**The Priority of Worship**

**Ezra 2-3 (ESV)**

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We’re going to be opening up our Bibles to Ezra chapters 2 and 3. I’m just going to read a couple of verses from chapter 2 and then we’ll read the rest of chapter 3 today as we consider what God would have to say to us. This new series that we began last week is entitled *Revival: Lighting the Spark*. We believe and are praying that God would use this to bring about a spiritual revival in our own hearts and in our church family. Then sort of the sub-text is Every Promise Every Time. Every promise God makes, He will faithfully fulfill every time. There is not one of them that will go unfulfilled. Really, this great prophecy from Ezra just speaks so loudly the call to worship, the call to revival and the call to believe that God is faithful. So we’re going to have some fun as we walk through this book together. So Ezra 2, beginning in verse 1. I’ll just read the first two verses there and then we’ll skip to chapter 3.

***1*** *Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.* ***2*** *They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah.*

Then the chapter continues with listing specific people and numbers of people who are all part of this nearly 50,000 who travel from Babylon, where they have been exiled for nearly seventy years. They’re traveling back now by edict of King Cyrus, back to Jerusalem to begin the worship of God, to rebuild first the altar and then the foundation of the temple in preparation of rebuilding the temple that had been razed to the ground underneath King Nebuchadnezzar during the Babylonian invasion. It’s in shambles. There is just rubble all around. So we pick up in chapter 3.

***1*** *When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.* ***2*** *Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.* ***3*** *They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.* ***4*** *And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required,* ***5*** *and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD.* ***6*** *From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.* ***7*** *So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the* *Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.*

***8*** *Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD.* ***9*** *And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.*

***10*** *And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel.* ***11*** *And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.* ***12*** *But 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, though many shouted aloud for joy,* ***13*** *so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.*

What a blessing! May God encourage us through His Word!

We think about those parents in Uvalde, Texas whose children entered school on a normal day, likely anticipating the end of the school year and the beginning of summer. Suddenly, a peaceful and happy day becomes a day of horror. The tragic deaths of these nineteen little ones and two adults at their elementary school stirs us, doesn’t it? It brings heartache and grief and sympathy and godly indignation. We think of the anguish of these parents and brothers and sisters and grandparents and friends who wake up on this Sunday morning with the bed of their son or daughter empty. They have to be thinking, “Am I in a dream?” Then they once again realize it’s not a dream. The evil pressing into their joy is excruciatingly and undeniably real.

I wish I could say that this kind of evil is unprecedented. I wish the horror of Uvalde is sort of like a one-of-a-kind outrageous act. Yet history reveals that this kind of evil litters the human storyline. The prophet Jeremiah describes this kind of horror in the weeping of moms and dads in his day when their children were killed at the hands of the Babylonians or kidnapped and deported away from them as the Babylonians invaded their land. Jeremiah wrote this of that day.

**Jeremiah 31:15** Thus says the LORD: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

Matthew takes up this same word from Jeremiah and applies it to the parents of his day who had their children slain by Herod as Herod killed all the children who were two years old and younger in order to get at this one who was born King of the Jews. I think Jeremiah’s word can safely apply to our day in 2022. It’s relevant. It’s right for us to weep with loud lamentation over such evil, the loss of precious little ones. Yet, at the same time, it’s important for us to remember in the midst of our sorrow and in the midst of deep lament that God connects us to His promises that are strong and deep enough to sustain us. These promises sustain us for today and these promises point us to a future when that kind of evil will be dissolved and will completely come to an end. When Jesus returns the second time, He will take evil and He will eradicate it. What a day that will be!

As we think about this kind of evil, all kinds of important gospel truths sort of invade our soul. One of those truths is that we ourselves don’t stand above the wickedness of this world, but we’re part of it. We look into our own hearts and we recognize that apart from Christ there is depravity. There is wickedness. If we don’t see that that’s a part of who we are, we will miss God’s merciful call for humble repentance. We’ll miss a day by day neediness for dependence upon the Holy Spirit. So, as we think and talk about these kinds of evil acts, we must not talk as though this evil is foreign and outside of our souls. These are a reminder of who we are apart from Christ. We are sinners in need of salvation.

