

Chapter 54 Ezra 1-10

The Book of Ezra: Moving the Past Forward

“So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate [the Passover], together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel. For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.” Ezra 6:21-22

The final phase of preparation for the coming of Christ has the feel of a second marriage to the same spouse. I have officiated at three weddings for couples who were reunited after suffering painful divorces. In each case the divorce was followed by months, even years, of anger, hurt and distrust. Little or no hope existed for a rebirth of agape love, but then something miraculous happened. God healed a very broken relationship. By the grace of Christ, the love that had all but died was revived. There was repentance, forgiveness and restoration. Romantic love was restored by redemptive love and the decision was reached to remarry. These are very special weddings because they testify to the power of God’s grace to overcome years of anguish and betrayal. They prove that agape love can be restored at the center of a new relationship with the same person. These marriages are altar-like testimonies to God’s redeeming, reconciling love.

Understandably, the wedding ceremonies for these second marriages to the same person are very different from the first wedding. Gone for sure is that spirited youthful pride and fresh romantic idealism. It is replaced by a kind of world-weary realism. The ordinary preoccupation of getting everything just so for the “big day,” which characterizes so many weddings today is also gone. The ceremony is as simple as it is meaningful. The couple stands before a few friends and family in humility and in amazement. Throughout the years of agonizing estrangement they never would have imagined looking into the eyes of their ex-spouse and saying, “I love you and give myself and all I am to you. With deepest joy I join my life with yours. I promise to cherish and uphold you from this day forward as long as our lives shall last. And as a symbol of this promise I give you this ring, a celebration of our union in Christ, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

These humble weddings remind me of the post-exilic reunion between the Lord God and the children of Abraham. The Babylonian captivity is over and the people of God have weathered the judgment of God. But this second Exodus can hardly be compared to the first, although the effect is much the same, the people do get back into the land. But like those second marriages to the same spouse, everything is scaled back. The big event is what has gone in the hearts of the couple. The internal transformation is what matters.

The first Exodus could not have been more dramatic: Moses declared the word of the Lord to a hardhearted Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” and then called down plagues of blood-red rivers, slimy frogs, swarms of gnats and flies, and mounds of dead livestock. Even more plagues

followed, plagues of boils, hail, locusts, darkness and finally death to all firstborn Egyptian males. Everything was miraculous about the Exodus from Egypt: the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of the Egyptian army, the guiding cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, even their daily sustenance, manna from heaven and water from a rock, was miraculous. But nothing on the surface was very miraculous about the exodus from Babylon. Cyrus king of Persia in 538 B.C. wrote a letter giving permission for the Jews to return to Babylon. The Book of Ezra begins word for word where 2 Chronicles ends (2 Chron 36:22-23). In the first Exodus, the Lord wiped out Pharaoh's army; in the second exodus "the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm. . ." The first event seems as spectacular as the other seems boring. In the first Exodus the Lord got the people out of Egypt and eventually into the Promised Land; in the second exodus the Lord brought the people back to the Promised Land slowly, to prepare for the coming of the Promised One.

Some believers want to live in the excitement of Red Sea crossings and Pentecostal outpourings. They want water to stream from the rock and fire to come down from the Mount. But most of Salvation History is a quiet work, below the radar of world news. The fact that the Lord "moved the heart" of the king of Persia to give permission (1:1) and moved the heart of the exiles to return and to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (1:5) is all the testimony needed to know that this is the Lord's work. We live by faith, not sight. We don't pine away because our enemies are not smitten with plagues and we have to work for our living. When the prophet Zechariah comes on the scene shortly he will affirm an important truth: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty.'" And the prophet followed this up with a famous warning, "Who dares despise the day of small things. . ." (Zechariah 4:6,10). Both the affirmation and the warning need to be heard today as much as they needed to be heard in Zechariah's day.

