

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Ezra 3:1-7

Lesson Title: Joyful Worship Restored

Introduction

The book of Ezra was written by "*Ezra, the son of Seraiah*" (Ezra 7:1). Although Ezra is not specifically named as the author, the vivid descriptions in the last few chapters of the book require that the author have firsthand knowledge of the events being recorded. Ezra's lineage included such notable High-Priests as Zadok (1 Kings 2:35), Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-13), and Eleazar (Numbers 3:4). Ezra "*was a ready scribe in the law of Moses*" (Ezra 7:6). That means he was skilled or highly qualified in the things God had revealed to Moses. This qualification would be essential and beneficial since those returning Jews from Babylonian captivity would need to go back to the law of God, interpret it properly, and then apply it obediently.

The children of Israel were taken captive in 597 B.C. and after 70 years of captivity were released in groups from 538 to 458 B.C. The second group was led by Ezra and the final group returned under the leadership of Nehemiah. When God delivered His people from Egypt, all the Israelites were ready and willing to leave. That was not the case when the Israelites returned from Babylonian captivity. Some wanted to remain in Babylon. It is estimated that out of a total Jewish population of perhaps two or three million, only around 50,000 choose to return to their homeland. The others preferred a life of relative comfort in Babylon.

The main events in the lives of those who returned, and the men who led them home is the construction of the temple under Zerubbabel's leadership (Ezra 1-6) and the reformation of the people under Ezra's leadership in (Ezra 7-10). Chapter 3, which is the focus of our study today, takes place as the people begin work on the central feature of the temple, the altar. This is significant because the altar not only shows their renewed commitment of the Mosaic Law, but through the atoning sacrifices, the people are reinstating intimate fellowship with their holy, loving God.

The worship experience was an important part of the restoration of God's people when they arrived back in Jerusalem. When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God. Next, they built the temple. After that they built the walls. The priority and order of their actions is correct; worship and a correct relation to God must be at the center of our personal lives before anything else. Putting first things first mean we worship. Christians worship on the "*first day of the week*" (Matthew 28:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2) which means worship is where everything rests. People who fail to worship are ineffective in everything else they do.

Restoring Spiritual Foundations (Ezra 3:1-5)

Verse 1

"And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem."

When the Jews returned from Babylon to their homeland they were occupied with rebuilding their own houses and getting a roof over their heads. By "the seventh month," (September and October in our seasons) "the children of Israel were in the cities." Although the year is not mentioned, it is implied that this was the "seventh month" of the first year in Jerusalem. The "seventh month" was a sacred time on the Jewish calendar, beginning with a blowing of trumpets and a holy gathering (Leviticus 23:24). On the fifteenth day of the "seventh month" there was a gathering together which lasted until the twenty-second day of the month.

As "the children of Israel were in the cities" they "gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem." This "gathering" seems to be more than just a normal coming together because a certain date had arrived on the calendar. The text indicates that the people had knowledge that the altar was going to be repaired and worship re-established. There was a great ingathering of people to "Jerusalem" to witness what was about to take place. When they came "together as one man to Jerusalem" they came with a common purpose or unanimously. They all agreed that it was time for this spiritual renewal and building project to take place.

It seems that so many of God's people "gather together" to worship for no other reason than its Sunday. Sunday comes and we are supposed to go to church and worship and that's about all there is to it. Joyful worship will be restored when God's people "gather themselves together as one man." We must come with a common purpose and in one accord to magnify and adore our wonderful Lord.

Verse 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."

"Jeshua the son of Jozadak" and "Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel" were the recognized spiritual leaders, respectively, and therefore in charge of the rebuilding of the altar. "Jeshua," the religious leader, was a descendant of Aaron, is given the title of high priest by Haggai and Zechariah (Haggai 1:1, 14: 2:2; Zechariah 3:1, 8; 6:11). The name "Jeshua" is a variation of Joshua, and therefore may be regarded as a type of Christ. "Jeshua" and "his brethren the priests," or, his fellow priests who were also descendants of Aaron, "builded the altar of the God of Israel." "Zerubabel," the civil leader, was a descendant of David, and along with "his brethren," or associates who were also descendants of David, helped in "building the altar of the God of Israel."

It is likely that "Jeshua, Zerubbabel," and their associates, "builded the altar of the God of Israel" in the same place where it had previously stood because the "bases" are mentioned in verse 3. It is also possible that this spot is where David had built an "altar" before there was a temple (2 Samuel 24:25). Ezra doesn't give us details and measurements but he does tell us this "altar" was built "as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God." The "law of Moses the man of God"

was authoritative. God's Word is still the final authority on the subject of worship. If you're going to worship you must follow the word of God. Worship is clearly defined in scripture and those who ignore God's guidelines and attempt to establish worship based on their opinion and tradition will find themselves in serious trouble.