As we think about these kinds of events as well, we do say with so many in our world and it is said over and over, “We can’t allow this to happen again!” Yet, this world and its darkness and its brokenness causes us to scratch and search for solutions. The question is asked, what can we do to prevent such evil from breaking in? The solutions posed by people are many and they’re varied and often, they’re even contradictory. As I’ve observed different leaders talk about potential solutions to keep this from happening, that conversation seems rather than causing more peace and righteousness to cover our land and society, it stirs up more hostility and division and anger and malice.

So how are we, God’s people, different? How do we respond? There are many thoughts here, but at the heart of it, we know that we have a book that God gave to us to direct our path, to help us. We open up this book to Ezra this morning. The main idea that we’re going to trace through Ezra 2-3 today is that God’s prescription for us to enjoy peace and righteousness on earth is true, vibrant worship. As we move toward worship, we move away from evil and as we move away from true worship, we move toward evil. That’s been true from the beginning. Cain moved away from true worship and what happened? It put murder in his heart and he killed his brother. So at the very basic big level, we recognize as Christians that one huge aspect of our part in bringing peace and righteousness, sort of pushing back evil in our society, is a return of our own hearts toward true worship of the true God. The best thing we can individually do to bring goodness into our own hearts is worship. The best thing we can do to influence others is to seek God for personal revival and corporate revival.

We’ve entitled this series *Revival: Lighting the Spark*. The spiritual revival that God gives to the people in Ezra’s day is offered to us. God always offers this grace of revival, this grace of vibrancy and spiritual life. So I would ask you at the outset of this series, would you pray? If revival is to come, it’s not going to be manufactured. It must come as a gift as we seek the Lord with all our heart. Would you pray that God would grant you spiritual revival? Pray with me about that. Wouldn’t it be wonderful at the end of the summer that we find our hearts so revived that we hardly recognize ourselves? Would you also pray with me that God would grant us together as a family, spiritual revival? Would you pray that we would experience this together so that our influence would be greater than just even an individual revival? That’s God’s plan. It’s God’s plan for the people of Israel, here. I believe it’s God’s plan for us today.

We’re going to think about the priority of worship this morning as we look at these two chapters. We want to begin with a definition. What is worship? So many are confused about what worship is. Here is the definition that I have considered. Worship is the submission of our whole life to God in response to God’s goodness and glory. God reveals His goodness and glory and then we see it and capture it by God’s grace. He opens up our eyes and then we respond in submission of all of our life.

Submission to the Lord is the very heart of worship. Submission takes place when we discover what God wants and we find that what God wants is opposite of what we want. Then we have a decision to make. We either move towards false worship or worship of self or worship of God. The worship of God is always that I’m going to submit to what God wants rather than what I want. Worship says, “Lord, I trust you more than I trust myself. Lord, I honor you more than I want to honor myself. Lord, I follow your heart more than I follow my own heart.” That’s what worship is. It is submission. It is placing ourselves under His care, under His authority. This definition teaches us that worship is not a Sunday morning thing. It’s a whole life thing. It’s the way we live. It’s the way we breathe. It’s the way we think. It’s the way we relate to every person and every thing. It’s our attitudes. It’s our values. It’s our behaviors. It’s our habits.

We also discover from this definition that worship is not an emotional thing. It can include emotions, but it’s not fundamentally an emotional thing. It’s a spiritual response to what God has said in His Book about Himself. It’s a response to what God has said of His goodness, of His glory. I would add that worship is not a music thing. It can include music, but in essence, it’s not music. That’s not what worship is. Worship is submission of our whole life. It’s a consecration.

I love what one English pastor who is now in heaven, said about worship. His name is William Temple. He says this. “Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His Beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration.” It’s saying, “I adore you! I love you, God!” With worship in view, Ezra teaches us four key ideas about worship. We begin here. Worship always has

**God’s Grace as the foundation of worship.**

Worship always has God’s grace at the floor level. We want to go back to Ezra 1, where Josh began last week, to capture such an important aspect of worship. I want to go back to chapter 1 to see how the foundation is laid.

**Ezra 1:1** In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia,

Persia is the empire that defeats Babylon and now they’re sort of the empire that is in authority over this vast portion of the world. There is a guy by the name of Cyrus who is king.

