been shocking for the Jews, but it is not shocking for those in the church. God dwells in his people, not in some building made with hands.

(Acts 17:24) God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.

Ezra 3:7

| |
|--|
| 7 They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia. |
|--|

Verse 7 is one of the most important verses in Ezra, which might seem like an odd statement when you read verse 7. But verse 7 tells us something very important about this group of former exiles – they sincerely wanted to give God their very best.

Even though their group was small and relatively poor, they set very high standards when it came to doing God's work. They hired talented masons and carpenters, and they ordered the finest

materials.

These people were a focused people and a dedicated people; they were not a laid-back people or a casual people when it came to doing God's work. Their desire was to give God their very best in everything they did.

Is that our desire also? Giving God our best does not happen by accident, but rather it must be our driving goal – or it won't happen. Again, their example is an example for us.

But unfortunately they also left us a bad example. We are looking now at the first return. The third return under Nehemiah occurred about 90 years later, and the prophet Malachi preached about 10 years after that. So, about 100 years after the people were intent on giving God their very best, Malachi described a very different situation:

(Malachi 1:7-8) Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. 8 And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.

We need to always be on guard against the same sad decline. If we are giving God our very best today, then that is wonderful – but we need to remain focused and dedicated on giving God our very best. The priorities of the returned exiles changed, and we can see the result in Malachi.

Solomon had also used cedar trees from Lebanon in constructing the first temple, but he had paid for that timber himself. Here the timber was paid for by the grant from Cyrus. God's people had fallen from their former glory because of their disobedience.

The exile had provided many vital lessons to God's people. One was the danger of idolatry. Idolatry had been a major cause for the exile, but interestingly, idolatry was never the problem after the exile that it had been before the exile.

A second lesson they learned, and one that is shown here, is the danger of pride and self-sufficiency. We know that God hates a proud look (Proverbs 6:17), but why? What is it about pride that causes God to so frequently warn us against it? The answer is that pride is dangerous – in fact, it may be the greatest danger. Why? Because pride and self-sufficiency blind us to God and our desperate need for God.

We should be thankful for reminders that we are not self-sufficient. We should be thankful for events that deflate our pride. Why? Because those reminders and those events cause us to look to God for our salvation and not to ourselves.

The prophets prior to the exile all spoke to a people who were blinded by their pride and their arrogance. We are now reading about a very different people. The exile had created a very different people – a people much closer to God and a people who understood their total dependence on God.

In our introduction, we mentioned that a theme in this book is the parallel between the events in Ezra and the establishment of the eternal kingdom in Acts 2 as prophesied in Daniel 2 and Isaiah 2. We have already seen some examples of that theme in this chapter.

Verse 7 has two parallel links – one that points backward to the first temple and one that points forward to the church that was to come.

The backward link, of course, is that the same materials that had been used for the first temple were being used for the second temple.

What about the link to the church? Listen as Isaiah 60:11-13 describes the church in similar terms to verse 7:

Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, **that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations**, with their kings led in procession. ... **The glory of Lebanon shall come to you**, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

Why did the temple exist in the first place? Why was there a first temple? Why was there a second temple?

(Hebrews 8:5) Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.

Why was the pattern so important? Because the temple was a shadow of heavenly things. Is the pattern any less important today now that we are members of that spiritual reality – the eternal kingdom of Christ?

Everything about the Old Testament is pointing forward. That is what Hebrews tells us. We need to always be looking for those spiritual realities in the shadows we see in Ezra and in the rest of the Old Testament.

Isaiah 60:11 describes the church as a place where “**thy gates shall be open continually**; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the Gentiles, and **that their kings may be brought.**”

Do we find a similar description of the church anywhere in the New Testament? Yes, in Revelation 21:24-25 – “And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and **the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.** 25 And **the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day**: for there shall be no night there.”

What is Revelation 21:24-25 talking about? Revelation 21:2 is very helpful in answering that question: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down from God out of heaven**, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

That phrase “coming down from God **out of heaven**” tells us two important things about Revelation 21. First, it is not describing heaven, and second, it is not describing something in heaven. Verse 2 could not be any clearer on that point.

What then is being described? First, Chapter 21 is describing a people not a place. We know from the descriptions in Revelation 21 (the frequent use of the number 12, for example) that God’s

people are being described. Revelation 21 describes a people not a place. Verse 9 – “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.”

But when? When are God’s people being described. I think verses 24-25 are an important clue – the gates are open! People are still being invited in! Will that be true of the church in heaven after the end of the world? No, but it is certainly true of the church here and now.

Ezra 3 is pointing forward to the church. Isaiah 60 is pointing forward to the church. Revelation 21 is describing that church using the very same language!

Ezra 3:8-9

8 Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD. 9 Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.

We are now in the second month of the second year, and verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to “set forward the work of the house of the Lord.”

Solomon also began building his temple in the second month (1 Kings 6:1). This was the month after Passover, or April-May on our calendar, and it was the beginning of the dry season, which made it the ideal time to start building.

Even so, as will see, they did little more than repair the foundation until nearly 20 years later during the time of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC, at which time they made another beginning (5:2).

What caused the delay? Maybe we can blame it on the Levites. Verses 8-9 tell us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua delegated the work to them. Maybe the Levites dropped the ball. The job was delegated to them, and nothing happened for 20 years. (I could insert a “deacon” joke here!) We will see what actually happened when we get to Chapter 4.

Notice in verse 8 that the Levites started working when they reached age 20. Numbers 4:1 says that the Levites began their work at age 30. In Numbers 8:24, we are told that the Levites could begin their work when they were 25 years old. 1 Chronicles 23:24, 27 says that in the days of King David they began their work at age 20 (as we find here in Ezra). How is this explained?

As for the difference between 30 years and 25 years in Numbers, the best explanation (and the one that rabbis have adopted) is that the Levites had a 5-year apprenticeship.

How about the change to 20 years in 1 Chronicles and Ezra? I think Numbers 8 answers that question. We earlier read verse 24, which placed the starting age at 25. Verse 25 places the

retirement age at 50, but verse 26 says that the retired Levites could assist the others. I think those younger than 25 were most likely also there just as assistants. (1 Chronicles 23:3 says that the Levites were numbered from age 30 up, and so age 30 seems to have still been the operative age – just with a five-year apprenticeship, now also preceded by a five year period of assistance.)