

Worship When Weak!

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part IV

Ezra 3

Introduction

I often begin my sermons by reading from the many notes I receive by way of e-mail or “snail mail”. Most of the notes I get are encouraging and uplifting, but I got a couple this week that were the opposite!

I received a sympathy card from a couple in our church. It reads, “To pay our respects at this sad time.” Inside is this note, “We want to send you our condolences on the passing away of Krispy Kreme on Walnut Street.”

You may not have heard that the Krispy Kreme there closed recently. Then, they closed by saying, “May the good Lord get you through this difficult time.”

Well, card or no card, I do not think they really care!

Then, to top it off, some guy in our church had the nerve to send me this story – I guess he thought it was funny.

A minister died and was waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him was a scruffy looking guy – beat up leather jacket, worn out jeans. Peter finally comes and says to the guy, “Who are you, so that I may know your position in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The guy says, “I’m Joe Cohen, taxi driver from New York City.”

Peter looks on his list and then, smiles and says, “Oh, you’re Joe. Well, here, take this silk robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The taxi driver struts into heaven with his fancy robe and solid gold staff. Now it is the minister’s turn. Peter asks, “And who might you be?”

He says, “I am Joseph Snow, pastor for more than forty years.”

Peter looks at his list and says, “Oh, so you’re Pastor Snow. Well, take this cotton robe and wooden staff and go on in.”

The minister says, “Now just a minute, Peter, that man ahead of me was a taxi driver, and he got a silk

robe and golden staff. I get a cotton robe and a lousy wooden stick. I want an explanation!”

Peter said, “It’s simple – while he drove, people prayed; while you preached, people slept!”

I, like you, did not think it was that funny.

It is true, there are times when I am preaching that people are sleeping. I do not mind, just don’t snore!

Fellowship: The oneness of heart that comes when two friends are on the same side of . . .

Let me take you to a worship service where nearly 50,000 people attended. And, I can guarantee that no one was sleeping. It took place in Ezra, chapter 3. Notice verse 1,

Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

This verse sets the stage for the entire chapter when it says,

. . . the people gathered together as one man

. . .

Call it unity; call it camaraderie; call it fellowship – I could not help but read chapter 3 and be struck with the theme of fellowship. They arrived in Jerusalem as one. One in heart, one in spirit, one in this incredible risk of faith.

In verse 1, they stand as one man

In verse 9, the workers stand together to oversee the workmen.

In verse 11, the people shout and sing together.

There is a strong sense of unity and fellowship. I read a definition of fellowship, several months ago, that came back to me as I studied this moment in Ezra, chapter 3.

Fellowship is the oneness of heart that comes when two friends are on the same side of a struggle.

This is like two couples who mortgage their homes and pool their resources to start a little

business. It is like a man who takes his life savings to begin manufacturing his invention. It is “do or die”.

Here, all the Israelites stand at the entrance to a broken down city – a city that is now overgrown with fifty years of weeds and brush, where no stone sits upon another, with totally scattered remains of a once great temple. These people are risking everything. There is a special fellowship shared by those involved in the same struggle.

There are three areas where the fellowship of the Israelite is observed in chapter 3. Let us divide our study along those lines.

Fellowship in Giving – even though there was a difference in . . .

1. First, there was the fellowship of giving.

If you back up to chapter 2, verses 68 to 69, you see the first signs of generosity.

And some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work . . .

The key phrase is, “according to their ability”! They did not all give the same amounts. There was fellowship in giving, even though there was a difference in the amounts they gave.

In verse 5, of chapter 3, and also implied in verse 7, as the people paid the masons and carpenters, here they are making the payments to the subcontractors – they are all involved, but they all do not contribute the same amounts.

We have seen the same thing occurring in our own building program. Our sound bite, that we refer to on many occasions, is the phrase, “Not equal giving, but equal sacrifice.”

To the child, ten dollars may be a tremendous sacrifice.

To the college student, one hundred dollars may be a challenging sacrifice.

To the executive, or the business owner, one hundred thousand dollars may be that which represents an equally challenging sacrifice.