**Ezra 1:1** …that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled,

One hundred and fifty years earlier, Jeremiah talked about a Cyrus, before Cyrus was born, who would bring about the deliverance of the people of Israel from the captivity in Babylon. So God is now acting on King Cyrus’ life in order to fulfill the Scripture that He had Jeremiah speak. What happened? It says

**Ezra 1:1**…the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia,

Underline those words.

**Ezra 1:1-2** …so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Then he says to the Israelites living in Babylon, because they had been deported there and it’s now Persia. He says

**Ezra 1:3** Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD,

So where does the worship of God begin among the people of God? It begins with God’s grace. It’s not as though the people got together and formed a committee asking, “How are we going to get back to Jerusalem? Let’s make a plan. Here’s step one, step two, step three. We have a strategy. Let’s go for it!” No, it began with the Lord stirring up this pagan king and this pagan king then acts as the instrument of God to bring about worship among His people. It begins with an act of grace. Grace is always where worship begins and the people of Israel know this.

You remember their history. Let’s review some of it. It began with a single man who lives in a pagan land, by the name of Abram. Abram one day has God appear to him as an act of grace. It’s not because Abram is more righteous. It’s not because he is more wonderful than any other person. God in grace comes to Abram. In Genesis 12 He makes a covenant with Abraham. He says to Abraham,

**Genesis 12:2-3** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

“Abraham, I’m setting my grace upon you. I’m going to bless you. I’m going to make your name great. I’m going to make you into a great nation. Through you and this nation, all the families universally will be blessed.” What a promise!

Why would God establish Israel as a nation who would be His treasured possession, a nation who would be blessed by knowing Him, blessed by being given sacrifices so that they could worship Him, blessed by having Him communicate His very self to them, blessed by being able to be a blessing universally to the whole world? Why would God do that? The answer is grace.

We’re told that this little family is miraculously conceived with a ninety-nine year old guy and an eighty-nine year old woman. They have a son. While in Egypt, they become a vast multitude of people. But while in Egypt, they also become enslaved. God sends a guy by the name of Moses to deliver this nation out of bondage. God tells Moses very clearly why He set His love upon them, why He blessed them. Listen to what He says.

**Deuteronomy 7:6** “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God.

You’re set apart.

**Deuteronomy 7:6** …The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession,

You’re special. You’re a treasured possession of the Lord.

**Deuteronomy 7:6** …out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

You’re treasured. Why?

**Deuteronomy 7:7** It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,

It was not because you were more impressive. It was not because you were more righteous. It was not because you were more mighty that God set His love upon you and chose you. You were the fewest. You were the least of these. Why then did God choose to place His blessing upon this people and draw them into a worship of His Person?

**Deuteronomy 7:8** but it is because the LORD loves you

It’s grace that brought the Israelites into relationship with God and it’s grace that keeps them in relationship with God. Grace makes this people a worshiping community, a people who draw near to God and adore Him and give honor to Him. It’s grace that sustains them as a worshiping community. God’s initiative in giving grace is always the foundation of our worship. We cannot make ourselves into worshippers. That’s impossible. We must first be recipients of God’s grace in order to experience the blessing of true worship.

Over time the people of Israel hardened their hearts against God’s grace and against true worship. They turned away from God’s mercy and they turned toward the false worship of other gods. In love and grace, God sends them prophet after prophet to warn them to turn away from this wickedness, from this idolatry. “I will not give my glory to another. I will not allow this among my treasured possession, among my people.” He warns them, “I’m going to send the Babylonians and they will severely punish you. They will bring pain and misery upon you if you do not turn from your idolatry.” His plan is to graciously use painful discipline to help them receive the benefit of His goodness, to bring them back to true worship. But in spite of God’s many and patient warnings, they didn’t listen. They persisted in rejecting God.

So in 605 BC, the Israelites experienced the sharp edge of the Babylonian sword. They are deported out of the land that God gave them and they are taken to a foreign land, a distant place. Their temple is razed to the ground. The temple that Solomon built that was so beautiful and so ornate, so amazing, is utterly demolished. It is nothing but a heap of rock. Such is true of their sacred city, Jerusalem, as well. However, God did not put an end to this people as His treasured possession. God tells them of a future day when worship would be restored. He writes of it through many prophets, but Jeremiah 29:10-11 is so key because this is the reference that Ezra is pointing to as well.