Letters and Lists

Letters and lists do not convey the same excitement as news of massive plagues and a mass exodus of several million people, but they do testify to the new work that the Lord is doing among his people. In the first section of the Book of Ezra, chapters 1-6, there are five letters and two lists, an inventory of temple articles, and a long list of exiles who returned to Jerusalem. Scholars debate the background of these letters and explore the details of these lists, but most Bible readers skip over them as fast as they can. However, it is helpful to understand what they represent, because it deepens our appreciation for the kind of work that the Lord is doing in preparing for the coming of Christ at Bethlehem.

The first and last letters frame this section and give permission for the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem. These letters are imperial proclamations. The first one is from Cyrus (538 B.C.) and the last one is from Darius (520 B.C.). Both edicts facilitate reconstruction by granting legal permission and sanctioning fund raising. Darius' decree goes further and designates the resources of the royal treasury and makes it a capital crime to defy his edict and interfere with the rebuilding of the temple. These Persian imperial edicts are part of the humility of the second exodus and the coming Incarnation. Judging from outward appearances the fate of Israel appears

subject to the will of pagan rulers. Cyrus and Darius think that they are calling the shots. They are unaware that God is moving their hearts to accomplish his will. Under the leadership of Moses and King David, Israel experienced its own national sovereignty, but now any semblance of theocratic rule is gone and Israel is under the rule of foreign powers. This post-exilic subservience by the people of God to higher powers will characterize the period leading up to the Incarnation and beyond. Like Israel in the post-exilic period, the Church was never meant to be the political law of the land (Mt 22:15-22; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). The birth of Jesus is introduced in Luke's Gospel with a reference to Caesar that is reminiscent of the days of Cyrus and Darius: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. . . ." (Lk 2:1). Superpower domination still describes the political state of affairs for the people of God. There should be no pretense of theocratic rule in Israel or in America. Jesus and Paul related to the political powers in much the same way that Ezra and Nehemiah did, and their model remains true for believers today. The post-exilic profile of the people of God resonates with the selection of Israel. The nation that was ordained by God to bless the nations (Gen 18:18) was not chosen because it was great, but because it was weak (Deut 7:7). And even then, the Lord scattered Israel among the nations so that only a few would survive among the nations to which they were driven by the Lord (Deut 4:27). The glory days of Solomon are long passed (1 Kings 3:8). Israel has been made "small among the nations" and "despised among the peoples" (Jer 49:15), yet she remains God's "treasured possession" (Deut 7:6; 14:2) and God's blessing to the nations. This second exodus reminds Israel that she is only one small subservient nation among the nations, but she is the nation through which the Lord seeks to bless all the nations.

The lists of temple articles and family names testify to a new day even as they establish continuity with the past. The temple articles confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar and used sacrilegiously by Belshazzar are inventoried and respectfully returned to the exiles. These objects do not emphasize external religion as much as sacred history. These dishes, bowls and cups, are not idols. There are no statues or icons, in the style of the surrounding religions. These are precious keepsakes rescued from the spoils of captivity, that linked the people to their past. They symbolize the temple rituals and the future hope of restored worship. Their value lies not in their precious metal but in their prior use in the temple of God. These are "the vessels of the Lord" that helped link the second exodus with the first. Like family albums and heirlooms recovered from a flooded home, they gave the exiles hope of a new day coming.

The heading for the list of family names can be found in chapter one: "Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem" (1:5). In chapter two this heading is divided into lists of lay people, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants, and the descendants of those who were unable to trace their family line. The search for family records was important. Those priests who could not prove their priestly lineage were disqualified from serving, until confirmed by "a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim" (Lev 8:8). The listing of leaders, the genealogy of families by name and number, and the integrity of the priests, illustrate the orderly administration behind the second exodus. This is reminiscent of the Book of Numbers and the organization that went into the first Exodus. Once

again, however, the emphasis on both continuity with the past and humility. The numbers are way down. There are far fewer people returning from the exile than escaped from Egypt. Instead of two to three million, there are now only about 50,000 (Ezra 2:64-65; Ex 12:37; Num 1:46; 2:32; 11:21; 26:51).