Building a temple, in Ezra, chapter 3, was not any easier than building a worship center in our town. It still takes the same basic thing – fellowship – the

oneness of spirit that comes when friends are on the same side of the struggle.

Is it any wonder then, that the Enemy of the church seeks, more than anything else, to divide the family. He seeks to turn unity of passion and purpose into a forced companionship that just shows up at the same address every Sunday morning.

John Haggai illustrated that difference in this way,

Two chickens tied at the legs and thrown over a clothesline may be united, but they do not have unity.

Fellowship in Building – even though there was a difference in . . .

2. Secondly, there was fellowship in the building process.

There was fellowship in the building process, even though there was a difference in their individual functions. Notice chapter 3, verse 2,

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.

Skip to verse 5,

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.

Talk about simplicity, this is a far cry from Solomon’s temple wherein they had offered their sacrifices seventy years earlier. In the past, they had a magnificent temple. Here it is a simple altar, surrounded by rubble.

Wonderful Truths About God

I must stop here long enough to say, this verse makes me restructure my thinking about God. Here are two wonderful truths about God and the worship of God.

God does not refuse worship even when . . .

1. Number one – God never refuses worship, even when it is basic and, dare I say, even simplistic.

In other words, God is not impressed by all the trappings.

I am glad of that, aren't you? You can worship Him at the kitchen sink or during the morning drive to work.

We, as a congregation, for the first twelve years, worshipped in everything but a traditional sanctuary.

For six years, we were in the band room of a junior high school. We used to come in on Saturday night to clean it. The janitors knew we would, so they would not clean at all on Friday. We would get trash cans full of stuff. Then, on Monday, if it was not clean, we would get in trouble. But, we had wonderful worship.

For the next six years, we were in our fellowship hall. That is why there was no choir loft or baptistery. A kitchen was planned to go in behind where I stood and the hall would be used for meals and banquets. Then, we outgrew the master plan for the seven acre site and knew we needed to move. What wonderful worship we enjoyed there.

Now we are planning to move to our new location and into our new place of worship – and it is a gymnasium, or what I call a “glorified gymnasium”. In other words, we will dress it up so that you do not think you are surrounded by basketball goals – they will be hidden in the ceiling. Our traditional sanctuary will not be built until the entire site enters its final building stage. I anticipate being around fifty years old!

That is when I need to be reminded of this truth in Ezra, chapter 3, because you and I have not missed anything essential when it comes to worshipping God as a church family.

Worship does not depend on the environment – on stained glass and padded pews – worship depends on the heart. The convicting truth to me is that today, while I preach in this beautiful building, there are Chinese believers holding worship services in the woods; there are Arab believers worshipping God in their cells; there are Sudanese believers, who have been sold as slaves, singing quietly to God from inside their slave quarters. Some of the sweetest, most sacred moments of worship take place in the most basic environments.

I want you to notice something else – look at verse 3.

So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands . . .

If I were writing the book of Ezra, I would have left that part out. It does not make the people look good. It does not sound spiritual. Whoever was proofing Ezra, probably said, “Ezra, do you really want everybody to know that one of our primary motivations for building this altar was fear?”

“Yes, leave it in.”

Which, by the way, reveals another wonderful truth about God.

God does not reject your worship, even when . . .

2. Number two – God does not reject your worship, even when your faith is weak.

God does not say to His child, “Listen, I’ll not listen to your prayer until you get it together. As long as I see your knees knocking, I’ll not answer your prayer.”

God accepts their offerings and praise and, at the same time, He knows they are like scared children, running to Him for protection.

By the way, simply by turning this truth around, you discover an interesting challenge for the believer. Even when they were weak with fear, they worshipped God.

What is it that has you rattled these days? What is being shaken loose from your perfectly nailed down life? It is in those rough waters where your prayers are refined and reduced down to the purest form of worship.

This is like the stormy water in Matthew, chapter 14, when Jesus walked to the disciples who were out in the boat. Peter hollered out, “Lord, bid me to come to you.”

That is the biblical way of saying, “Lord, that looks like fun. May I do it too?”

