

### The Altar is Built and the Temple Foundation is Laid

#### Ezra 3

**Ezra 3:1-9** - *“And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and 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.*

*Though fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on its base and they offered burnt offerings to the Lord, both the morning and evening burnt offerings. They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required. And afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD. 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 had not been laid.*

*Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon by the sea to Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus, king of Persia. Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad, with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.”*

#### Background Notes

After the Persian Empire conquered Babylon, the Persian emperor, Cyrus, issued an edict that allowed the Jews who were held captive in Babylon to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1). King Cyrus even encouraged the returning Jewish captives to rebuild their Temple that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies had destroyed in 586BC. About 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem, led by Zerubbabel, in 538BC (Ezra 2).

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the first thing they did was to rebuild the altar of the Lord (v2). Jeshua and the priests and Zerubbabel and his brethren *“arose and 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.”* Jeshua was the high priest, and Zerubbabel was the political leader. First things first! They built the altar of sacrifice so that they could worship and obey the Lord. Let me ask you - Are “first things first” in your life?

Then, in obedience to the Law, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles - a great celebration! They began to offer all the sacrifices and all the feasts according to the Law of God (v4-5). Then, in the second year of their return, they began to rebuild the Temple of the Lord (v8).

Jeremiah 25:11-12 prophesied that the Jews would be held captive in Babylon for 70 years. How do we calculate the 70 years of captivity? One way is to start with 605BC, when the kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians, and the first wave of Jewish captives was taken to Babylon (including Daniel and others). The re-building of the destroyed Temple began in 535BC. So one way to calculate the 70 years is from 605BC, when the first captives were taken, down to 535BC, when Temple foundation was laid - 70 years. Another way to calculate the 70 years is from 586BC, when the Temple was destroyed, down to 516BC when the rebuilt Temple was finally completed – that's also 70 years.

There's more we could give for background, and we'll pick up more as we go, but what is the Bible teaching us here? By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God chose to include this book in Scripture, so He has certainly selected lessons for us to learn.

## Doctrinal Points

### **The work of the Lord proceeds with organization.**

Some Christians have the idea that the work of the Lord just happens automatically. They say: "Let go, and let God." Right? No! We certainly don't find that approach in the Bible. Just look at the organization that's recorded in this chapter!

- **The people were organized in their priorities.** The first thing they did when they got back to Jerusalem was to rebuild the altar of the Lord. Why? Because worship of the Lord was their top priority. And worship led to obedience. They obeyed the Lord in all the offerings and feasts that were given in the Law.

Are we organized as to our priorities? Does our worship of the Lord and our obedience to the Lord have the Number One place in our lives? What about this past week? Were worship and obedience your priorities this past week?

- **The people were organized in their preparations.** *"They also gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia"(v7).*

The people didn't just start in to rebuild the Temple without some planning and preparation. No! They bought and shipped materials all the way from Lebanon - no small project in itself. They arranged for cedar trees to be cut down, sawn into logs, brought down from the mountains to the Mediterranean Sea, floated to Joppa, and then brought up to Jerusalem! That took a lot of planning and preparation! They appointed the Levites to oversee the work (v8). These folks were organized!

The work of the Lord proceeds with organization. Organization is biblical. The work of the Lord doesn't just happen automatically. There's got to be some organization. Have you ever been to a church or camp "work day" that was not organized ahead of time? Believe me, it's chaos! The volunteers mean well, but they end up tripping all over one another - and the work of Lord is actually hindered.

It's great to hear of organization in planning for a VBS or youth group, for example. That's wonderful! Programs like VBS don't just "happen automatically"! The work of the Lord proceeds with organization.

- **The people were unified in their purpose.** *"The people assembled as one in Jerusalem" (v1).* They were unified. Psalm 133:1 says, *"Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity."* Unity and organization - it doesn't get any better than that, does it? The work of the Lord proceeds with organization.

## 2. The work of the Lord proceeds with emotion.

**Ezra 3:10-13:** *"When the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel. They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, "For He is good, for His mercy 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.*

*Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy. The people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off."*

The work of the Lord proceeded and the foundation was laid for the new Temple. It was a time of great emotion. The priests and Levites played instruments and sang songs of praise and thanksgiving. And the music was **loud!** Let's face it: trumpets and cymbals are not made for playing soft music! **That music was loud!** Many of the people shouted for joy, and whooped it up in celebration!

However, some of the older folks wept (v12). Why? Some of them had seen and remembered the glory and grandeur of Solomon's Temple - the beautiful Temple that was destroyed, and the Temple treasures stolen, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. These older people wept because the rebuilt Temple was so much smaller and less glorious than Solomon's Temple. However, because it was the work of the Lord, in this smaller Temple they could rejoice.

The work of the Lord proceeds with emotion - sometimes with weeping, sometimes with celebration, sometimes with mingled joy and sorrow. A few years ago I was present at a baptism at a Christian camp. Some of the teens who were

being baptized had had very dramatic conversions, and as they were baptized some of their Christian friends cheered, while other friends wept with joy. It was a time of great and glorious emotion!

God has created us as emotional people. It's not wrong to shout for joy, and it's not wrong to weep - at the appropriate times. The work of the Lord proceeds with emotion.

## Practical Application

### Go to the Lord when you're afraid!

The foreign neighbors in the surrounding countries weren't happy that the Jews had returned to Jerusalem. They did **not** want the returning Jews to prosper, and they started to threaten them (more about that in Ezra 4.) The threats from powerful enemies caused the people of Judah to be afraid. *"Fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries" (v3).*

What did the Jews do? In spite of their fear, they built up the altar of the Lord. They offered sacrifices to Him. They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (v3-4). They turned to the Lord in **worship** and **obedience!** And when we're threatened or afraid, that's what we should do as well. *"I will trust and not be afraid" (Isaiah 12:2).*

Do you instinctively turn to the Lord when you're frightened - because of physical danger, or sickness, or lack of financial security, or the unknown? When we're afraid, we should turn to the Lord. We can talk to the Lord when we're uncertain or afraid- and He will provide peace of heart and mind (Philippians 4:6-7).

Fear comes in all shapes and sizes, doesn't it? Last week I had an MRI because of a back injury. During the MRI, I was encased in a noisy horizontal tube, head first, for about 20 minutes. Fortunately I'm not claustrophobic, but some people are, and an MRI is a very scary experience for them. It's not wrong to pray about your fear of an MRI, or any other medical procedure. It really isn't!

God loves to hear our prayers when we're afraid, no matter whether the fears are "big" or "small." Are you afraid right now? About something big? Or even about something quite small? Go to the Lord when you're afraid!