Question: How much concern exists today in the hearts and minds of God's people concerning worship? Do you view worship as a necessity? Does God expect us to worship correctly by following Scriptural guidelines or are we free to adjust things to our preferences?

"Burnt offering" means "ascending as smoke." This name is appropriate because the "burnt offering" was to be wholly consumed and to rise in smoke toward heaven. A description of the "burnt offering" is found in Leviticus 1:1-17. The offerings placed upon the altar of the "burnt offering" were according to what a person had which denoted his standing in society and before God. This is a beautiful picture of our worship which should not be based on what others do but rather offered to God according to our privileges and blessings. It was essential to the life of these returning Israelites that they worship correctly, honestly, and sincerely.

Although "Jeshua" and "Zerubbabel" were God's appointed leaders they clearly identified themselves with their "brethren." They did not allow their position and authority to cause them to lord over the people but rather lead the people. Leadership in worship is more than a team of volunteers who direct music or attempt to emotionally motivate people in a worship service. Being able to lead God's people in worship is a gift from God within those He has saved and called.

Verse 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."

The "altar" was build "upon his bases" which refers to its pre-captivity location. Exact location may not mean a lot to us today but it did in Old Testament times. It the life of the patriarchs it marked a new dedication to God or a new experience of God's presence or leading (Genesis 12:7; 13:4; 22:9; 33:20; 35:1). These men would often return or remember these special locations as milestones and spiritual markers in their lives. It is true that a Christian does not have to be at a spot or a particular place to worship God. However, it is also true that scripture requires us to be at certain places on certain times to be obedient to God's Word. It is a sin to "forsake the assembling of yourself with God's people" (Hebrews 10:25) when you are physically able to gather together. And every child of God who has been in the Christian journey for any length of time has special places but private and public where they have met with the Lord. We don't worship the place, but rather the God of the place!

Although the Israelites were somewhat afraid of what their non-Israelite neighbors might do, they went ahead and "offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord." God's people were fearful of the surrounding heathen nations or people of foreign descent living in Judah. Some of these

"people" had been sent to Judah by the Assyrians. Both Ezra and Nehemiah show a growing tension between these non-Israelite people and God's people.

Christians often live in hostile environments. The early church faced the same situation as they worshipped the Lord surrounded by people who did not accept Christianity. Ezra tells us God's people were fearful, yet they "set the altar upon his bases" anyway. Part of the reason they proceeded to build the altar was in order that God would protect them from their non-Israelite neighbors. The "people of those countries" didn't accept or appreciate the "burnt offerings unto the LORD" or the fact that they were offered "morning and evening." Nevertheless, God's people obeyed the Lord and worshipped.

We must never let the world or those who do not know God prevent us from obeying God in worship. When Peter and the apostles were told not to preach or teach in Jesus' name, they responded, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Worship not only provides us an opportunity to obey God and glorify Him, it also protects us. This is not a day to back away from biblical worship because the cults and belief systems that promote terrorism are on the rise. The Bible says, "For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14).

Verse 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"

After the altar was set up, the people began to celebrate which ever particular feast came up on the Jewish calendar. The feast observed here is the Feast of Tabernacles, first called "*The Feast of Ingathering*" (Exodus 23:16b). It was one of the three most important religious celebrations in the Jewish religious calendar. The pilgrim festivals, when all the men of Israel were to come to Jerusalem, were Passover in the spring, Pentecost (Weeks or Harvest) in the summer, and Tabernacles or Ingathering in the fall (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:16).

It was important that the people keep these feasts "as it is written." As previously stated, worship is not left up to the dictates of man. Each action required by God served a particular purpose that aided in their worship and glorified God. For instance, in the Feast of Tabernacles, the people built booths or huts which would be a reminder of how God cared for them while they journeyed in the wilderness and lived in tents.

The people "offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required." The offerings for every day are carefully laid down in Numbers 29:13-38. This stresses the fact that when God's people are serious about worship they will follow God's directive and place importance on the particulars. Worship is particular. Everything we do in worship should have a purpose and be according to God's Word. Worship is not just a meaningless exercise of emotion. Worship should remind us of how great God is and all that He has done in redeeming us, securing us, and providing for us. If you want to know how to worship, read the Bible and follow it precisely as "it is written." The Bible is still the best manual on worship!

Verse 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."

