

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 2: The Altar Rebuilt and the Temple Foundation -- Ezra 3:1-13

Picture the scene. The wagons have finally stopped rolling. After a journey of some nine hundred miles from Babylon, the first wave of returned exiles stands on the rubble of Jerusalem. The walls are broken. The temple Solomon built, the glory of their grandparents' memory, is a heap of charred stone and ash. Weeds grow where priests once sang. And the people who have come home are surrounded on every side by neighbors who do not want them there. If you have ever walked back into a place you loved and found it ruined, you know something of the lump that must have risen in their throats that day. The question hanging over the whole community was painfully simple. Where do you even begin?

Here is what is striking, and what this lesson is really about. They did not begin with the walls, though they were exposed. They did not begin with their own houses, though they needed shelter before winter. They began with an altar. The very first thing the returned remnant built was a place to meet God in worship. Before there was a sanctuary, before there was a single stone of the new temple set in place, there was a fire on an altar and the smoke of burnt offerings rising toward heaven, exactly as it is written in the Law of Moses. They put first things first. They understood, in a way we often forget, that you do not build a life and then add God to it. You begin with God, and everything else takes its proper place around Him.

And they did this, the text tells us, while afraid. Ezra 3:3 says, plainly, that fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands. They were a small, vulnerable group in a hostile region, and worship did not make them safer in any visible way. It did not raise a wall or post a guard. Yet they worshiped anyway, morning and evening, day after day, because they had learned in exile the lesson their fathers had to learn the hard way. The God who judges is also the God who restores, and the only secure place to stand is in His will. Their fear did not silence their praise. Their fear sent them to the altar. That is a kind of courage we would do well to covet.

As the chapter closes, the foundation of the new temple is laid, and the sound that goes up is one of the most human and moving in all of Scripture. The young men shout for joy. The old men, the ones who could still remember the splendor of the first temple before the Babylonians burned it, weep aloud. Joy and grief rise together until, the text says, the people could not tell the shout of joy from the sound of weeping, and the noise was heard far away. This week we are going to stand in that mingled sound. We are going to ask what it means to put worship first, to worship by God's pattern rather than our preferences, and to hold gladness and sorrow in the same trembling hands. And we are going to see how this rough altar and unfinished foundation point us all the way forward to Christ, the true temple, and to the worship in spirit and truth that He has made possible for us.

Group Discussion: Why do you think the returned exiles built the altar and resumed sacrifices before they laid a single stone of the temple itself? What does the order of their priorities reveal about how they understood their relationship with God, and where do our own building projects, literal and figurative, tend to put God in the sequence?

Personal Reflection: Ezra 3:3 says the people set up the altar and offered worship even though fear was on them because of the surrounding peoples. Think of an area in your own life right now where fear is pressing in. Be honest with yourself: is that fear driving you away from worship and prayer, or is it driving you toward God? What would it look like this week for your fear to send you to the altar rather than away from it?

Read Ezra 3:1–13

Study Questions

1. According to Ezra 3:2–4, the people rebuilt the altar and offered burnt offerings as it is written in the Law of Moses. Why does Scripture so deliberately emphasize that their worship followed God's revealed pattern, and what does this teach us about the authority of God's Word over how we approach Him?
2. The returnees made worship their very first act before tending to their own homes or security. Examine your own week honestly. What does the order of your time, attention, and resources reveal about where God actually ranks among your priorities?
3. Ezra 3:3 says they offered worship even though fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands. How can fear and faithful worship exist side by side, and what does this account teach us about worshiping God when circumstances feel unsafe rather than only when they feel comfortable?
4. When have you allowed fear, whether of people's opinions, of failure, or of the unknown, to silence your worship or thin out your devotion to God? What is one fear you need to bring honestly before the Lord this week?

5. In Ezra 3:4–6 the people kept the Feast of Tabernacles and resumed the regular daily offerings even before the temple foundation was laid. What does their commitment to consistent, ongoing worship, rather than a single dramatic event, teach us about the rhythm of a faithful life with God?
6. Is your own worship more like a fire that burns steadily morning and evening, or more like a flare that flames up occasionally and then goes dark? What practical step could restore a steadier rhythm of worship and devotion in your life?
7. Ezra 3:8–9 describes the leaders, priests, Levites, and people working together to set forward the work of the house of God. What does this picture of shared, ordered labor teach us about how God intends His people to work together in His service today?
8. Where has God placed you to help set forward the work of His house among His people, and are you presently carrying your part of that work, or leaving it to others? What is one way you could take fuller ownership this week?
9. The people laid the foundation of the temple, the house of God, with worship following the pattern given in the Law of Moses (Ezra 3:10–11). Reading this in the light of John 2:19–21, 1 Peter 2:4–5, and Ephesians 2:19–22, how does the physical temple foreshadow Christ and His church as the true temple of God, and what does it mean for us to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24) under the New Covenant rather than by the old pattern of altars and animal sacrifice?

10. In Ezra 3:12-13 the laying of the foundation brought shouts of joy and the sound of weeping mingled together. Name one specific way this passage is shaping you to be more like Christ, whether by putting worship first, by trusting God in fear, by worshiping according to His Word, or by holding joy and grief together with hope. What single step will you take in response?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Haggai 2:3-9, the later word of encouragement to the very people who wept that this latter house would be filled with God's glory in Christ; John 4:21-24, Jesus teaching that true worship is no longer tied to a place but offered in spirit and truth; 1 Peter 2:4-5, believers as living stones built into a spiritual house offering spiritual sacrifices through Christ; Ephesians 2:19-22, the church as a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit; Hebrews 12:22-24, the worshiping assembly come to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem through the blood of Jesus

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com