

Ezra 3:1–13 – Rebuilding the Altar and Restoring Worship

A United Return to Worship (vv. 1–3)

“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.” (Ezra 3:1 NKJV)

Despite living scattered across the land, the people came together with a single purpose—to seek the Lord. There’s something powerful about unity, especially when it’s centered on worship. The people had endured exile and hardship, yet their hearts longed for God. And the first thing they rebuilt was not their homes—it was the altar.

“Then Jeshua... and Zerubbabel... arose and built the altar of the God of Israel...” (v. 2)

Before laying a single foundation stone for the temple, they restored the altar, the place where sin was atoned for and worship was offered. They followed the instructions “as it is written in the Law of Moses,” showing that revival always begins with a return to God’s Word.

Even though they were afraid of the surrounding nations (v. 3), they didn’t let fear keep them from worship. Instead, they responded with greater devotion, offering burnt offerings every morning and evening. Their fear led them not to retreat, but to worship more faithfully.

Celebrating the Feast and Freewill Giving (vv. 4–7)

The returned exiles also celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles—a joyful remembrance of how God had protected and provided for Israel during their wilderness journey. Even in humble beginnings, they were practicing joy-filled obedience.

“Everyone who willingly offered a freewill offering to the Lord...” (v. 5)

Giving was not coerced or manipulated—it was willing, joyful, and according to ability. True worship and revival will always produce a generous spirit. And just like in the days of Solomon, they arranged for cedar logs from Lebanon to begin the rebuilding (v. 7)—a nod to the past, but with a fresh start.

Laying the Foundation (vv. 8–10)

In the second year of their return, construction began. Jeshua and Zerubbabel, leading both the spiritual and civic efforts, mobilized the Levites to oversee the rebuilding. When the foundation of the temple was finally laid, there was a celebration—trumpets, cymbals, choirs, and unified praise.

“They sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: ‘For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel.’” (v. 11)

This echoes the praise offered when Solomon’s temple was first dedicated (2 Chronicles 5:13). Even though they were starting small, the people still gave God-sized praise, celebrating not what they saw, but what they believed He would do.

A Mixed Response of Joy and Sorrow (vv. 12–13)

Yet not everyone rejoiced. Some of the older men, who had seen the former glory of Solomon's temple, wept aloud. They remembered what had been lost and perhaps mourned over what could have been.

"But many... shouted aloud for joy... so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping..." (vv. 12–13)

This was a moment of emotional collision—joy for the future, grief for the past. Both were valid. The younger generation was full of hope and vision, while the elders carried the weight of memory and regret.

Personal Application: Rebuilding Begins at the Altar

Ezra 3 teaches us that revival starts not with construction, but consecration. The altar was the first thing to be restored because the people needed to reconnect with God before they rebuilt anything else.

Like the returning exiles, we may be standing amid the rubble of the past—broken dreams, ruined relationships, forgotten callings—but God invites us to begin again. Build the altar (not literally but in your heart). Worship in the face of fear. Celebrate God's goodness even before the walls go up.

And when it comes to giving—give willingly. Don't wait for perfect circumstances. Offer your heart, your praise, your resources, because God is building something eternal.

Finally, don't be surprised if your new beginnings stir up both joy and sorrow. God honors the memory of what once was, but He also invites us to rejoice in what He's doing now.

Key Reflections

- Are you starting over in some area of life? Start by building an altar—recommit your life, your worship, your priorities to God.
- Have you lost something valuable in the past? It's okay to grieve, but don't let it stop you from rejoicing in God's present work.
- Are you waiting to give until it feels convenient? Instead, give joyfully and freely, trusting that your offerings are part of God's greater plan.