

The Primary Importance of Corporate Worship
The Book of Ezra
Sunday, April 30th, 2023

Scripture

Ezra 1:1-3

[1] In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

[2] “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. [3] Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Pray

Introduction

As we get into the book of Ezra this morning, in order to understand the weight of this book and the goodness of God in it, you also need to remember where the Israelites have been and why.

After Israel split into 2 kingdoms because of Solomon and Rehoboam’s sin, the northern kingdom (which includes 10 of the tribes of Israel) sets up images to represent their own gods. This leads to years of walking away from the Lord which results in their being sent into exile in 2 Kings 17 by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

The southern kingdom (which included Judah and Benjamin) fared a little better. They had a mix of evil kings, but also kings who brought them back to the Lord. Yet, because of their continual sin and walking away from Yahweh, their God, time and time again, he eventually **had the temple destroyed** and sent them into exile in 2 Chronicles 36 by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

And that is where they remained for the better part of 70 years.

And all of this happened because they had forsaken the proper worship of their God and instead sought other false gods.

As the prophetess Huldah said in 2 Chronicles 34:23-25:

[23] "...Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'Tell the man who sent you to me, [24] Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the curses that are written in the book that was read before the king of Judah. [25] Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands, therefore my wrath will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched.'"

Things were looking pretty bleak for the Israelites and especially for the southern kingdom between 586-539 B.C.

But then something happens in 2 Chronicles 37:22-23.

It jumps ahead in history to the reign of king Cyrus, and it gives the Israelites a glimmer of hope, that God had not forgotten his people. It says that that the Lord stirred the spirit of king Cyrus to make a proclamation that the house of the Lord (The Temple) should be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and whoever is of the Lord's people should go up to do this work.

And this same proclamation is exactly what we read in our opening verses this morning. Because the same hope and good news that 2 Chronicles ends with is the same good news that the book of Ezra opens with.

Now, just to give you a little background to this book.

Ezra divides into two main sections.

Chapters 1-6 chronicle God restoring his people to the land of Judah, and chapters 7-10 chronicle God's reformation of his restored people through Ezra.

This book was originally put together as one book with Nehemiah and has traditionally been attributed to Ezra as the author. However, many modern scholars believe that it was partly Ezra, and then in its final form was assembled by someone else.

It was likely written sometime between 433-424 B.C. And even though it is only 10 chapters it actually spans almost a 100 year period.

Here is a chart that gives you an idea of how this history unfolds.

Chronology of Ezra

Event	Date	Verses
King Cyrus captures Babylon	539 B.C.	Dan 5:30-31
Cyrus issues proclamation freeing Jewish exiles	538	Ezra 1:1-4
Jewish exiles return from Babylon to Jerusalem	537	Ezra 1:11
Altar rebuilt	537	Ezra 3:1-2
Temple rebuilding begins	536	Ezra 3:8
Adversaries oppose the rebuilding	536-530	Ezra 4:1-5
Example letter of opposition from future time	464-446?	Ezra 4:7-23

This letter interrupts the historical narrative and gives us an example of the hostility that the Jews faced for roughly a century after Cyrus' decree. The technique employed here of using a letter that is from a future period is common in this kind of writing. Its purpose was to show that the persecutions faced by this community were not isolated, but deeply rooted on ongoing.

Temple rebuilding ceases	530-520	Ezra 4:24
Temple rebuilding resumes (2nd year of Darius)	520	Ezra 5:2
Temple construction completed (6th year of Darius)	516	Ezra 6:15
Ezra departs from Babylon to Jerusalem	458	Ezra 7:6-9
Men of Judah and Benjamin assemble at Jerusalem	458	Ezra 10:9
Officials conduct investigation of intermarriage	458-457	Ezra 10:16-17

However, despite it spanning such a long period of time there is one overarching theme that works its way all the way through this book. And it is this:

That God desires worship, and in particular corporate worship (his people gathering to worship), to be of primary importance in the lives of his people.

So this morning as we walk through the book of Ezra we will see the importance of corporate worship, what that worship looked like in Israel, why it's important, and that the results of faithful worship are exceeding joy.

So let's start with the importance of corporate worship.

1. Corporate worship is to be a primary activity in the lives of God's people (Ezra 1:2-3)

Ezra 1:2-3

[2] "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. [3] Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Finally, the time has come for God's people. God, in his mercy and power, works in the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, so that the people of Israel who still remain in exile are now free to go back to Jerusalem and Judah.

This means that after 70 years the people of Israel (in particular the people of Judah and Benjamin) may go back to their homeland which they have been away from for almost a full generation.

But God doesn't just send them back so that they build themselves comfy homes and enjoy a good life. Instead, God is sending them back with a command. And the command is that they are to build him a new home or temple in Jerusalem.

