

BUILD THE ALTAR FIRST

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 3

Third Message

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What is the first thing you do in the morning after waking up?

For me, I have had a life-long love affair with the snooze button. Most days, the first thing I do as I open my eyes to start a new day is to close them again for ten more minutes of sleep. I love that half-awake state in the morning, and I love slipping back into sleep. I've recently gotten better— now I manage to only snooze once instead of 3-4 times.

Someone once told me that the first thing you do in the morning sets the tone for your entire day. If that's true, then most of my days are me wishing I could go back to sleep.

If it is not true, what does set the tone for your day? What priorities guide your day? How do you decide to do this instead of that? What things must happen each day compared to those things that you might get around to? How do you figure out what's important?

Today we are continuing our series in the book of Ezra called "Return and Rebuild." The year is around 537 BC, and we're watching the Israelites come back to Jerusalem after living in exile for 70 years. Last week we saw how much effort they put into making sure they got their identity right this time around.

In our passage this morning, we'll notice an interesting sequence of events for how they approach the construction of the temple. We'll learn something from their priorities as we watch them build the altar first.

The Israelites of this period lived in a massive season of transition. They experienced a traumatic disruption to everything about how their lives worked. They had lived a reduced version of their lives for a significant period of time. Now the Israelites are returning to their land and hoping to get back to something they had before. Does any of this sound familiar?

The kinds of themes they are dealing with are so relevant for us today. The Israelites are looking at how things were and trying to rebuild something connected to their past. But they're also living in a different world, and so it seems like everything has changed. They don't want just to recreate what was; they want to rethink their priorities and make sure that things work better this time around.

Nostalgia for the past. Hope for the future. Grief for what was lost. Excitement for new possibilities. Re-prioritizing everything. And trying to figure out where God fits into all of it. This was the Israelites in 537 BC. This is us 2500 years later, in AD 2021. Let's hear their story and see what God might teach us through it.

First things first

Let's begin with the first section of our story. In these verses, notice the unity of these people and what they choose to do as their first united act. Ezra 3:1-3 and 6:

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.

Ezra 3:6:

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.

The people were afraid: "fear was on them." So "they gathered as one man." They were starting something new. They were worried about the opposition around them, so the first thing they did was to build the altar.

Building an altar is not something that happens every day. In fact, we see this happening throughout the Old Testament only at very critical junctures in the history of God's people. Noah was the first to build an altar (Genesis 8:20). Abraham built four different altars (Genesis 12:7, 12:8, 13:18, and 22:9). Jacob (Genesis 35:7), Moses (Exodus 17:15), Joshua (Joshua 8:30), Samuel (1 Samuel 7:17), Saul (1 Samuel 14:35), David (2 Samuel 24:21), Solomon (1 Kings 9:25), and Elijah (1 Kings 18:32) all built altars. That's a great ten-week Bible study if you're interested.

Here in Ezra, we get the last reference in the Old Testament to an altar being built. This was the last altar. It sheds a brighter light on the last verse I read: "From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord." This was the last altar we hear about until it was destroyed 600 years later when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

If you think about it, it's a curious place to start a building project. Don't you usually build walls and a floor and a roof before you care about the furnishings? Not in this case. The Israelites realized they needed to build the altar first.

We can learn something from that. As we return and rebuild, the most important question for us is: Where is our altar? How does the presence of God fit into our daily lives? What are we doing as we rebuild our social lives, professional lives, recreational lives, and academic lives to ensure that God is at the center.

As you return and rebuild, build the altar first.

There are a lot of ways this could play out. Maybe it's rethinking what you do first thing in the morning. If the first thing you do when you wake up is to check your phone, what is your altar?

Here is another way to think about it: you will build your altar first. The only question is what kind of altar. By definition, you will make sure to include the things in your life that are most important to you. Look back over your schedule, finances, and activities, and you will see the altars you have built.

This was true in the Bible as well. The heroes of the faith I mentioned weren't the only ones to build altars. Aaron built an altar to a golden calf. Balaam built seven altars to tempt God's prophet away from telling the truth. We're going to build altars. We're always sacrificing one thing for another.

So you're going to build an altar. It's up to you to decide which one.

Faithful to the legacy

As the story continues, we see the Israelites begin work on the foundation of the temple. We're going to see how the past becomes a guide for them as they rebuild toward the future.

Ezra 3:7-9:

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.