The Lord answered, “Come on.”

So, Peter climbed over the side of the boat and started to walk to the Lord on top of the water. He thought to himself, I am guessing, “Christianity is really great! Man, this is the life!”

Then, verse 30, says,

But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!”

Now that is reducing the prayer down to bare essentials! He did not say, “Lord, Thou who created all things in only six days; You who art my refuge and strength in time of trouble; I praise Thee today for the rolling waters of the sea . . .”

No! He said, “Lord, I’m gonna die!”

More accurately, it could be translated, “But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and said, “Lord, save me!”

Jesus reached down and grabbed Peter’s hand. As He pulled him up, He said, “Peter, your faith is small. Did you forget I could take care of you, even out here in the storm?”

They returned to the boat and got in and verse 33 says,

And those who were in the boat worshipped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”

Some of the greatest discoveries about our Lord are learned in the storms of life – when we are terrified – when we learn what it really means to pray.

The Israelites are terrified of the enemies around them. They do not have a wall around their city. Did you notice the significance of the fact that they did not begin building the wall first? They built the altar first. You do not pursue security – you pursue God and find, in Him, security.

Building this altar is another way of saying Matthew, chapter 6, verse 33.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things [that you truly need] shall be added to you.

You do not seek protection from the storm, you seek after God and discover He is your shelter, even if the storm never goes away. The best time to worship God is when you are weak. Some of the purest adoration offered to God is adoration offered through lips that tremble and eyes that are filled with tears.

The Israelites were in the center of God’s will – completely terrified.

David wrote, in Psalm, chapter 56, verse 3,

When I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee.

The truth is, trust is often deepest when we are afraid.

Worship when you are weak. God will never reject that kind of worshipper and that quality of worship.

Fellowship in Praising – even though there was a difference in . . .

3. There is a third moment of fellowship within the Israelite camp, it is the fellowship they experienced as they praised God.

Notice Ezra, chapter 3, verse 8,

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 Lord.

Skip to verses 10 and 11,

Now 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. And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, “For He is good, for His loving kindness is upon Israel forever.” 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.

I want you to notice that they are celebrating with trumpets and cymbals and song. Over what? The temple has been reconstructed? No! The foundation has been laid. That is all. Just the foundation had been laid and they started an outdoor concert to the glory of God.

The word translated “praising,” in verse 11, comes from the Hebrew verb “halal.” It means to boast about someone, to thank someone. “Halal” is the root form from which “hallelujah” is formed.

Hallelujah came to signify praising the Lord, extolling the virtue, honor, and glory of God. To say, “Hallelujah,” means, “I boast about God. I lift up the honor of God’s glory. I praise the virtue of God.”

Later in the text, you discover that they are literally shouting their praise – they were shouting “Hallelujah.” Let us try it together, like they must have done it here. “HALLELUJAH!”

Notice the last phrase of this chapter,

. . . and the sound was heard far away.

Try it again to be heard far away,
“HALLELUJAH!”

Now once again, even louder, “HALLELUJAH.”

We have just said a Hebrew word that means,
“Lord, we praise you, we glorify you, we boast of
your faithfulness.”

Hallelujah.

There was fellowship in their praising, even
though there was a difference in their emotions.
Notice verse 12,

*Yet many of the priests and Levites and
heads of father’s households, the old men
who had seen the first temple, wept with a
loud voice when the foundation of this house
was laid before their eyes, while many
shouted aloud for joy;*

They were weeping and laughing. There was
sobbing mixed with singing.

Their sorrow was only to be expected. Did you
notice who was weeping? These were the old men
who had seen Solomon’s temple in all its beauty and
splendor. This temple will be nothing like it.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian,
records these words for us,

*They recalled to mind the former temple
which had been very great and costly, and
seeing that this one fell short of the old one
because of their poverty, and considering how
far they had fallen below their ancient
prosperity and a state worthy of the temple,
were downcast, and being unable to master
their grief at this thought, were moved to
laments and weeping.*

The words, “. . . unable to master their grief . . .,”
struck me. Their grieving started out as one would
expect and appreciate. They grieved over the loss of
their temple glory. They grieved over the loss of
what could have been, had they not disobeyed God.