"And afterward" are two very important words in regard to joyful worship. So many times worship begins with an initial enthusiasm and then after weeks or months it begins to lose its appeal. Worship is more than a momentary impulse. It is more than being caught up in a moment. Ezra tells us the people didn't stop bringing their offerings even after the initial sacrifices were offered. The "continual burnt offering" is a reference to the daily morning and evening sacrifice (Exodus 29:42; Numbers 28:3-6). The people also observed the "set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated." These were the regular offerings that were set apart by God on occasions such as "the new moons" and changing of seasons.

"And every one that willingly offered a free will offering unto the LORD" refers to offerings that could be offered at any time. While most of the "free will offerings" were brought on special feast days, some were made on a regular basis. The "free will offering" is a reminder to us that a true worshipper is not stingy. True worship goes beyond what is required and gives glory to God and sacrifices to God out of a heart of gratitude and praise. The heart that loves God desires to worship him in a way that pleases him and is "willing" to give to him whatever he can (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Restoring Physical Foundations (Ezra 3:6-7)

While Ezra 3:1-5 focuses on the spiritual aspect of establishing of sacrificial worship, verses 6-7 deal with the actual physical aspect of the rebuilding of the Temple. Worship is not all spiritual. Worship includes the physical as well. Sometimes we fail to realize that our actions are a vital part of worship. The woman with the alabaster box of ointment of spikenard in Mark 14 truly worshipped Jesus in a spiritual way. But part of her worship involved physical actions. The Bible says, "*She came...brake...and poured*" (Mark 14:3). Commenting on her actions, Jesus said, "...She hath wrought a good work on me" (Mark 14:6).

Verse 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."

The people had been faithful in reinstating the sacrificial system and bringing their "burnt offerings unto the LORD." These words may be short and simple to us but don't underestimate what is being said. It was no small task to accomplish what these people had accomplished. Worship is not easy and worshipping God's way requires commitment and faithfulness. While the people are to be commended for their actions, there is a significant "but" in this story. "But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid." The building of the altar and the bringing of the sacrifices was only part of the task. The enormous task of rebuilding the temple lay ahead. And the first step was to lay the foundation.

Verse 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."

There was a period of preparation for building the temple foundation. Actual work on the temple did not begin till "the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem" (Ezra 3:8). That means it was at least seven months after the altar was built before the foundation work began. The reason for this delay was because they had to get organized and secure the building materials.

First, "they gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters." They hired or contracted (as we would say today) the men needed to perform the work.

Second, "they gave...meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon." They exchanged staple goods such as "meat, drink, and oil" for timber and supplies. The "cedar trees" or the wood, came "from Lebanon." When Solomon built the first temple the "cedar trees" also came from "Lebanon" (2 Chronicles 2:8-10. The shipment of trees would have been shipped along the coast "to Joppa" and then carried overland to Jerusalem. "Joppa" was a seaport about fifty miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Third, this shipment was "according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia." "Grant" carries two basic meaning. It means the shipment of materials was authorized by King Cyrus of Persia. Since "Zidon" and "Tyre" were under the Persian Empire, "Cyrus" had to authorize this transaction. It also means that "Cyrus" had provided some of the funding for the materials and the shipping process (Ezra 6:3-5).

Each detail recorded concerning the establishment of the altars and the rebuilding of the temple is important. Ezra and Nehemiah in their records are clear to communicate that everything is done decently and in order. The proper authorities such as "Cyrus" and "Darius" (Ezra 5 & 6) are a part of the remnants return to their homeland and restoration of worship and the temple. Sometimes Christians hold an improper view of God ordained authority. Even in worship we are to respect God ordained authority and do things biblically and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). God can still use men in authority to carry out His plans and help take care of His people.

Conclusion

When the first Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah, they viewed the worship of the Lord as their first priority. Cyrus had commissioned them to rebuild the temple and reinstitute the sacrificial system (Ezra 1:3). Restoring genuine worship is not without difficulty and sometimes opposition. They found that their neighbors in the land were not anxious to see true biblical worship resume. In spite of their fear they proceeded to rebuild the altar and restore worship as God required in His word.

Worship must always remain a priority among God's people. Every detail laid down in God's Word must be followed and obeyed. There is no room for preferences and opinions when it comes to approaching God in worship. However, strict adherence to worshipping God's way did not remove the heart of God's people from worship. They brought their free will offerings according to their hearts desire to glorify and please the Lord.

It should bring us great joy to come before the Lord with our brothers and sisters in Christ and worship Him. It should also bring us great joy to give of ourselves and our resources to the One who gave Himself for our salvation. The returning remnant set a good example for believers today in the matter of worship. May God help us to follow their example.

Amen.