

**Return: *Worship in the Long Run***  
Ezra 3-4:5

**Introduction:** It's hard to **start** certain things: how many of us found it difficult to *start* the term paper due in a few weeks, or return the pile of emails that stacked up, or cleaning out the garage. Other things are easy to start with excitement, only to fade as the days turn into weeks, which leak into months and years. Think of New Year's diets, the book you were going to read cover to cover (the kind without pictures), the quilt you started, or the wood project you began in the garage. Or for those that have played any instrument, the awe of starting out learning to play piano or violin, but then getting bogged down by other activities, the slogging pain of practice, and shifting of desires to other delights. To move from an excited start to a finished conclusion takes perseverance, discipline, and a belief that the end result is worth it.

We come to this next chapter of Ezra and find an excited group of returnees who begin a good, obedience, dependency driven work, only to get bogged down with disappointments, discouragements, and frustration. They were called back to **worship**, to reestablish what had been missing or which they had been unable to do in exile. They were called to worship as the **central focus of their life** because **God is ultimate, not man**. In this, we find the parallel to our lives. We are called to worship our greatest treasure who is our greatest joy. We are called to worship not as an activity but as the shape of our life, the drift of our time, the desire of our soul. We worship because God demands it, and because it's our mission:

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. **Worship is**. Missions exists because worship does not.

Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. Its the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into white hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of peoples in the greatness of God (see Psalm 97:1; 67:3-4)

But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish. Missionaries will never call out, "**Let the nations be glad!**" who cannot say from the heart, "**I rejoice in the LORD...I will be glad and exult in thee, I will sing praise to thy name, O Most High**" (Ps. 104:34; 9:2) Missions begins and ends with worship."<sup>1</sup>

Since we are all called to a mission of spreading the glory of God by making disciples in Jesus Christ, worship is OUR GOAL. This morning we will look at what worship looked like for those who returned, but how we can easily get sidetracked from our primary calling, and the effects that can have on our mission and purpose.

**Excitement of Starting: *Rebuilding the Altar* (3:1-7)**

*"When the **seventh month came**, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. 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. 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. And they kept the **Feast of Booths**, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by the number according to the rule, as each required,*

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, p. 17

*and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offering of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord. 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. 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.*

### **Rebuilding the altar showed the primacy of Worship**

#### **Worship was the mission - which trumped other things -**

We note in the text what is stated and what is not. The journey from Babylon/Persia to the area of Jerusalem would have taken about four months, and when they arrived, they would have to find shelter with relatives or rent out properties from locals. That means that within only a few short weeks/months, they got after the first things first. Nothing is mentioned about building their own homes, getting their business started, or enrolling their kids in local schools. This relatively small group was singly focused on the mission or worship revitalization, restoring worship in Jerusalem to the God of Israel.

#### **Worship united -**

The people came out together "*as one man*". Think about how many differences there would have been among 45,000+ people. Different areas of culture, upbringing, and family traditions, coming together to form some sort of united front. *How in the world do that many people come together as one?* The answer is worship, which demands humility and actually humbles the worshipper, since one cannot worship God and puff himself up with pride at the same time. Pride kills worship and unity. When worship is the priority of the family, church, or group, there will be unity.

#### **The altar was where God met His people (Ex. 29:43) -**

*"It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord where I will meet with you and speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel."* The altar was where the God would meet with His own. That is why they "set the altar in its place", putting it exactly where it had been in the former temple. God could meet His people because it was on the altar that sacrifices would be made, atoning for the people's sin, allowing sinful man to access a holy God. Worship entails a reverential, fearful, respectful, full of awe relationship with God Himself. We no longer have to make sacrifices "morning and evening", which was a truly bloody affair, since we have access through the once for all sacrifice of Jesus, which was also a bloody affair. Jesus died so that we could have access. Jesus died so we could now worship.

#### **The altar reminds us of real problems and solutions**

We often believe that our problems are outside of us and the answers are within us, when in reality our problems are inside of us and the answer lies outside. We are in need of something outside of us to save, to solve, and to restore. Worship reminds us that only through the work of Another could we restore hope and meaning. The fact that Jesus died once to satisfy the wrath of God means that we can find satisfaction for our weary soul. We worship regularly to constantly remind ourselves that nothing else can satisfy: sin offers happiness but only delivers bondage. No amount of money, or sex, or power, or success can satisfy us, but God offers Himself in Christ as the One in whom we find rest. Too often we frame life in God in terms of what He calls us NOT to do, rather than seeing worship as pursuing the One who can truly deliver on what we crave the most.

