

## Unit III: Special Offerings and the Sanctuary

# Mourning the Past or Celebrating the Future?

DEVOTIONAL READING: Colossians 3:12-17

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezra 3:1-13

PRINT PASSAGE: Ezra 3:1-6, 10-13

## KEY VERSE

All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. (Ezra 3:11b, KJV)

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All the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. (Ezra 3:11b, NIV)

## LESSON AIMS

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- Trace the history of Israel's exile and return to their homeland.
- Be honest about what is lost, even when celebrating the gift of something new.
- Adapt a worship celebration in which all generations in your community celebrate God together.

## \*KEY TERMS

**Altar (verse 2)**—Hebrew: *mizbêach* (miz-bay'-akh): a structure on which offerings are made to a deity. In the developed temple ritual, the same word is used for both the altar of *holoh* (that which goes up) and the altar of incense. Thus, an altar is a place where sacrifice is offered, even if it is not an event involving slaughter.

**Feast of Tabernacles (verse 4)**—Hebrew: *chag* (khag) and *Sukkot*, *sukkôt*, or *sukkos* (sook-kaw'): also known as the Feast of Booths and "Festival of Tabernacles" (NIV); it is a biblical holy day celebrated on the fifteenth day of the month of Tishrei (late September to late October). It is one of the three biblically mandated festivals for which Jews were commanded to journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a weeklong fall festival in the Bible. It commemorated the forty-year journey of the Israelites in the wilderness and the completion of the harvest or agricultural year.

**Ordinance (verse 10)**—Hebrew: *chuqqah* (khook-kaw'): something prescribed, an enactment, statute; "prescribed" (NIV).

\*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)



## The Biblical Context

The book of Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ended, fulfilling God's promise to allow Israel to return to their promised homeland after seventy years of exile in Babylon. Although the author is not identified, tradition typically attributes the writing to Ezra, a priest, scribe, and influential leader who was dedicated to serving God. Thematically, Ezra emphasizes the power and trustworthiness of God's Word as validated by the book's first verse, where the author references the fulfillment of God's promise to return exiled Israel to the Promised Land (see Ezra 1:1). Structurally, the book of Ezra recounts two returns of the Jews from Babylon. Zerubbabel, appointed leader and governor of those choosing to return to Judah, led the first group to rebuild the Temple (see chapters 1–6). A second group was led by Ezra fifty-eight years later. Where Zerubbabel's task was rebuilding the nation's worship center, Ezra's was rebuilding the nation spiritually and morally (see chapters 7–10). Historically, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible, and, along with Esther, provide a glimpse into Israel's post-exilic life.

## INTRODUCTION

Many Christians worship in small, rural congregations. These simple, often one- or two-room churches are often steeped in rich traditions handed down through generations. Despite their size, there has existed a strong sense of community and care for each other and the modest places of worship. In contrast to large mega-churches with thousands of members, these smaller congregations, typically comprised of hardworking individuals with varied education levels—typically sacrificing their time, skills, and limited resources—often show a deep commitment to the faith community's well-being. Over time, many such churches have witnessed the expansion of their congregations, leading to larger, more elaborate church buildings and ministry priorities. And, with growth and the addition of new members, sometimes a gap emerges between generations. Older members, or “seasoned saints,” often yearn for the way things used to be, and sometimes feel sidelined by the younger crowd and newer leadership styles.

This reality is about more than nostalgia or resistance to change. Understanding the emotional and cultural ties that bind people to their past is essential. The issue is not a matter of who or which way is right or wrong, but about recognizing and respecting the diverse reasons for why people hold on to their traditions.

This dynamic isn't unique to our time or faith. The Bible recounts how returning Jewish exiles felt mixed emotions as they rebuilt Jerusalem's altar

and laid the Temple's foundation. While the younger generation celebrated the progress, those who remembered Solomon's Temple felt an emotional loss. The story serves as a reminder that embracing the future while honoring the past remains a delicate balance as faith communities grow and deal with change.

## ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

### Rebuilding the Altar (*Ezra 3:1-6*)

#### KJV

**AND WHEN** the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.

2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening.

4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required;

5 And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD.

6 From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

## NIV

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.

Ezra 3 provides details of the repatriated exiles' initial efforts to restore worship in Jerusalem. Their assembling "together as one" to begin this task signifies a spirit of unity in purpose and focus among them (**verse 1**). The reference to the time of year is also significant. The seventh month was when God prescribed the Feast of Tabernacles (and the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement), when they were to live in booths to celebrate God's protection and care for them during their wilderness wanderings. Their political and religious leadership, Jeshua the priest and his associates, and Zerubbabel, Judah's governor, led the effort to build the altar where sacrifices could be made (**verse 2**). These sacrifices were necessary to establish a right relationship with God before any work on the Temple began, despite the threat of opposition from neighboring people (**verse 3**). After setting the altar in place and reinstituting the prescribed offerings, the people observed the Feast of Tabernacles. They resumed the entire sacrificial system specified by the Law (**verses 4-5**). This action signified their eagerness to reinstate worship to express their devotion to God and their complete reliance on Him for



protection and provision. **Verse 6** further validates their resolve to prioritize worship above all else. Applicable spiritual principles for the faith community are embedded in these verses. These principles include the importance of unity of purpose and focus within congregations and their spiritual leadership, the necessity to “get right” with God before attempting to worship Him or engage in ministry, and prioritizing biblical worship, according to God’s Word.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What things promote unity in the faith community? Why is unity important? What practical steps help to foster its development and maintenance?

