

May 18, 2025

“Worship is Restored”
Lesson 4

Ezra 3:1-6, 10-13

Intro

Ezra tells the story of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin returning from exile in Babylon. Their purpose in returning was to “rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5). The first temple was destroyed in 586 BC, and the people have been in captivity for nearly 50 years. When the city was destroyed, there was no more nation of Judah, no capital city of Jerusalem, no temple, no royal palace, no walls. Normally, it would be impossible for a nation to come into existence again after an absence of 50 years. But God was in charge of this situation, and as Jeremiah said, nothing is too difficult for the Lord. Rebuilding the temple would require a lot of money, time, and labor. The first (and quicker) task they undertake is to build the altar of burnt offerings. That’s where today’s lesson begins.

Read Ezra 3:1-6

1. vs. 1: The seventh month here is roughly late September or early October
The Jews had two calendars: a civic calendar and a religious calendar
This seventh month reference deals with the religious calendar
This month is the first month in the civic calendar
The month was called Ethanim before the exile, and Tishri (“beginning”) after

By the time noted here, most of the people had returned to their ancestral villages
Few apparently wanted to live in Jerusalem itself

One in every 10 people were selected by lot to inhabit Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1-2)
The 7th month included four observances that would have drawn people to Jerusalem
The blowing of trumpet on the first day (Lev. 23:23-25)
The Day of Atonement on the 10th day (Lev. 23:26-32)
The Festival of Tabernacles on days 15-21 (Lev. 23:33-36)
An assembly on the 8th day (Lev. 23:36b)
The reason for this gathering, however, may be none of these, as the following verses show

2. vs. 2: Joshua and Zerubbabel are mentioned together in a dozen OT verses
Joshua is the high priest, Zerubbabel is the governor
Here Judah’s religious and civic leaders are working together to rebuild their lives
This includes both halves: the religious and the community
Here they begin rebuilding the altar in the temple courtyard
It is not these two alone
“Fellow priests” of Joshua and “associates” of Zerubbabel also are working
There were 4289 priests who returned from exile (Ezra 2:36-39)
It’s likely that a much smaller number were actually working on the temple

The purpose for the altar is given as a reminder:
To sacrifice burnt offerings...in accordance with...the Law of Moses
Lev. 1 gives specifications for the construction of the altar and its function

3. vs. 3: The rebuilding of the altar is a priority and nothing is allowed to deter it
The peoples in the land who are not Israelites pose a potential threat
It could be a physical threat of attack
It could be a spiritual threat—contact with unholy people, making things impure
The text doesn't specify what causes the people's fear
It does tell us that they build the temple despite this potential threat
The altar is built on the foundation of the previous one destroyed 50 years earlier
This is a sign that they are doing things the right way
They are "building on a solid foundation" to establish the right ways
The priests then begin the twice-daily sacrifices as commanded in Exodus 29
4. vs. 4: The Festival of Tabernacles is celebrated, putting the time in the middle of the month (See vs.1)
The phrase "in accordance with what is written" is significant
It shows that their practice is based on what Moses wrote
The burnt offerings are emphasized again, showing this was very important
5. vs. 5: The full range of the altar's functions are addressed here
The sacrificial system was reinstated from the earliest possible moment upon returning
There are three offerings that haven't been mentioned before in Ezra
The New Moon offerings, which are addressed in Num. 28:11-15
The various sacred festivals
Freewill offerings are discussed in Lev. 22:18-23
Carrying out these sacrifices required having the animals to sacrifice
This means the return of shepherds, flock protection, water management, etc
A return to "normal" life before the exile is happening
6. vs. 6: On the first day of the 7th month, the burnt offerings are begun again
In the vs. 1 notes, the 7th month included four observances
The first day is for the blowing of the trumpets, the beginning of the month's observances
They begin their worship with sacrifices on the altar
The author notes that the foundation is completely missing ("had not been laid")
The temple is completely absent, but the sacrifices begin on the courtyard altar

Read Ezra 3:10-13

7. vs. 10: The laying of the foundation took about a year and a half (compare Ezra 3:1 to 3:8)
When this was finished, the priests and Levites get ready for the worship
Both groups have instruments (trumpets and cymbals) to support the singing
As with the sacrifices in vs. 5, this shows a return to the things done before exile
8. vs. 11: The people sing "He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever"
This is the same words (song?) sung in David's time (see 1 Chr. 16 and Ps. 107)
This is another re-connection with their previous worship practices

9. vs. 12: There are two contrasting responses to seeing the temple's foundation completed
The older priests, Levites, and heads of family saw the previous temple
They are about 70 years old now, and they remember the glory of the first temple
They weep now, likely thinking about the sins that caused the temple's destruction

A second group, likely younger, "shouted for joy"
They have never seen Solomon's temple—they have no basis for comparison
This is exciting and unprecedented to them

10. vs. 13: The noise level is so high that one can't tell crying from shouting
That's a high level of noise!
Of significance is that this noise can be heard far away
The non-Israelites who live in the land will put up a fight about rebuilding the temple
This struggle will go on for 20 years; the temple was finished in 516 BC

Application: Today's passage points to two things: human effort and God's mercy. It is God's mercy that allows human endeavors to succeed and produce results. God is also the One who brought the people back to the land from captivity. The unspoken question from Him seems to be: Will your world also be My world? And that is a question that is still relevant for us today. Is our world also God's world?

Prayer: Father God, help us to see all situations from Your view. We can lose sight of the big picture when we shift our focus to life's obstacles, and off of Your plan for our lives. Help us also to not be an obstacle to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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