It's not obvious when you read this passage in isolation. Still, if you compare this account of building the second temple to the biblical accounts of building the first temple, you see incredible parallels. There is a 500-year gap between when Solomon built the first temple and this temple project in Ezra. Yet, the same exact phrases are used. The same payment is used for the Sidonians and Tyrians. The same system of supervision is established. Everything is practically identical.

The point is that they are consistent with the past. This new temple is not an innovation—it's a continuation of the Israelites' long history of worshipping God in a particular place that represented the physical home of a spiritual God.

But they aren't consistent with the past out of a sense of nostalgia or because the past was so great. It's not just about the past. It's about what God did in a previous

generation. What the Israelites are doing is staying connected to the way that God had worked in the past. They aren't honoring the past. They are honoring how God worked in the past.

This is the goal during a time of transition. This is how we rebuild.

We are in a time of significant transition at PBC. How do we look to the past and recognize the ways that God has worked here? How do we honor God's work in the past as a church?

On the one hand, is the temptation toward nostalgia: This is the way we've always done it, so we have to keep doing it that way. On the other hand, the temptation toward innovation: This is new, so it must be better. You can fall off the cliff on both sides, but in the middle lies the path of wisdom. That's continuity. We honor God's work in the past, knowing that it will look different in the present.

The goal is always to see God's kingdom lived out in this time and place. Since time and place are constantly changing, our practices are always going to change as well. Over the last 70+ years at PBC, we've seen a lot of change. But in the midst of that, we have found continuity with the way God has worked.

We equip people and send them out for ministry. We follow Christ within our unique culture. We empower the gifts within each of us for the sake of ministry. We attempt to put Christ at the center of all that we do. We share leadership across a wide variety of men and women. We are utterly convinced that God's revelation in these pages is the most reliable way to know him.

These are the ways I've seen God in this place. This is what it looks like to honor God's work in the past. This is what God has done. When we think back over how God has worked here at PBC, we usually arrive at the same conclusion that we'll see the Israelites come to.

God is good

After the temple foundation is complete, the community gathers for a celebration. At the heart of what they are celebrating is not their work. It's not even their faithfulness to God's work in the past because when you honor God's work and strive for continuity, you end up with a focus on God. That's what happened in 537 BC.

Ezra 3:10-11:

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.

The Israelites celebrated one simple but incredibly powerful idea: "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." God is good.

God is many things. He is holy. He is loving. He is gracious. He is just. But as the Israelites return and rebuild, they celebrate God for his goodness. Not just a generic goodness. They say "he is good", but they recognize that God's goodness lands somewhere. "His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

We put God first, we honor his work in the past, and we celebrate his goodness.

God's goodness is the aspect of God most under attack in our culture. In my experience, people don't want to follow God because they don't believe one of the two statements that the Israelites declare. They either don't believe God is good in general. Or they don't believe God has been good to them specifically.

Many people today question whether the God of the Bible is good. They ask how a good God can require standards for sexual behavior. They associate God with a particular political system that they see as unhealthy. They can't reconcile the goodness of God with the horrific suffering which exists in the world. They can't bring themselves to say with these Israelites, "for he is good."

Others have a more personal challenge. It's not the abstract nature of God that bothers them. It's what has happened to them. How could God allow this kind of suffering in my life? They may feel that the God of the Bible doesn't affirm them as people. They may have been victims of abuse or tragedy and don't want anything to do with a God who would allow that. They can't agree with the Israelites, who say that God's steadfast love has been shown toward them.

That is why it's important for us to worship God for his goodness. Not just for our own sakes but because when we center on the goodness of God, we invite those in our world to reconsider who God might be. When we declare that God is good and his love is toward all of us, we proclaim a truth that has the power to open the eyes of the blind.

So this celebration of the Israelites begins with a united expression of who God is, but then we see a crack of division in this new community. Let's see what happens next.

Worshiping with joy and grief

The people all sing together of the goodness of God. The content of their worship is the same, but their experience is different. Let's read how it's described.

Ezra 3:12-13:

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.

There are two different reactions to the foundation of the new temple. The previous temple had been destroyed 50 years earlier. Some of the older people among them had seen that temple and were disappointed in the new version. So they "wept with a loud voice." Others, who hadn't known the old version, were thrilled with the new temple, so they "shouted aloud for joy."