## Laying the Temple’s Foundation (*Ezra 3:10-13*)

### KJV

**10** And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel.

**11** And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever 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.

**12** But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:

**13** So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

### NIV

**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.

**12** But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.

**13** No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

After restoring the altar, resuming the traditional worship observed before the exile, and preparing physically to rebuild the Temple (see Ezra 3:4-9), the Temple’s foundation was laid in the second month of the following year (**verse 10**). An elaborate worship celebration marked this event. Jeshua

and Zerubbabel, their spiritual and political leaders, respectively, led the project's preparation, which was characterized by a continuous spirit of communal unity and musical praise by the priests and Levites. The worship and praise were reminiscent of David's prescribed tradition. Thus, in keeping with this established pattern of God-centered worship, the congregation's song acknowledged God's goodness and unfailing love for the nation in allowing the laying of the Temple foundation (**verse 11**). Yet, this significant event produced mixed emotions among the people. The older priests, Levites, and elders who remembered Solomon's Temple before it was destroyed loudly wept when they saw the new Temple's foundation, while the younger generation shouted joyfully (**verse 12**). The noise and reason for their collective but differing emotional responses were indistinguishable and could be heard far beyond their location (**verse 13**).

At this point, the spirit of unity within the congregation was disrupted by these differing intergenerational perspectives regarding the new Temple's foundation. The "seasoned saints" focus was on the past, perhaps fueled by a longing for the "good old days"—while the younger generation focused on the hope for a brighter future that this event represented. Unfortunately, but not hopelessly, similar differing generational perspectives exist within the faith community, especially regarding worship formats and music. Thus, during this transitional era of competing perspectives about what is or isn't worship and which music genre is best or preferred, it is critical that spiritual leaders intentionally promote intergenerational unity and collaboration within their respective congregations if they want them to remain vibrant and effective in fulfilling the church's mission. Alexander MacLaren has commented on this passage as a plausible solution: "It is possible to unite the shout of joy and weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies and thought" (MacLaren, A. [1974]. *Expositions of the Holy Scriptures* [vol. 1, 77]. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House).

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How can your congregation maintain a sense of community among generations with differing perspectives about the past and the future?

## A CLOSING THOUGHT

The rebuilding of the altar and the laying of the foundation for a new temple were momentous occasions for the Jewish exiles who returned to their homeland from Babylon. Commendably, they put first things first by ensuring that they were right with God before rebuilding the Temple. The priests' actions (as prescribed in the Mosaic Law) provide an example of how to approach God in worship. However, laying the foundation caused conflicting intergenerational responses, shattering the previous atmosphere of unity among them. This scenario highlights the importance of prioritizing balancing respect for older saints' biblically based perspectives about the past and younger generations' embracing modern progressive movements and exploring ways to blend them and produce an atmosphere of mutual respect, cooperation, and ministry productivity.

## YOUR LIFE

The exiles who returned to their homeland faced challenges that involved change—a change that required some to let go of the past, and challenged others to embrace an uncertain future. Regardless of our generation, we all have faced or will face this reality, especially within the faith community and its evolving dynamics. Therefore, consider what spiritual disciplines and attitudes you would suggest to help you and others when the need arises to let go of but respect the past and celebrate the future.

## YOUR WORLD!

From the outset of the Temple construction, the people were all on one accord because they did first things first—ensuring their hearts were spiritually acceptable to God. Perhaps a critical prerequisite to balancing differing generational perspectives about the past and modern innovations within the faith community is prioritizing God-centered worship that overshadows insignificant differences and maintains an upward focus instead of a backward look.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, You are the God of change and continuity. Therefore, help us balance differing intergenerational perspectives about the past and the future by learning from one another, so that we cherish the past as we use it to move forward into the future that You have planned for Your church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## CONCLUSION

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's lesson explores the significance of renewing a covenant commitment to God (Nehemiah 10:28-39).

### Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, May 19	"A New Covenant"	(Jeremiah 31:27-34)
TUESDAY, May 20	"Saved by Grace"	(Ephesians 2:1-10)
WEDNESDAY, May 21	"Communion Marks the New Covenant"	(Luke 22:7-20)
THURSDAY, May 22	"Hear the Word of the Lord"	(Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-12)
FRIDAY, May 23	"Remember God's Salvation"	(Nehemiah 9:2-3, 6-17, 32)
SATURDAY, May 24	"A Better Covenant"	(Hebrews 8)
SUNDAY, May 25	"Revitalized Worship"	(Nehemiah 10:28-39)