**Jeremiah 29:10** “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon,

So they begin this captivity from Babylon in 605. It’s going to be exactly seventy years when the foundation of the temple is going to be finally laid.

**Jeremiah 29:10** “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

He’s talking about bringing them back to Jerusalem, to this land that He gave to them. Oftentimes, the next verse is quoted out of context. It’s really about the people of God experiencing the faithfulness of God’s promises, every promise, every time, regarding the covenant He made with Abraham. He says

**Jeremiah 29:11** For I know the plans I have for you,

He says you know them too, because I told you about those plans back in Genesis 12. The plans are to bless you and to make you a great nation and that you would be a blessing to every nation on earth. I know the plans that I have for you.

**Jeremiah 29:11** …declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

After seventy years, they have to wonder if that’s true, if they would ever get back to the land, if there would be any future for them as a nation anymore. He says at that time, seventy years later, you’ll wake up and

**Jeremiah 29:12-13** Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Isn’t that a wonder? God is fulfilling His promise of grace. The seventy years are complete and God in grace now moves the heart of Cyrus to make an edict for the Israelites to return back to the land to rebuild the temple. This scattered people now becomes a gathered people. They were scattered in God’s wrath and gathered together in His mercy. Look at Ezra 1:5. There is an emphasis again upon grace

**Ezra 1:5** Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

There are 50,000 of them that go, but many say, “We made a good life, here. We don’t think it’s time to go back there. There are still enemies in the land. It’s going to be hard. We don’t know what’s going to happen when we get back to Jerusalem. We kind of like it here.” But God in grace says, “No, I have a plan for your future.” He stirs up the heart. Again, it’s grace. It’s not these people who make a decision on their own to go. It’s God in His grace first stirring them up so that then they would decide to go.

True worship requires that we receive before we give. We will never want to worship God without God stirring up our hearts to see His value. Oftentimes there is an emphasis when we talk about worship, about coming on a Sunday not to receive, but to give. Have you ever had that emphasis? It’s not entirely wrong, but it’s not entirely right, either. The truth is not one of us can come to give anything to the Lord or to one another until we first have received. It’s right for us to come to church and say, “Lord, I’m a needy person. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. I’m impoverished. I need what you offer me and I need to be reminded of the Gospel and receive your fresh mercy that is new today. I need that.” Then as recipients of God’s grace, we’re able to worship upward and we’re able to love outward. Worship’s foundation is receiving from God. It’s not first giving. 1 John 4:19 reminds us that we love God because He first loved us. There is not one person who loves God who didn’t first discover and experience God’s love for them. Not one person!

The other day, we were at the camp. A lot of our kids are still at camp, today. There are 275 people between us and Living Hope and Bethany Community that are there. Pray for those young folks as they’re learning some really good things about the Gospel. Kimberly and I were there on a day, as I was able to speak.

In the afternoon, we took a golf cart around with little Malakai and Malakai’s mom. We’re having a wonderful time and having some conversation together. I asked Malakai, “Do you think that you say ‘I love you’ to your mom and dad more than they say ‘I love you’ to you? Or do you think they say ‘I love you’ more to you?” He looked at me like it was a silly question. He said, “Of course I say ‘I love you’ more.” I asked, do you think your mom would agree? She was in the back of the golf cart with us. He said, “Yes.” I asked, Are you sure? “Yes.” Do you want me to ask her? He said, “Yes. Go ahead and ask her.” He was super-confident that his answer was going to be true. So I said, “Keira, do you think you say ‘I love you’ more or do you think Malakai says ‘I love you’ more?” She wanted to affirm her son. She said, “Well, he does say ‘I love you’ quite a bit, but…”

Now, I don’t know who says “I love you” more often. I have a thought, but I’m not sure. But this is what I do know. This is what I know beyond a shadow of a doubt. Keira loved Malakai before Malakai loved Keira. That’s what I know. That’s undeniable. The reason why Malakai loves Keira is because Keira loves Malakai. That’s what I know. Before any of us would worship God and love Him, we must experience the amazing gift of His love toward us. If we’re having a hard time in worship, the place to begin is not, “I have to start disciplining myself and working harder and I have to start chiding myself.” No, the place to begin is praying, “Lord, I need to know more of your love for me. Please, would you help me to know together with all the saints how high and how wide and how deep and how long your love for me is?” That is the key to the beginning of revival.

