

God Restores His People

God restores us to Himself on His own terms, which will always include repentance and obedience.



GOD'S STORY
THE TRANSFORMATION FOR ADULT LIFEGROUPS

Ezra 3:1-11; 6:19-22

August 30, 2020

(Ezra 3:1-11) ¹ When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. ² Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. ⁴ Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. ⁵ After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the Lord, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the Lord. ⁶ On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid. ⁷ Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia. ⁸ In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak and the rest of the people (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work. They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the building of the house of the Lord. ⁹ Joshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers—all Levites—joined together in supervising those working on the house of God. ¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

(Ezra 6:19-22) ¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month, the exiles celebrated the Passover. ²⁰ The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their relatives the priests and for themselves. ²¹ So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, 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. ²² 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.

COMMUNITY – CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

- Are you more of a fixer-upper type person, or do you prefer new things?
- Have you ever restored something, such as piece of furniture or a piece of clothing? Describe the commitment that was required to bring it back to life.

Few things are more rewarding, and more challenging, than restoring something to its original condition. It's an apt metaphor for what God does with us when we repent of our sin and return to the Lord with worship and obedience. A significant part of the book of Ezra tells the story of God working to restoring His people to Himself. The story reveals the role worship plays as God restores us to Himself.

CONTENT – EXPLORING GOD'S STORY

Have a volunteer read Ezra 3:1-7

- What makes community and unity so important when tackling group projects? How does worshipping God unify people?
- What conclusions can we make about the Jews' repentance and worship by observing their obedience of Mosaic law? How can obedience motivate a believer to give out of pure gratitude to God?

- How do the actions taken in this passage speak into how we approach worship today?

The people rebuilt the altar for worship and pursued a right relationship with God through worship. Restoration with God cannot exclude worship. Indeed, it is the essence of what it means to be restored to Him. Small wonder, then, that the Jews turned to building the temple once an altar was complete.

Have a volunteer read Ezra 3:10-11

- Who got all the credit when the foundation of the temple was complete? What lessons can we learn from that for our worship today?
- What things do you consider to be the foundations of worship in our church? Why?

No doubt humbled through the experiences related to their earlier exile, and certainly grateful that God orchestrated their return to Jerusalem, the people of Israel made the worship of God their chief priority. Foundational for their worship was an altar to offer their sacrifices and a temple in which they could gather. With the foundation laid, the people immediately worshiped God in a joyous and celebratory manner, indicative of their own joy in once again being able to soon worship God according to His Word.

Have a volunteer read Ezra 6:19-22

Upon the restoration of the temple, the exiles observed the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These rites marked the renewal of religious life for the Jews, who could once again worship in obedience to God's Word. Passover was (and is) one of the most important rituals of Jewish life. It recalled God's miraculous deliverance of His people from Egypt. Passover especially evoked the memory of the angel of the Lord's "passing over" each Israelite dwelling marked by the blood of a sacrificial lamb, sparing that family from the death of the firstborn son.

- What things can we do to spiritually prepare ourselves to worship the one, true God?
- How does the joy expressed in these restored festivals foreshadow the joy we have through faith in Christ?
- What are some ways you can express joy and gratitude to God for providing salvation in Jesus Christ?

The restored exiles had many reasons for being joyful. Primarily, the Lord had made them joyful because the Persian king's attitude had changed. The ruler of Persia was in fact the king of both the defeated Assyrian Empire and the Babylonian Empire. Ezra 6:1-15 tells how the Persian king researched the archives and discovered that the Jews had received the permission and support of King Cyrus to rebuild their temple. The king then rescinded a ban that had been placed on the Jews' work, and the temple was finally completed in 515 B.C.

We too should rejoice in a God who not only can direct the decrees of human kings but also issued a divine decree of mercy and restoration based on the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. We can acknowledge God's grace and goodness by worshiping Him with joyous, repentant, and grateful hearts.

COMMISSION – ENGAGING IN GOD'S STORY

- What has God done through Christ to restore you to Himself? Do you believe this?
- Is your personal worship of God a joyful experience for you? What steps can you take to better experience and express your joy in Christ in your personal worship?