### **Celebrating the Feast was a reminder of dependency**

**Worship is prescribed by God, not made up by us -**

The people began to restore worship "*as it is written in the Law of Moses.*" They fulfilled the prescribed sacrifices and offerings, and since it was the seventh month, they observed the **Feast of Booths**, a seven day period of time that marked the beginning of a new agricultural year. This was one of the three most important festivals in the Hebrew calendar: Passover in the spring, Weeks in the summer, and Tabernacles or Booths in the Fall. This was an important way to restore worship, as we are called to worship God the way He prescribes, not the way we decide. Today, He calls us to worship in spirit and truth (see John 4), meaning that our minds and hearts, passions and truth are essential to truly worship.

**Feasts were relentless reminders**

But the feast of booths also created a relentless and regular reminder to the people. As they lived in flimsy tents in the yard, they were reminded of God's protection of Israel in the wilderness (Lev. 23:33-43), His continuing providential care, and their **dependence on Him**. This is an essential in worship. It reminds us that we NEED GOD, not the other way around. We do not gather to focus on ourselves or even what we give, as if God needed us. We gather, sing, fellowship, and hear preaching to remind us that we are in constant need of Him. *Why did God have them enter tents in the yard once a year? Sounds weird?* J. G. McConville wrote this about the point then and now:

"It is far more difficult to hear the message of fragility of life and the fact of dependence upon God for each succeeding breath amid the settled affluence and long life-expectancy that so many in the modern western world enjoy. Yet all our securities are ultimately illusory. Any attempt to peel them away, whether by temporary abstention from some of the good things of life, or whether deliberate exposure to and sharing of the hard realities experienced by the poor and disadvantaged, can only be salutary."<sup>2</sup>

What's the point? The feast of booths was a perfect starting point since the people knew they needed the Lord, and they were **afraid of the people around them**. Fear of the unknown, fear of opposition drove them to worship, which was a cry of dependency. Booths were to remind them that dependency never goes away, even though we often are deceived by our health, checkbooks, and homes that we really do not need Him. Worship should be a relentless drumbeat of the acknowledgement of need and the crying out of dependency.

**Emotions of Continuing: Rebuilding the Foundation (3:8-13)**

*"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 fo the Lord. 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.*

*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. 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. **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***

<sup>2</sup> McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 20-21.

*aloud for joy, 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.*

### **Worship reminds us that God keeps His promises**

#### **Because He promises, we can be proactive**

The second phase after setting up the altar was to begin on the Temple itself, and any real builder will tell you that a good foundation is essential for any substantial building. This would have taken months to accomplish, since supplies in the immediate area were limited. They would have had to send for wood from Lebanon, cedars just like were ordered by Solomon. Jeremiah had prophesied (Jer. 33:11) that they would be able to give thanks again in the Temple. Knowing this type of promise the leadership could be proactive, knowing nothing could ultimately stand in their way.

There are similar promises we have today in the church, where Jesus promised that even the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). We can be proactive in these things not because its easy, or because it won't cost us, but because God promised it would come about.

#### **Because He promises, we can respond with thanks**

Notice that the response once the "builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord" was to respond in spontaneous, responsive praise and thanksgiving. How often have we prayed and asked God to deliver, only to forget to return thanks? How often have we asked for things from God and failed to thank Him for anything? One of the best ways to pray and to liven our own individual worship is to simply thank God for all that He has promised us in Christ and to watch how our attitude changes and motivation turns.

### **Worship reminds us that we are not home yet**

#### **Worship was a mixture of real emotions**

Perhaps one of the most poignant scenes of this narrative is the gathering of young and old in a praise service to rejoice in the completion of the temples foundation. On one hand, the younger generation with no experiential knowledge of the past (we call this *ignorance*) rejoiced, since all the months of planning, waiting, and work came together in the next phase of the process, and their shouts were of joy. But the older, more experienced generation was not so enamored. There were some who would have seen the former temple in all its glory and their shouts were of weeping over the reality that this new temple paled in comparison. There were feelings of **disappointment and regret**, knowing that at one time, this place would have been a marvel of the world and God was ruling His people.

#### **Worship creates a longing for our real home**

What is fascinating about this scene is that it was all worship, and it was all part of praise, and the weeping was not condemned or rejected by the Lord. In fact the mixture of emotions was indistinguishable from the people, even far away. Both of these are valid in our experience here on earth, as we seek to worship a holy God in perishable bodies, battling the flesh, and struggling with sin. That is why we say we come here on Sundays *in reality, not acting like everything is ok*. Sometimes we praise God for the birth of a child. Others we worship through the tears that are struggling with infertility. Sometimes we worship in the reality of a healthy marriage, while others it's in the midst of frustration in an unchanging one. All of this means that worship creates in us a longing to go to our real home, the one in the future where tears are wiped away, injustices are made right, and Jesus will be seen. So we worship now, through tears and joy, in the disappointment of the past but hope for tomorrow.