There is continuity with the past at every turn, but everything is scaled back. Compare the freewill offering of a 1,100 pounds of gold for rebuilding the house of God, to the 110 tons of gold that King David provided out of his personal treasure (Ezra 2:69; 1 Chronicles 29:4). There is no comparison between the two amounts, but the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the temple is just as important as it was the first time. The glory days of Solomon are definitely over, but the Day of the Lord is approaching with ever increasing humility.

Altar and Temple

The seventh month was the most sacred month for the Jews and included the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:23-43). The first priority was worship and that meant building an altar on the temple site to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, “in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God” (3:2). They wasted no time reestablishing their corporate worship even though this identity-forming action was bound to increase the suspicions and opposition of the neighboring peoples. The exiles had not been able to worship together as the people of God for decades. They had suffered this privation for as long as many of them could remember, an imposed moratorium on shared repentance, congregational prayer, and the fellowship of devotion. In captivity, their worship had been subversive, but on their own land and away from oppressive rulers, worship was their first public priority—their first shared activity. They celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with careful attention to the detailed directions in Numbers 29:12-38. They were able to do all this because they built an altar.

What would we miss if we were denied the fellowship of worship for an extended period of time? Would our hearts yearn for the courts of the Lord? Would we say with the psalmist, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One” (Ps 42). Would our souls “yearn for the courts of the Lord”? Would our hearts “cry out for the living God”? (Ps 84:2).

All they needed to do to begin public worship was to build an altar. In the wilderness, Moses and the people of Israel were given specific instructions on how to build an altar. From the days of Abraham, and even Abel before him, the altar was a symbol of sacrifice and surrender. Noah built an altar after the flood, and Job offered burnt offerings on behalf of his family. For centuries the people of God had built altars before they were given specific instructions on how to build them. Apparently Abraham knew how to build an altar without a manual. There wasn’t much to it. There was no art to building an altar. It was just a pile of rocks.

The key factor in authentic God-centered worship was not the shape or size of the altar but the

worshiper's humble dependence upon the mercy of God. Abraham knew that, but in time, the simplicity of true worship was tainted by human nature's predisposition to reverse the meaning of worship and glorify the self. Cultural influences crept in and the children of Abraham were tempted to exalt themselves rather than humble themselves. They could easily turn true worship into idolatry and shift attention away from the mercy of God to religious style and performance. This religious danger necessitated the following command:

"If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it." (Ex 20:25-26).

The unadorned, undecorated pile of rocks in the wilderness became for the people a biblical image. It stood there in earthy simplicity as a symbol of human need and divine acceptance; humility and mercy, repentance and redemption. The Lord insisted that the altar must not be turned into a shrine to human effort and religious pride. To decorate the altar was to desecrate it. To put it high up on a platform was to exalt man and debase God. "Whatever you do," the Lord said in effect, "don't work on it religiously. Keep it simple. It's just a pile of rocks. Worship me in humility and depend upon my mercy."

What this picture means in our personal lives is captured in George Herbert's poem, *The Altar*:

**A broken ALTAR, Lord thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touched the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy power doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.**

George Herbert, *The Country Parson, The Temple*, John Wall, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981),

p.139.

The first thing that catches our eye is the shape of the poem. What Herbert made of his poem is what God intends to make of our lives. It is not we who fashion ourselves into something religious and acceptable to God. All such willful action ends in idolatry. If we insist on controlling our destiny, limiting our involvement with God, and being the Master of our fate we only succeed in exposing our sinfulness. The essence of life is not what we make of ourselves, but what God makes of us. Will you let God make something of you or will you insist on your

own master plan? When you look at this poem you may see either an altar or the letter “I”. For Herbert both symbols were meant to mean the same thing. Is your identity, your “I”, in the shape of an altar? The apostle Paul’s challenge comes to mind, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship” (Rom.12:1).