- Are our corporate worship experiences joy-filled? What needs to take place to increase the joy expressed in our worship?

PRAYER: Close in prayer, asking God to prepare your hearts for worship and to remove any obstacles that keep you from fully worshipping Him as individuals and when you enter into corporate worship each week.

CONTINUE TO JOURNEY THROUGH GOD'S STORY

Bible Reading Plan:

DAY 1 – Zechariah 1:1-6, 2, 12
 DAY 2 – Ezra 7-8
 DAY 3 – Ezra 9-10
 DAY 4 – Esther 1-2
 DAY 5 – Esther 3-4

KEY VERSE: Esther 4:14

H.E.A.R. Method:

Highlight a verse or two.
 Explain what the text means.
 Apply the verse to your life.
 Respond to God.

Our team has put together Bible study resources to encourage and inspire you as you engage in God's Story. Visit chetscreek.com/gods-story for videos, study guides, and more.

OUR VISION

To be a church
 for the unchurched,
 here and around the world.

ADULT LIFEGROUPS

Gospel-centered communities that aim to KNOW
 GOD together and BE CHANGED by Him in a
 way that will CHANGE THE WORLD.

Ezra 3:1-7, 10-11

3:1 The designation seventh month was important in that the month featured special observances God had established for repentance and remembrance. The first day of the month came to be recognized as something of a “New Year’s Day” (modern Rosh Hashanah). The sacred assembly on this day was later associated with the Feast of Trumpets; it was a preparation for the tenth day with its solemn observance of the Day of Atonement (modern Yom Kippur). Then on the fifteenth day the Festival of Booths—also known as the Feast of Tabernacles—began and continued for seven days (see Lev. 23:33-44). On the first day and then again on the final day, the people gathered in solemn assembly (see Lev. 23:35,36). The people recognized the need to repent of the sinfulness that had led to their exile.

3:2-3 Rebuilding the altar became the priority for reestablishing their worship. The law called for sacrifices and offerings, and these required an altar. Two men in particular led the effort to restore the altar: Jeshua (or Joshua) and Zerubbabel. Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, most likely is the same person mentioned in Haggai 1:1,12 as “Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.” Zerubbabel is described as the “governor of Judah” in Haggai 1:1. These two men represented the religious and civil arms of the Jewish community; they joined together to lead an important task in the restoration of God’s covenant people.

The people desired to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. The Day of Atonement was approaching. The people of God needed to demonstrate their repentance through sacrificial worship. The worship emphasized God’s acceptance of a blood sacrifice (of an animal) to cover the people’s sin. This blood sacrifice foreshadowed the new covenant in which Jesus, through His sacrificial death on the cross, provided not just a “covering” of sins but instead a complete atonement for sins (see Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:12,15,24-26).

A bigger concern for the construction team was opposition to the project from other groups. During the years the exiles lived in Babylon and Persia, other ethnic groups had established their presence in and influence over the region around Jerusalem. These people were bound to see the Jews’ rebuilding efforts as a threat to their power. Although the Jews feared these groups, they set up the altar and began to offer the morning and evening sacrifices prescribed in God’s Word. God’s people should never be surprised when their devotion to the Lord evokes opposition from the Devil’s crowd. Courageous believers obey God regardless of fear or opposition.

3:4-5 During the festival, the people constructed simple, temporary shelters in which they lived for the week. The experience was designed to commemorate the Lord’s provision and protection during the Israelites’ 40 years of living in the wilderness on their way to the promised land. Furthermore, it was an opportunity for the returning exiles to gratefully affirm the Lord’s providential care in their time. Burnt offerings were a sign of complete devotion to the Lord. Nothing of the sacrifices was held back for personal use; they were completely consumed by the fire on the altar, and the resulting smoke rose to the heavens as prayers of devotion. Verse 5 reveals that the Jews continued their commitment to keep God’s law concerning sacrifices, offerings, and sacred gatherings. They did not cease obeying God’s Word just because the initial celebration had passed. Their consistency in observing all the Lord’s appointed holy occasions demonstrate their sincere desire to be faithful. The freewill offering, as the name indicates, was an “over-and-above” offering that was given as an act of sheer gratitude for God’s grace in providing for His people.