It's common to say that people don't like change. But that is too simplistic. The thing that makes change hard is that change always involves loss. Losing something good means grieving it.

My wife and I dated long distance before we got married. When I proposed to her, I made a surprise trip to where she lived. I had planned everything for the actual proposal, but I needed to make sure she would be home when I arrived to pick her up. So I arranged for a friend of hers to schedule something. They were going to go shopping together that afternoon.

Instead, I arrived at her door, and the rest was history. But to this day, she will still say, "I was really looking forward to going shopping with my friend."

It's not that she wished I hadn't shown up to ask her to marry me. But even that good change—even that great change in plans—involved some form of loss.

All change involves loss: moving to a new city, having a baby, a new job, a new temple, or a remodeled worship center. All of those might be good changes, but they involve loss.

We see in this story that grief and joy can coexist, especially in the context of worship. Read the psalms. You'll find plenty of joy and grief. The goodness of God is big enough to handle our weeping with a loud voice and our shouting for joy.

When we come to God, we bring him everything. We bring our joy and our grief. Worship with grief and joy.

If it's not already evident to you, this scene is incredibly relevant to us today. I have literally heard people both "shouting aloud with joy" and "weeping with a loud voice" in response to our remodeled worship center and some of the ways our worship gathering has changed over the past few years.

There is a lot that we could say about this, but I'll just make three quick comments.

First, an encouragement. This is normal. We have two different instances of this recorded in response to the new temple in the fifth century BC. Over the past 25 years that I've been at PBC, some people respond with joy, and others respond with grief every time a significant change has been made. We should expect this and not be surprised by it.

Maybe God wants to use both reactions. These Israelites had suffered something terrible. The older ones in their midst needed to grieve. They had gone from great to terrible to pretty good. The younger ones in their midst needed to celebrate. They had only gone from terrible to much better. That's okay. When we gather as a community, our experience of worshiping God is big enough for both those emotions.

Second, a warning. Don't let your experience of worship distract you from the content of your worship. This is the issue that concerns me the most. We are here

to worship God. Our focus is on him. I can declare the goodness of God equally well from a pew or a chair. I can praise the God of redemption equally well under a black ceiling or a white ceiling. I can preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to people in a room, participants behind a camera and a combination of both.

Worship isn't about me. It's about God. Please know that every change we've made has been discussed and prayed about at great lengths by the elders and other leaders. This wasn't about our preferences or making us comfortable. We're not here for us. We're here to give glory to God.

I've been disappointed by reactions to our worship center in both directions. On the one hand, none of these changes should make it impossible to worship God in this place. It's okay to grieve the past. Allow God to draw you into grief. But resist the temptation to allow nostalgia to draw you away from God.

On the other hand, none of these changes should suddenly enable a brand new experience with God. We made some great changes; we updated a few things. But this is still just a building. Worship comes from the heart, not a sound system.

An encouragement that this is normal. A warning not to let our experience distract us from God. Lastly, a reminder. Everything that we experience here is but a foretaste of the feast to come. When a similar scene happens later, the prophet Haggai has these words of comfort in Haggai 2:9: "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts."

As followers of Jesus, we are fundamentally a people oriented toward the future, not the past. Nothing in our past will compare to what God will do in the future. The way that theologians describe this reality is to say that the church is an "eschatological community." We are far more about what will happen than what has happened.

What will happen is the presence of God will overwhelm us with beauty and glory when he returns. Until then, whatever building we are in is nothing compared to the glory of Christ. We need to honor the work of God in the past. But, we have to be careful of getting stuck in the past, when God's promises for all of us lie in the future.

Conclusion

Let me ask again: what is the first thing you do in the morning after waking up? What if that is your altar? What if that activity represents the thing upon which you build your life? I don't think it's quite that simple, but it's a good question for us to ask.

As we've watched the Israelites in Jerusalem begin the project of rebuilding, we have seen many different themes. They built the altar first. Their project was very intentionally linked to the work of God in the past. When they gathered to celebrate, the content of their worship focused on the goodness of God. However, the experience of their worship varied among them: some grieved while others celebrated.

All of these different issues come down to the same basic idea: put God first. Make it the first thing you do to build an altar. When you're looking at the past, don't just look for tradition. Look for the work of God. When you celebrate, it's not your work that should be front and center. It's the goodness of God. As you respond to the experience, don't let that draw you away from having God as your focus.