

LESSON 9

Ezra 3:2

2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

Two major leaders stand out in the first half of Ezra, and we see them both (again) in verse 2: Jeshua and Zerubbabel.

Jeshua was (or soon became) the High Priest, and he was the grandson of the High Priest prior to the exile. Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin, the king of Judah prior to the exile. Their presence provides very strong evidence of the continuity between these people and those Jews who had been carried away to Babylon 70 years earlier.

Again we should note that while Zerubbabel was from the line of King David, Zerubbabel was very definitely not a king, and I'm sure he would have been the first to tell you that. Had Zerubbabel called himself a king at this time, his reign would have lasted only until King Cyrus heard about it, no doubt from the neighbors of the Jews. Cyrus had not allowed the Jews to return so that they could set up a kingdom. Their king at this time was the King of Persia. Israel had no king at this time, and, in fact, the throne of David would remain unoccupied until Jesus came to sit on that throne for eternity (as had been promised to David).

But even though he was not a king, Zerubbabel was a vital link to the House of David that was required for God to later raise up a descendant of King David to sit on the throne of David. And, as Zechariah tells us, Jeshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the descendant of royalty together prefigured the perfect King and High Priest who was to come, a combination that Hebrews tells us could never occur under the Old Law.

Again, we wonder what happened to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the people on their return in Chapter 1. As we discussed earlier, some surmise that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two names for the same person, which is very unlikely. Others suggest that Zerubbabel may have been a subordinate leader under Sheshbazzar. Meyers suggests that Sheshbazzar may have been an elderly figurehead, with Zerubbabel being in charge of the day-to-day affairs. In Ezra 5:16, we will be told that "Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

Many times the hardest part of a project is just getting it started. Someone needs to step up and take the initiative, and that is why having good leadership is so important, especially at the start of a big project. Otherwise, great plans are likely to remain just that — great plans!

Two more points about Zerubbabel and Jeshua:

1. 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. Why is that? Most likely the reason is because this section is focused on worship.
2. 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.

Back to verse 2, what is the first thing the people did?

The first thing the people did was build an altar. Building the altar before construction of the temple was also in line with the example of David, who had constructed an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah after the king had purchased the hilltop in 2 Samuel 24:25 that became the Temple Mount, which 3000 years later is today the most hotly contested piece of land in the world.

Ezra 4:2 will suggest that there was already an altar here, but if so the Jews would have considered that altar to be defiled and unusable and would have taken it down to put up their own.

That action 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 that 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.

And if there is an incorrect and defiled altar, the solution is not to just try to clean it up and fix it. The solution is to get rid of it and start over. That is the difference between reformation and restoration. What we see here is restoration.

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 right here 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 later 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

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. 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; 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 an instrument made with human hands and 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?

This reference back to Moses 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 as described in the Law of Moses.

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.” Why was it a healthy fear?

It was a healthy fear because it was based on a realistic recognition of the great challenges that faced them. It was a healthy fear because it drove them to be obedient to the will of God regardless of the circumstances. It was a healthy fear because it drove them to trust in God for help and protection.

But eventually, as we will see, this “healthy fear” became a paralyzing fear, and that sort of fear caused this rebuilding to 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” in verse 3 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. This group also included some who had earlier been forcibly settled in this area by the Assyrians. (That group will be mentioned in Ezra 4:2.)

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 we see in Ezra are the Jewish exiles who returned, not the Jews who remained behind.

Each of these groups would have been hostile to what was now taking place. In fact, the book of Ezra has much to say about how the people of God should live in an angry, hostile environment. And I think we would all agree that our own environment has very quickly become much more angry and much more hostile to the ways of God and the people of God.

Who would have ever thought that publishing Matthew 19:4 (“Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female?”) would lead to death threats? And yet that is the world in which we are now living. The Jews of Ezra’s day are not the only people of God who ever had angry and hostile neighbors!

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” in verse 4 (or “according to the rule” in the ESV). Turning back to God’s word is the only possible path to restoration of proper worship and service to God. To restore anything to its original state we need the original blueprint, and the Bible is the original blueprint when it comes to pleasing God.

Notice how careful they were to follow every detail. They set the altar **in its place**. They performed the sacrifices **by number according to the rule**.

There is a lesson here for us. Details are important, and we neglect those details at our peril.

If we don’t care about the “little” things, then that apathy about the so-called little things will very soon become apathy about the “big” things. What that means is that when it comes to making sure our worship is pleasing to God, there are no little things. God cares about the details, and so also must we.

Twenty years later, Zechariah would ask a question about this very point.

 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 of them apparently thought that this rebuilding was just not worth doing at all because the rebuilt temple would never be as grand as the first temple.

But 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.

Mankind’s problem 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. And perhaps some of them were literally living in booths or tents in their ruined city.

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 is real and lasting security, 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.

But, of course, the people here were not worshiping 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.

And there are many other reasons God created the moon. If you ever want to show someone the design evident in the universe, you don't need to start with the stars. You can start much closer by looking at the moon. There are many properties of the moon, such as its existence, its orbit, its size, its location, and its mass, that are vital to life on earth. Even today, secular science struggles to explain how the moon came to be. But we know how that happened, and we know why that happened.

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 moon in verse 5 were the burnt offerings 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 so it 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 absent the ark.

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: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

And yet forgiveness was promised under the Old Law.

Leviticus 4:35 — And the priest shall make an atonement for his sin that he hath committed, and it shall be forgiven him.

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.

Hebrews 10:3-4 – But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

That is why, I believe, the faithful Jews who had died were in a holding area prior to the cross as we see in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus where it is referred to as Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16:22). That all changed at the cross.

Hebrews 10:10 – By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

And those faithful Jews who had died under the Old Covenant could then be with Christ, having been cleansed of those sins that had been rolled forward to the cross. In my opinion, that event is described in Ephesians when Christ ascended, leading captivity captive.

Ephesians 4:8 - Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

So that, after the cross, Paul did not expect to depart and be with Abraham, but rather he expected to depart and be with Christ.

Philippians 1:23 - For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.

But for those under the Old Covenant during the exile, what happened when the temple was destroyed and 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 these sacrifices were restored.

This was the not the first time the sacrifices had been restored. They had started about 1000 years earlier, and they had been 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 and in our country, the supply of truth has always exceeded the demand!

#ezra-esther