And the reason that this is so important is because the temple was the center of worship for the Israelites. It was the place they went to experience God's presence and forgiveness through the offering of sacrifices.

It was the central place that God's presence dwelt and that his people carried out their covenant relationship with him through worship. That is why it is called the house of the Lord.

Because God's desire was to dwell with his people and be their God. As he says in Leviticus 26:11-12:

[11] I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. [12] And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.

This means that God's primary reason for calling his people out of exile was so that they could worship him together and could experience a restored fellowship with him through the building of a new temple.

In fact, this is the exact same reason that God originally called his people out of Egypt. As it says in Exodus 8:1:

[1] Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Let my people go, that they may serve (In the NIV and Holman it says "worship") me.

The point here is that the primary call on the lives of God's people is worship.

Now for us as New Testament Christians, we know that we no longer have to go to a temple. Because the word of God tells us that we are his temple. As it says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

[19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

We were bought with a high price which was Jesus' life on the cross. He took our sin, we got his righteousness, he opened the way for us to fellowship freely with God, and he has now made us God's temple where his Spirit dwells.

And because he lives in us we now have 24/7 access to worship and fellowship with the living God. **That is so good isn't it?**

But as awesome as that is, it doesn't set aside or diminish the importance of gathering together as God's people to worship him.

If anything, what we see in the New Testament is a reinforcing of the importance of gathering to worship God.

Look with me at the following verses.

Acts 2:42–44

[42] And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. [44] And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

You very clearly see Luke, the writer of Acts, showing the importance and the power of the early church gathering together here.

Hebrews 10:24–25

[24] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Here we not only have a call to not neglect meeting together, but we see how integral our meeting is to stir each other up to love and good works.

1 Corinthians 14:26

[26] What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

Paul is not only making meeting a priority, but he is saying that we each have something that God has given us for the purpose of building up the body.

The point being that the New Testament does not diminish the importance of the corporate gathering of God's people, but instead reinforces it and reminds us that it is a very big deal.

And I'm bringing this up this morning, not only because it is what the whole book of Ezra is about, but because we live in a time where the importance of the weekly gathering of the church and being invested in a body of believers is being diminished.

It's being relegated to something that is a practice of the past and is increasingly becoming optional in the lives of believers.

According to a Barna Group study, church attendance in America over last decade or so has slowly fallen from about 45% to around 29% of the overall population.

And even more concerning than this is research done by Thomas Rainer at Church Answers that found that only 30% of a church's population actually attends the weekly gathering 3-4 times a month.

The next largest group is 25% who attend 1-2 times a month. Another 25% attend only 4-10 times a year, and finally 20% who attend 1-3 times a year.

Lastly, according to another study by Barna, only about 50ish% of churchgoers see it as important to take a vested interest in the church by becoming members.

Now, here at La Crescent Free I think we are a little better than these particular numbers, but it doesn't mean that we don't still face the same problems.

It is far too easy for us to see church attendance, membership, and taking an active part in the life of the body as something that is optional, versus something that is commanded by God and is necessary for our flourishing as his people.

But that statement begs the question. If church attendance, membership, and active involvement in the body of believers is commanded by God and is necessary for our spiritual life, what is that supposed to look like and how is it good for us?

And that's the 2nd thing that I want to look at this morning.

2. The practices and benefits of corporate worship.

As we jump back into the book of Ezra, we already know that God worked through Cyrus to free his people from captivity. And the purpose of that freedom was that they would go back to Judah and Jerusalem to reestablish the worship of their God, Yahweh, by building him a new temple or home. **We learned all of that from Ezra 1:1-3.**

But now, as we move past Ezra 1 and past chapter 2 where it lists all the people who came back from exile, we move into chapters 3-10 where we get to see the building of the temple and get a picture of what their worship of God looked like.

So for the sake of time I am going to briefly touch on various verses throughout these chapters that highlight the ways in which the Israelites worshiped God. And then I am going to show you how it connects to our worship today and why it is important and beneficial for us as his people.

Instead of living in fear the Israelites worshipped God through Sacrifices.

Ezra 3:1-3

[1] When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. [2] Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they 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. [3] They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.

Although the people of Israel were firmly settled back in the land of Judah, it doesn't mean that everything was perfect. We learn in Ezra 4:4-5 that there were other non-Jews who didn't particularly care for the people of Israel.

They disliked the returned exiles so much that they discouraged them, made them afraid to do the work God had for them, and in general made life hard.

But instead of fully living into that fear and giving up, the Israelites came together as one man to rebuild the altar of God so that they could offer sacrifices, make atonement for their sin, and have a renewed fellowship with God.

So the first priority for the returned exiles, in the face of opposition in the land, was to join together to seek the presence and fellowship of God.