**Ending because of Opposition: Ceasing the Work (4:1-5)**

"Now when the **adversaries** of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, '**Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.**' But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, '**You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus king of Persia commanded us.**'"

Then the people of the land **discouraged** the people of Judah and made them **afraid** to build and bribed counselors against them to **frustrate** their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia....

Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

**Caution given to inclusivity**

**The disingenuous offer of help** - On the heels of this mixed bag of worship, the gang of returners got an unexpected offer. The people of the area, those that had been living there in the time in between the deportation and return, offered to help the rebuilding process. This would have undoubtedly been needed in the short run: manpower, supplies, and connections to access whatever they needed in the future. The offer also seemed trustworthy: *we worship the same God, and have been doing so since we were brought here by the Assyrian king*". **Help by people who believe and worship the same way, what a great way to bridge a culture, relationship, and get our mission accomplished!** But what seemed to be a clear cut answer, became a resounding "NO!!!!". "No thank you". "Not gonna happen." nope, we will do this part alone." What happened? Why did they reject the offer?

**The reason the offer was rejected**

- **The offer was NOT truly genuine** - Notice that the text gives us clues that the offer was not altruistic. Verse 1 calls these *adversaries*. They were trying to get close to this group, to join in the process, which would have given them influence and possibly control over them in the future
- **The offer was NOT true** - A little background is needed here. When Assyria conquered the Northern tribes of Israel, they *imported* their own people into the land, created **syncretism** or a mix of worship. "***So they feared the LORD, but also served other gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.***" (2 Kings 17:33). In other words, they DID sacrifice to God, but also all the other gods. This is worse than not worshipping at all, since God demands worship to Himself alone and does NOT compete with others.
- **God is EXCLUSIVE, so there is a limit to our INCLUSIVITY** - God says we are to have no other gods beside Him (Ex. 20:3; Deut 5:7). Not only that, but there is ONLY one way back to God in our sin: Jesus alone "And there is salvation in no none else, for there is no other **name** under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This means that we **cannot mix these two realities**. We are as inclusive as the Bible calls us to be, loving all people, even our enemies, and NOT judging them according to the standards of Scripture when they act like unbelievers. But loving and not judging does not mean they are included in salvation or even the true church (those who belong because they are born again). When we mix these up, we blur the lines of what the gospel brings: salvation. Salvation is given by God through faith, and that belief causes people to repent of their sin and enter into newfound, joyful worship, turning

from a life of selfishness to submission to all God has commanded. We are as inclusive as is demanded by love, and as exclusive as is commanded by the truth.

### **Cost of exclusivity**

**Full frontal attacks of discouragement** - Notice that it did not take long for the real motives and intentions of the locals to come out. A good rule of thumb to find out if someone is truly as altruistic as they seem....*tell them "no", and see what happens*. In this case, the call of exclusivity of rebuilding the Temple was met with an immediate response. They set out to **discourage them**. This was not just with words, but a systematic approach:

**Sabotage caused frustration** - They bribed counselors, meaning they sought to disparage the reputations of the builders. They could stop the supply lines, halt deliveries, and keep valuable resources in warehouses. They wrote letters to the king to try to get him to go back on the original decree. They tried all the things they could think of to frustrate the purposes of the people and their mission, trying to side-track them at every turn.

**Opposition caused fear, which lead to a building stoppage** - The effect was felt. Not only did it cause fear (if you keep building, your kids are going to pay....if you keep building, no one is going to frequent your business...good luck buying a house in this area), but it caused the people to stop their mission. We know that the building of the Temple, which started with such unity and excitement, stopped for **over 20 years**, and God had to raise up prophets to get it going again (we'll talk about this next week).

You can see an interesting digression in this passage: excitement, effectiveness, praise, disappointment, discouragement, opposition, fear, and cessation of mission. The call for exclusivity was right, but it came at a cost.

Today we are faced with similar situations. Our culture reacts strongly against truth, and even though everyone wants to be accepted as being right with God, when it is pointed out they are violating God's Word, the reaction is swift and progressive. The Bible prepares us for this. If people hated Jesus, they will hate us (John 15:18). They will criticize us, label us, shun us, and hate us. What is our response? Love. Love in the truth. Love with a message of truth outside of us, of One who sacrificed for them so that they can have life, and that abundantly.

What is our motivation? Worship. How do we deal with our fear? Worship. How do we keep going in dependence? Worship. We do not attack anyone, judge anyone, but we stick to our mission in spite of the opposition. We open our eyes wide in love and give the truth that we know only few will find (Matt. 7:14).

So we commit ourselves to worship. That is our mission. And out of our mission to glorify the Lord, having tasted of His goodness, we offer it for others to taste and see that the Lord is good. We do this together, knowing it will be hard, knowing that we need to push past thresholds of pain, and keep going until we are reunited with our Savior.