It is not only the shape of the poem that stands out, but the number of biblical allusions. Of course Exodus 20 was in Herbert’s mind, as he reflected on the difference between an altar and an idol. “No workman’s tool hath touched the same,” recalls the command not to defile an altar with our own designs. We are forever tempted to turn the work and worship of God into a platform for our own self-expression and self-promotion. When that happens the altar becomes an idol. Herbert’s reference to a stony heart makes us think of the hardheartedness of Israel who resisted God’s will in the wilderness. “A Heart alone is such a stone” causes each of us to reflect on the condition of our own heart. We know that a warm and engaging personality can conceal a heart of stone. We know that outward conformity and compliance can cover up an unyielding heart.

“As nothing but Thy power doth cut” recalls the ways in which God has worked in our lives to break our stubborn, self-centered wills and to lead us to praise him. It is this hard heart of mine that now by the grace of God “meets in this frame to praise thy Name.” Drawing on the apostle Peter’s analogy, we are “living stones...being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). When we read, “these stones to praise thee may not cease,” we remember what Jesus said to the hardhearted Pharisees, “I tell you, if they [the disciples] keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Lk.19:40).

It’s not the altar that is most important after all, but the sacrifice. “Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine, And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.” Examine the line carefully to see if it is the expression of your heart. You may not use these metaphors, but do you accept their meaning? Divine initiative is Herbert’s theme. A prayer for mercy seeks the redemption to be found in Christ’s atoning sacrifice. A prayer of consecration asks the Lord to set apart our lives for his purpose. We do not sound like this today, but we should. George Herbert’s poem will undoubtedly impress some as odd or quaint, but I pray that it will express for many earnest followers of Christ the longing of their hearts.

The altar is a good place to begin to understand the discipline of surrender. It reminds me of that old gospel hymn, which begins, “Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me...” This pile of rocks symbolizes our repentance and God’s mercy. There must be no vain attempt to beautify the harsh realities represented by the altar. There are no grounds for religious merit. Repentance is signified by a sacrifice laid on an altar of unadorned stones.

A quest for deeper devotion to Christ may begin in many ways. We could discuss spiritual gifts, what they are and who has which gifts; we might talk about the need for more prayer or better strategies of evangelism; we could emphasize church growth and proven techniques for effective youth work. These all may be good, but the foundational truth that precedes them is repentance and the mercy of God. Are we willing for our hearts of stone to be cut by the only One who has

the power to make us and shape us into His image? Are we willing to have our lives become altars, made of hearts cemented with tears? Herein lies God's plan for our spiritual renewal and growth in Christ.

After the altar was built and they began to worship together, they began to gather resources for the foundation of the temple. The report of how materials were acquired and how the work was supervised by the Levites, recalls Solomon's temple (1 Chron 22:2-4; 23:4, 24, 27; 2 Chron 2:7-15), but, once again, everything is on a much smaller scale. The exiles celebrated the first phase of construction with a worship service. The priests "in their vestments and with trumpets" praised the Lord. The Levites with their cymbals "took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: 'He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.'" (3:11).

The endurance of God's love forever was exactly what was at stake in the restoration of Israel. If God had been into nation-building and Zionism this would have been a depressing start, but God was not into saving a race, but into using a race to save humanity. God's goal was salvation, not external religion. With successive generations of believers, stretching back in time, we need that same reminder. God has not forgotten his people, forsaken his promises, or abandoned the nations. The Lord of History lives but the profile of his work is like nothing the world anticipated. Even the church is often fooled and ends up trying to look like the world to impress the world. The model of post-exilic Israel offers a redemptive paradigm for the history of the Church. If you are a follower of Christ, expect to look pretty insignificant in the eyes of the world.

Sorrow and Joy

The celebration of praise that followed this first phase of temple repair was *blended worship* (3:8-13). Two generations joined in the worship, one generation looked to the past and the other looked to the future. The older generation "wept aloud" and the younger generation "shouted for joy." Those who wept remembered the glory days of Solomon's temple; those who shouted looked forward to a new day. Did the older generation weep for joy or sorrow? What may be ambiguous in the Ezra text is clarified in Haggai's implied perspective, when he asked, "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" (Haggai 2:3).