What is our application? Well first, let’s humble ourselves before the Lord. We humble ourselves before the Lord by taking all of ourselves into the Lord’s presence, asking Him to show us who we are in all of our sin, in all of our willfulness, in all of our rebellion, in all of our wretchedness. Then when He shows us, not turning away in anger, but turning in softness and saying, “Lord, would you forgive me? Lord, would you change me?” Scripture tells us

**1 Peter 1:5-6** “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,

That’s what this people in Ezra’s day needed to hear. They needed to humble themselves before the Lord. It’s what we need if we’re to have revival. Secondly, I would say let’s recall to mind the goodness of the Lord. It’s His goodness that reminds us of His love for us. David, in Psalm 103, in really urging his heart to have a heart of worship, a heart of revival, he says

**Psalm 103:2** Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,

He speaks to his soul. He knows that one of the reasons why he doesn’t bless the Lord is because he is forgetful of God’s goodness, of God’s love. So he says I want to take my mind and rather than using it with all these distracting and dark thoughts, depressing and discouraging thoughts about this broken world and about the hurts and all that, I want to think about the goodness of the Lord so that I can take all this and bring it up to Him. I know that’s where worship is. That’s where revival is. It’s reminding myself and taking my mind and using it to reflect upon His love for me. The second aspect of worship that Ezra teaches is

**God’s People are the participants of worship.**

We’re active. I love chapter 2! I reflected with some friends about Ezra 2. I said I was going to preach on Ezra 2. I told them to read it because it’s going to be super exciting! They came back and said, “I read Ezra 2. I don’t know what you’re going to say.” It appears like if you’re reading in a Bible Reading plan and you come to Ezra 2, it’s one of those that you read quickly. Let’s get to chapter 3 or 4. It just seems like it’s a long, boring list of names. There are some really significant things here. I wish I could take more time with this. There is a main point that I want to get to. Look at verses 1 and 2.

***1*** *Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.*

Then he starts naming names.

***2*** *They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua,*

Zerubbabel, by the way, is the leader of this early group. Ezra actually is not going to come to Jerusalem for another seventy or eighty years. So he is telling a story of what happens before he gets to Jerusalem in these first six chapters. There is

*Nehemiah,*

This is not the Nehemiah who wrote the book. There is

*Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: the sons of Parosh, 2,172.*

Ultimately we’re going to see that there are almost 50,000 people who are part of this group. Again, it’s hard for us to read this chapter and stay alert. Yet, God communicates a really important truth, here. That is that God is personal. He is personal to each and every one of us. God sets His love upon a people, like a nation, His church. But He sets His love also upon individuals in that people. God moves the hearts of individuals. He wants us to know that by naming names. He doesn’t just say it was a 50,000 group of people. He names specific people who each had their heart stirred up by God, who each then in faith made a faith decision to say, “I want to be part of this. I want to find out what my part is and I want to do my part so that the temple can be rebuilt, so that God can be worshiped, so that God would be glorified among us again.”

There is a little children’s song that I learned. It’s special to me and it’s special to children today who grow up in Sunday School. “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.” It’s not just that Jesus loves us. That’s really great that Jesus loves us as a group. It’s awesome that Jesus loves the church. But the truth of Scripture is Jesus loves me. He has some names written down because He wants us to know that if we’re in Christ, our name is written down, specifically.

Some of you have gone to graduations recently. I avoided that wonderful thing this year. But you know how you go to a graduation and there is like 500 people or more whose names are going to be listed. There is a speaker that is not so great, usually. There are other things happening up there. You get through all that and then they start calling names. They start with the A’s. You’re waiting for your letter to come up. Finally when your letter comes, you start paying a little more attention. Up until that, you’re on your phone or whatever you’re doing. You’re twenty away from your graduate, then fifteen away, ten away, five away. Then you start paying attention. You start looking up. Then it’s your son, your grandson, granddaughter. It’s your niece or nephew or whoever it is. They say the name and you cheer. Maybe you cheer out loud or you cheer in your heart. This is why I’m here. This is what makes the whole thing worthwhile. A specific name says this is why I’m here.