3:6-7. God’s providence can be seen clearly in the Persian ruler’s authorization for the exiles to return to their homeland. The returning Jews were sure to encounter hostile resistance from the groups who lived in the environs of Jerusalem. But King Cyrus not only had authorized the Jews’ return but also had decreed that the non-Jewish residents of the region were to support and assist the returning exiles.

When God calls His people to accomplish some great task, He always provides what they need to succeed. Consequently, the Jews were able to hire stonecutters and artisans to help with the rebuilding effort. Wood was in scarce supply, so they purchased timber from the renowned cedar forests in Lebanon. They bartered with the residents of Sidon and Tyre, offering food, drink, and oil in exchange for cedar timber. Huge logs were floated on the sea to Joppa and then transported inland to Jerusalem to be used in the temple construction.

3:10-11 As the exiles worked on the temple, they recognized God's provision and protection. When the builders completed the foundation of the Lord's temple, the people praised the Lord. Following practices that were established in preparation for the first temple—envisioned by King David but built by his son, Solomon—the priests and Levites organized a celebration of praise.

The worship leaders led the people in praise and thanksgiving as they sang to the Lord. Their litany of praise reached back into their spiritual archives. In earlier circumstances, their ancestors had sung the same chorus to the Lord (see Ps. 118:1,29)

Joy filled all the people as they joined in with a great shout of praise. They glorified the Lord. They did not have to wait until the building was completed. As the foundation of the Lord's house was laid, they could envision the glory of a new temple and a new future. Some of the older priests and Levites remembered the former temple and wept aloud with overwhelming emotion (see Ezra 3:12).

Ezra 6:19-22

6:19 Upon the restoration of the temple, the exiles observed the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These rites marked the renewal of religious life for the Jews, who could once again worship in obedience to God's Word. Passover was (and is) one of the most important rituals of Jewish life. It recalled God's miraculous deliverance of His people from Egypt. Passover especially evoked the memory of the angel of the Lord's "passing over" each Israelite dwelling marked by the blood of a sacrificial lamb, sparing that family from the death of the firstborn son (see Ex. 12:13). As the restored exiles gathered on the fourteenth day of Nisan, the first month on the Jewish calendar, God's act of deliverance was not only ancient history but part of their current experience.

6:20-21 Procedures for offering sacrifices guided each aspect of the Passover. Because the Lord God is holy, the priests and Levites had to be purified. Whoever offered a sacrifice had to be ceremonially clean. Having prepared themselves, the priests were able to offer the Passover lamb. Everyone needs God's mercy. Notice that the lamb was slain for all the people, including the priests and Levites. The inclusive nature of sin ("all have sinned") requires an inclusive sacrifice. Jesus Christ came into the world as the precious Lamb of God slain for our sins.

God's Word unites people in worshiping Him. The Israelites who came back from exile were not the only ones to partake of the sacrifice. Other Jews who had remained in the land during the intervening years joined the worship. After the destruction of the temple and the deportation of many of their spiritual and political leaders, some Jews who were left in the land intermarried with pagan families and adopted pagan ways. Before they could worship God, they had to separate themselves from such sins.

True worship has at its center the Lord God of Israel. Years before, Joshua had given the Israelites an ultimatum to follow the gods of Egypt, or the idols of Canaan, or join him in worshiping the one, true God (see Josh. 24:15). As true worship became reinstated in the national character, the Jews had to reject false gods and unclean, sinful practices.

6:22 Passover was associated with the Festival of Unleavened Bread, a feast that commemorated the Israelites' readiness to obey and follow the Lord. This celebration lasted seven days and was characterized by great joy. The restored exiles had many reasons for being joyful. Primarily, the Lord had made them joyful because the Persian king's attitude had changed. The ruler of Persia was in fact the king of both the defeated Assyrian Empire and the Babylonian Empire. Ezra 6:1-15 tells how the Persian king researched the archives and discovered that the Jews had received the permission and support of King Cyrus to rebuild their temple. The king then rescinded a ban that had been placed on the Jews' work, and the temple was finally completed in 515 B.C.