This worship scene may reflect the tension between sorrow and joy often felt among the people of God. Some Christians are inclined to look back and lament the fading glory of God's work in the past, while others are eager to look ahead at what God has in-store for the future. Cathedral sanctuaries with their gothic architecture, stain-glass windows and mighty organs, are often silent testimonies to bygone days of vital orthodoxy. Today, these places which knew real worship may be characterized by lifeless liturgy, modernist theology, innocuous new age spirituality, and an ethic compatible with the spirit-of-the-times. The impulse of an older generation to look back in sorrow over the decline of true worship, biblical theology, authentic spirituality and real obedience, is not only understandable but commendable.

On the other hand, many Christians are filled with joy because they have left behind a tired spirituality. They don't want to live in the past and dwell on religious externals. They are ready to move forward with genuine worship and biblical commitment. They don't care if they have to meet in a school auditorium or hotel conference room. Their joy in the Lord fills the place.

In the eyes of an older generation the revival of true spirituality seems reduced in quality. The place of worship has lost its aura of transcendence. The worship music is too horizontal and the preaching too relational. To an older generation this new and youthful worship lacks depth and meaning. But in the hearts of the young, who are not looking back to the glory days, this worship is personally dynamic and engaging. Keeping these two generations together in worship is absolutely crucial to the life of the people of God. The easiest thing would be to split up the generations. For either group to insist on their sorrow over the past or their joy over the future is to drive a wedge between the generations. But in Jerusalem in 538-537 BC, three things kept the generations worshipping together. First, both groups gave free expression to their heart felt worship. Blended worship produced a powerful effect. "No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise" (3:13).

Second, worship climaxed for all generations in the Passover celebration (Ezra 6:19-22). The climax of this early post-exilic experience is found in the celebration of the Passover. Sorrow over the past and hope of the future met in the uplifting, shared joy of God's work of redemption. Their faith in God was centered in the Atoning sacrifice—God's work of grace. This same truth unites today's generations of believers. If the Passover, a shadow of things to come, worked for them, "how much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Heb 9:14).

The third reality that may have factored into keeping these generations together was a common enemy. Real worship, no matter how subversive and below the world's radar, cannot remain hidden for very long. Just after the narrator said that the sound of their worship was "heard far away," he began to describe the plans of the "enemies of Judah and Benjamin" to frustrate the rebuilding of Jerusalem. True worshipers from all generations provoke the world's fear and animosity. The presence of God's people often triggers retaliatory measures and strategies of disruption. The surrounding nations did not want the Jews to rebuild, because it would have meant a loss of control and influence in the region.

The body of Christ faces similar opposition today. Wherever we find authentic Christian worship and witness, we will find resistance to the Gospel. Even the initial strategy of opposition faced by the post-exilic biblical community is consistent with today's methods of interference. Under the guise of tolerance and pluralism, the world approaches the people of God, and says, in effect, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him. . . ." (4:2). The world seeks to blur the distinction between the church and the world. The opposition wants the spirit-of-the-times to diminish the influence of the Spirit of God. They are uncomfortable with a world-view that is at odds with the world as they know it. This calls for

discernment and decisive action by the leadership of the biblical community. Thankfully, Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, together with the heads of families, saw through this deceptive “inclusivism” and responded boldly, saying, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us” (4:3).

The Church today has much to learn from God’s “cradle-building” in preparation for the coming of the Incarnate One. The post-exilic community experienced the ever increasing humility inherent in representing the crucified God. By every measure the second exodus was not nearly as exciting or as spectacular as the first exodus, but God was preparing his people for the coming of Christ. God was also providing a model for how the biblical community ought to worship and witness together in a hostile world.

One final thought, the sorrow and joy expressed in the worship service, at the dedication of God’s new work in Jerusalem, is characteristic of our weekly worship. On any given Sunday, there are believers filled with joy and there are believers struggling with pain and loss. There are believers looking back in sadness and others who are looking forward in hope. May our worship be sufficiently Christ-centered to embrace this range of emotions and effective enough to “declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9).