If you were part of this group, and let’s say you had a great grandpa who was part of this group, or a great-great grandpa, you would not skip over Ezra 2. You would skip over a lot of other names, but then you would get to…Let’s see. We’ll choose one out of here. You’d get to Nebo (Laughter!) and you would say, “Nebo! That’s my great-great grandpa.” Why is that? It’s because it tells you that individuals are really important to God and when a name is said, that’s important.

Of course we have a greater affinity for names that are connected to us than names that are not. But the truth is, in God’s kingdom, He loves one by one. He actually gives each individual meaningful work. Each of them have a different part to accomplish. On their own, they’re not going to accomplish this. There is not one person who can say, “I’m going to go down there and rebuild the temple.” What? They need all 50,000 of them in order to establish the sacrifices, to begin to build the altar, to lay the foundation and ultimately build the temple. Each person is loved by God specifically and given meaningful work.

So here are the applications. I want you to know God loves you. In love, God calls you to receive Jesus as Savior so that He would adopt you into His family and you would be a forever son or a forever daughter. If you’re already a child of God through faith in Jesus, know that nothing, nothing, nothing will ever separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. You now have your name engraved upon the palms of His hands. In Isaiah 49, God tells us “I have engraven you on the palms of my hands.” How often does my name, Ritch Boerckel, pass before my Father who is in heaven? It’s like it’s on the palm of His hand. Every day He sees it. That’s how individual He is. Then He says in Revelation 3 that those who are in Christ, their names will never be blotted out of the Lamb’s Book of Life. In other words, individual names, through faith in Christ, are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. These are individual names. God loves you.

Secondly, know that God loves His church. He loves the whole nation here of Israel. He loves the whole church. The whole is also important. That helps us to esteem the whole because God’s love for the individual wouldn’t bring about community worship. It requires a love and a connection and a participation in the family together to worship Him.

Then third, God loves worshipers. He is seeking worshipers. He says that to the woman at the well in John 4. He says that the Father is seeking people who would worship Him in spirit and in truth. So there are the participants. Isn’t it a wonder to be a participant in the worship of God? That’s an act of grace. Next, Ezra teaches us that God’s Word becomes our manual for worship.

**God’s Word as the directives for worship.**

Look at Ezra chapter 3.

***1*** *When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.*

So they are unified now. They’re locking arms. They are one man. We’re here. We’re going to be a people who worship God.

***2*** *Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen,*

These two are the key leaders.

*and they built the altar of the God of Israel,*

So they begin with worship. Before the foundation is laid, they’re building the altar in order

*to offer burnt offerings on it,*

Notice this next line.

*as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.*

So they’re looking not to what they feel like and saying, “What do you guys want to do when we get to Jerusalem? How do you want to go about this? We know how Solomon built the altar, but maybe we should do something different. We know how Solomon and the nation and even back at the time of the tabernacle, how they qualified people to be priests. Maybe we should do something different. We know the kind of animals. We know the festivals. But maybe this is a new day and maybe we should do something new because this seems more exciting to us.” No, they said, “How are we going to do this? How are we going to worship God? For seventy years there were no sacrifices and no temple. How are we going to worship God? Let’s look at the Book.” They looked to God’s Word to provide directives so they could participate in true worship.

If we ask the question, “What are we supposed to do in worship?” we find the answer to that question lies not in our own thoughts or our own emotions, but in the Word of God. The Word of God gives great freedom, but the Word of God gives us directives. The people knew that they needed to build the altar from uncut stones. They knew that they needed to build the altar on a specific place. It was the place where Abraham actually raised the knife to sacrifice his own son. It was that place. It was the place where Solomon built. God says, “This spot on my earth is where I want to be worshiped.” They knew that’s the place they had to go back to. That’s the place where they built the altar. They knew that there were specific kinds of sacrifices, not with blemished animals, but they were to use specific animals, unblemished. They knew that there were certain people who could make sacrifices that were from a specific family. They knew that these members who were qualified by family had to also be qualified through ceremonial cleansing. They knew the timing, morning and evening. How did they know this? They said, “Let’s look to God’s Word.”