As a result, we see God helping his people to flourish in the land throughout the book of Ezra and into Nehemiah, which Eric will preach on next week.

In a similar fashion, if we turn to the New Testament, we read in Acts 1:14:

[14] All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Here we have a group of people who have just seen Jesus ascend into heaven. He was killed and came back to life, but now he is gone. And they are probably asking themselves, “are we going to be killed and persecuted like Jesus? What is going to happen to us?”

But instead of scattering and running in fear it says they were together devoting themselves to prayer.

Like the Israelites, they were seeking God’s presence and fellowship together which ultimately leads to the Holy Spirit coming in Acts chapter 2, and to the explosion of the church throughout the rest of the book.

The point for us here is two-fold. One, we need to remember that when we gather, God is present with us. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:22:

[22] In him you (Plural, the church) also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Two, that when we make gathering to worship God a priority, he moves and allows his people, his church, to flourish. Going back to Acts 2 it says in verse 46-47:

[46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

When we gather faithfully to worship and fellowship with God he is present, he will move in our midst, and he will make us flourish as his people.

Second:

The Israelites used their resources and gifts to build the temple (God’s house)

Look with me at the following sections of Ezra:

Ezra 2:68-69

[68] Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. [69] According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests’ garments.

Ezra 3:8–9

[8] Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. [9] And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

As we have already seen, the Israelites knew that they were commanded by God to rebuild the temple, but they also knew that the temple was vital to their worship of God and his presence with them.

So when the time came to rebuild, they were more than willing to give their resources, whether that was material resources or skills so that the temple could be rebuilt.

This was an all hands-on deck building process. And even though there were ups and downs, and starts and stops in the process, God allowed them to prosper and the temple was finally finished in 516 B.C. As it says in Ezra 6:14-15:

[14] And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; [15] and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

Now as I said earlier, because of the amazing sacrifice of Christ on the cross, we no longer have a physical temple, because God, through Christ, by the Spirit has made us his temple and dwelling place.

But that doesn't diminish our responsibility to use our resources, both material and spiritual to build up the body of Christ which scripture says is the church. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11-13:

[11] And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,...

We are to worship God by using our gifts and resources in the context of the body of Christ, the church, to build each other up to maturity in Christ so that we as a church together look like Christ. And we do this as Peter says in 1 Peter 4:11 so that God would be glorified through Christ.

So as the Israelites used their resources to rebuild the temple, we too must use our resources and gifts to build up the body of Christ so that our God would be seen, adored, and glorified.

Lastly:

The Israelites collectively listened to and obeyed God's commands

Ezra 10:3

[3] Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law.

In Ezra 9 it came to Ezra's attention that the people of Israel along with the priests and Levites had inter-married with people from the surrounding lands which was not permitted by the law of God. **And in response it says that he tore his garment, wept before God, and prayed.**

As a result, those who heard him responded and said they would make a covenant with God, would put away their foreign wives in accordance with Ezra's counsel, and would obey the commands of God in the law.

The Israelites heard God's Word through Ezra, were confronted with his commands and responded by walking in obedience, and turning away from their sins.

And in the same way, we as Christians we are called to be a people who hear and respond to God's commands. As James writes in James 1:22

[22] But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

And one of the primary ways we are to hear and respond to God's commands is through the preaching of his word which is why Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2:

[2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Therefore, like Israel, we must prioritize hearing, and responding to, and obeying God's word, especially the preached word that comes to you within the context of the local church.

And James says in the last part of James 1:25 that when we respond to the word and walk in obedience to God's commands that we will be *"blessed in our doing."*

Now, I have just scratched the surface of this book this morning. So much more could be said about how the Israelites praised God, sang to him, prayed, and protected their distinctiveness as his people, and how that relates to us and our worship.

I could also spend a whole sermon talking to you about the providential hand of God to bring about his good purposes for his people as he worked through pagan kings like Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes.

But the most important thing that we need to take away from this sermon this morning is that ordinary and regular gathering of God's people as a church for worship is not optional. It is not just another thing, but is meant to be one of the primary activities in the life of every believer.

And when we, as God's people make this gathering a priority. When we come here to encounter the living God together. When we come here to invest in the church, use our gifts to build up the body, and rightly hear and respond to God's word together. **We not only glorify our God and exalt Christ, but we will see God working in our midst for the building of his church and the flourishing of his people.**

And when we live this way, the results will be an exceeding joy that comes from our great God.

As it says in Ezra 6:22

[22] And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

In the same way, in the New Testament Jesus says in John 15:10-11:

[10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

So let's be a people that keep God's commands, that make worshipping with and investing in God's people, the church, a priority. And together let's expectantly wait for, pray for, and stand in awe of the work that he will do in our midst so that we can together, experience the exceeding joy that he has promised us.

Let's Pray.