Their grieving, however, went well beyond this
chapter. It went on and on. The prophet Haggai
eventually came along and rebuked the elderly men
for clinging to the past and so discouraging the
people that the work actually stopped.

Mastered by grief is not good grieving.

Good Grief

What is good grief?

Here are two thoughts from this context of Ezra.

Grieving over our burden without becoming . . .

1. Good grieving is when we grieve over our
burdens without becoming bound to our past.

What do you cherish more – your memories, or
your dreams – what you have done in the past, or
what you are trusting God for in the future?

2. Good grieving is when we grieve over our
pain without avoiding God’s perspective.

Here, to these elderly men, the primary focus
should have been what God was doing, not what He
had done. There was a new generation, a generation
that needed a healthy link between the past and
future, and they were not providing the proper link.

One of the authors I read wrote from his own
family experience in *Establishing the Foundations*.
He wrote,

*Seven years ago my father died. My mother
continued to live in the house they shared
together for thirty years, and recently she has
made necessary and beautiful changes in the
house. She has replaced curtains she and my
father picked out together and has removed
the wallpaper they hung together. While my
mother weeps again over the loss of her
husband, especially each time she makes such
changes, she does not allow her grief to keep
her in a house with dilapidated furnishings.
In contrast to the grief by the elderly men of
Jerusalem, we need to find, like my mother,
right ways to grieve even as we move ahead
with our lives.*

That is quite a testimony to her son, even though
he is grown and writing commentaries. Ezra, chapter
3, meant more because of what his mother was going
through.

I have one more thought to share from this
chapter. It struck me that they began to praise God
after only the foundation was laid, not the entire
temple finished. They laid the foundation and then
held this celebration, the older men notwithstanding.

“We’ve made a little progress – let’s praise God
now! Let’s not wait until it’s finished, shall we?”

And the majority of the people said, “Great idea
– let’s praise God now, for a work in progress.”

What a challenge to all of us. You do not have to
wait until everything is right to praise and worship
God.

How tempted are you to say to God, “Lord, I’ll serve you when everything in my life is put neatly together,” or, when everything is arranged, “Lord, I’ll spend some time with you, when I finish this stage in my life. I’ll get around to worship.”?

No, now! In the middle of your life, which could be characterized by a sign hung over your head that reads, “A work in progress; a Christian under construction!”

Then, seek His perspective. And while you are at it, do not forget to sing His praises.

A couple of months ago, I was discouraged about several things related to our building project. We had suffered some setbacks from our efforts to rezone this property; we were delayed in our financing – and it seemed the whole history of relocating was bearing down on me. It was one of those times when you take responsibility for something that is not yours. Have you been there too?

I happened to be driving near our land and decided to pull in. My wife would tell you that my version of driving near the land simply means that I am driving in our town.

I pulled in with a heavy heart. Yet, sitting there at dusk, looking out over land that did not seem to be coming together, God convicted my heart. My discouragement was really the result of pride, (“C’mon let’s get these building up so everyone can see ‘em.”), and impatience, (“C’mon, Lord, step in and remove the obstacles – we’ve got some things to do!”).

Then, I got out of my truck and walked a little way toward the project. Now I was discouraged and convicted – that is a great combination. The strangest thought impressed me, “Sing!” I did not hear a voice, or have a vision, I was just impressed to sing. So, I began to sing – out loud.

I am telling you this, by the way, not so you will think I am some kind of saint, I want you to know, I have only sung a solo out there once. And, I did not sing because I was on a mountaintop and really felt like singing. I do want you to know that afterwards, and even during the song, God refocused my mind and heart with the truth of His faithfulness.

The song I sang was,

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him all creatures here below;

Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts;

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

He was, and is, worthy of praising. There is that word, “Hallal”ujah. Our perspectives need re-arranging, God is, at all times, worthy of praise.

I encourage you to sing that this week. Sing it at your weakest moment – in the midst of whatever bears down on your heart.

Worship Him when you are weak . . . He welcomes your praise.