The people of Ezra’s day didn’t simply follow their hearts in relationship to worship. They followed God’s Word. God’s Word brings unity to our worship. When we’re around God’s Word, we say, let’s do the things that God requires. Let’s not do the things that God prohibits. In everything else, let’s just be together. God’s Word provides unity in our worship. It’s when we get away from God’s Word and get onto our own feelings and our own opinions and our own thoughts and our own preferences that the church is divided. The church is really divided! It’s terrible! It’s because people have demands that are not in the Word about what worship must be. Why can’t I just let those things go as long as we’re worshiping God according to the directions He has given? The issue is about God. It’s not about me. When it becomes about God, actually, that’s when I find the greatest joy. God’s Word brings purity to our worship and God’s Word brings authenticity to our worship. Let’s keep reading, here.

***3*** *They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands,*

There is opposition. There is always opposition to true worship.

*and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.* ***4*** *And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written,*

So they kept this feast of tabernacles, celebrating God’s provision in the wilderness, as it is written. There are a lot of instructions about that that God gave them.

 *and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule,*

Notice that. What rule? It’s the rule of Scripture.

*as each day required,* ***5*** *and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD.*

Who appointed them? The LORD appointed them in the Book. Worship involves simple obedience to God’s Word. We do not draw near to God on the basis of our obedience. We draw near to God on the basis of Jesus’ obedience. The reason why we can draw near is not because we obey God. It’s because Jesus obeyed God and we’re in Him. But we dare not draw near without obedience. In other words, we dare not say, “Lord, I’m going to continue to willfully sin, but I still want to draw near.” That leads to false worship. God accepts worship that follows His righteous decrees that He has given us in His Word.

Here are some practical lessons. First, God does care about the manner in which He is worshiped. He really does. His attitude is not, “Well, their hearts are in the right place.” He wants us to pay attention to what He said about worship, reverence Him, submit our lives to Him, and follow Him. He cares about little things, even. God seeks worshipers who would worship Him in spirit and in truth. He gives us much freedom. That’s to be sure. That’s to be rejoiced. But He accepts the worship of those who receive His Word with faith, with submission, and with joy.

The second application is God opens the door to worship Him through the sacrifice of His Son. It all begins at the altar. The altar is the first part of the temple to be rebuilt because the sacrifices must be made in order for sins to be atoned for, in order for people to be clean, to be able to approach the presence of God. So the top priority before the foundation of the temple is built, before the walls, is let’s build the altar where sacrifices can be made. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. Without the forgiveness of sin, there is no drawing near to God. Our greatest need is for God to provide an atonement for us, and He has. He has given us Jesus. That’s the reason why Jesus and His cross is always in view when true worship is in view. We’re always acknowledging the necessity of an atonement for us to be able to draw near boldly.

In a moment, we’re going to take bread and a cup. Jesus instituted this so that we would keep in view the necessity of His atonement. The reason why we can come to God is not our own obedience. It’s the obedience of Christ. It’s the provision of Christ. So in our worship, we worship with an open Bible and say, I want to obey everything. But we also in our worship, we say, I’m really not able to worship because I obey. I am able to worship because of what Christ has done. Jesus says “Keep remembering this all the way until I come again, when I will be present with you and forever then you’ll be rejoicing in what I’ve done, in my physical presence. But until then, never ever forget. Remind yourselves often.”

Communion is a simple act of worship of just saying I remember. It doesn’t have to be long and drawn out and kind of a process. It can be. We could celebrate the Lord’s Supper for a couple hours and that would be wonderful. But if it’s only for thirty seconds, where you say for thirty seconds I’m going to remember that the reason why I’m here and the reason why God listens to me and the reason why God receives me is because Jesus died for me. Something significant takes place every time we remember that. These two elements help us.

This series is entitled Revival. Revival requires the cross. Revival always takes us back to the beginning of our new life in Jesus. That beginning is the cross of Jesus where the burden of our sins was rolled away. God’s provision of atonement makes a way for us to worship when there was no way. Amen? The last thing this morning is

**God’s Glory is the goal of worship.**

This is fantastic! The builders have made the altar and sacrifices are being made. Now they lay the foundation of the temple. It’s a couple years in the making, so this zips forward. It’s a couple years of time to get to this point.

***10*** *And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD,*

That’s what they want to do. They say, “We want God to be glorified. We want Him to be adored. We want Him to be praised. That’s what this whole thing is about. This is the goal. It’s the end of it.”

*according to the directions of David king of Israel.*

There is the Word again.

***11*** *And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”*

So they’re singing. This is the song. How many times did they sing this one chorus? I don’t know. Maybe they sang it fifty times. Would that be a bummer to some? I hope not. We don’t know all the lyrics to the song, but here is just one line of this. He says this is what matters. It doesn’t matter so much about how many words or how few words. What matters is that God is at the heart and God is being praised. Here are the lyrics of this song.

*“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout*

There is joy. There is enthusiasm. There is some real emotion. It’s not driven by emotion. It’s driven by revelation, but there is joy over who God is, that’s He’s good.

*when they praised the LORD,*

Again the issue is the heart. The goal of worship is God’s glory. It’s God’s adoration.

*because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.*

They recognized that’s all of God. That wouldn’t have happened apart from Him. God in His grace accomplished this.We will have pleasure in our worship when we find pleasure in God.

What a time of worship this must have been! They had spent seventy years in captivity with no temple worship, no sacrifices, no reminder of God’s faithfulness to give this people the land that they are now in. There were no reminders of that. It was all seemingly darkness. This is not a practiced performance. This is a spontaneous celebration of God’s goodness. It’s an exuberant enthusiasm that flows from a heart of receiving the blessing of God upon their lives and their community.

I recognize that everyone’s personality is a little different regarding how we all express joy. There are some who are Tigger’s among us and some who are Eyore’s. If you’re a Tigger and you’re super-joyful, you’re going to look like Tigger, bouncing off the walls here. If you’re an Eyore and you’re filled with the exact same joy, you’re going to look like, “I don’t even know if he’s even awake.” That’s okay. You don’t have to be another person to worship God. If you’re an Eyore, we’re not saying what we need is more people to jump. We’re also not saying what we need is less people to jump. What we’re saying is in our hearts, we need every one of us to have an exuberant joy and to express that joy in the way God created us. That’s what we need. Amen? (Amen!) The reality kind of hits us in verses 12 and 13. Everything seems idyllic and we have to close with some reality.

***12*** *But 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, though many shouted aloud for joy,*

Many were shouting in celebration of God. The Lord is good! In the midst of that, many were weeping, particularly the old guys. It was so strange that the people, as they were trying to listen to the people weeping and the people rejoicing,

***13*** *so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.*

Both were really loud and they were kind of joined together. But they could look at people and say, “That face is really tearful and sorrowful. That face is really happy. But I can’t tell by closing my eyes and listening.” Do you catch that? That’s the context of what is happening.

What is happening? Why were the older men weeping on such a joyful occasion? Well, because they were thinking back to the good old days when they had Solomon’s temple. They were look at this foundation and saying, “This is nothing like Solomon’s temple. It’s not as big. It’s not as beautiful. It’s not as glorious. Back then, when we had worship services, we were in this temple that just rocked the place with reverence and holiness and awe, and look at this. It’s just a foundation.”

The good old days are never as good as we remember them to be. What happened in the good old days with Solomon’s temple? It was the generation that committed idolatry that caused them to lose the temple in the first place. They forgot that. They just remember the temple and how good it was to worship there. So they’re weeping and are unable to experience the joy of a new thing that is small, but it’s a new thing that is beginning, new life, because they’re reflecting the nostalgia upon what used to be.

Warren Wiersbe is so helpful! “It’s unfortunate when the unity of God’s people is shattered because generations look in opposite directions. The older men were looking back with longing while the younger men were looking around with joy. Both of them should have been looking up and praising the Lord for what He had accomplished. We certainly can’t ignore the past, but the past must be a rudder to guide us and not an anchor to hold us back. God’s people are a family, not a family album filled with old pictures.” Amen? Which would you rather lose; your family or your family albums?

Wiersbe says God’s people “they’re a garden, not a graveyard covered with monuments to past successes.” That’s profound! “To some people, ‘change’ is a synonym for ‘compromise,’ but where there’s love, ‘change’ becomes a synonym for ‘cooperation with one another and concern for one another.’” Amen and amen!

**Psalm 133:1** Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

Why is that? Because it’s there that we can truly worship God with one voice, a voice that He deserves to hear.