

Priority of Worship

Scripture: Ezra 3

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**October 2, 2011
Morning Service**

People of God: What would be your priority if you came back to your homeland after seventy years? That's the question the people of God faced when they returned from exile, back to the Promised Land. The people confronted many problems. Their homes had to be rebuilt; the land hadn't been worked for years; businesses had to be started from scratch. It was a complete restart for God's people. What becomes the priority?

I think the immigrants of the 1950's can relate to the situation faced by God's people in this chapter. Those, like my parents, came to this country with very little money or resources. They had to learn the language, find a job and try to establish themselves in their new homes. But for them, it was also very important to establish churches, where they could worship God—at first in their native tongue and then in the language of their new country.

Worship was a high priority. So it is in this chapter. Yes, the people had to settle in their homes and towns. Yes, the land had to be seeded so that a crop could be harvested. But while that work could have consumed all their time, energy and money they realized that the worship of the Lord their God had to be a high priority for them.

Re-establishing the proper worship of God was the ultimate reason why they had returned to Jerusalem. They didn't expect to become a mighty nation, or to get wealthy. If they wanted financial security, they should have remained in Babylon. But instead, they risked everything in order to re-establish a worshipping community in accordance with the will of God.

This priority of worship was already indicated in the opening chapters of this book. In chapter one, we have a list of all the articles that were used in the temple and will have to be used again in the worship that will take place in rebuilt temple. It's like taking along, the baptismal font, the Lord's

Supper Table, and the pulpit. Some things, even if they are symbolic, are necessary for worship.

In chapter two, we have a list of those who came back to Jerusalem. In that list, there would be a high percentage of priests and Levites, as well as singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. These are the type of personnel that would be needed if the temple would be fully functional. While the NT church requires far less personnel for worship, still for us it's helpful to have in addition to a preacher and musicians, sound and video technicians, ushers, and nursery attendants.

Now in this third chapter, the resumption of the worship of God swings into high gear. Now it's not as if God's people didn't worship the Lord during the time of the exile. They did. But they could not follow the system of worship that God had instituted at the time of Moses. Now that could all be restored again.

As a result, the altar is rebuilt. Since the sacrifice was the key to the Mosaic system of worshipping God, the altar was very important. It was the means by which a sinful people could approach a holy God. The altar was in constant use. But for seventy years it was silenced. No blood was spilt for the atonement for sins. No smoke ascended to heaven. But now the altar is rebuilt. The sacrifices began again--all according to the law of God.

In these few verses quite a number of different sacrifices are mentioned: there was the morning and evening offering, the regular burnt offering, the New Moon sacrifices, the freewill offerings. The sacred festivals were held again, including the Feast of Tabernacles. What happiness and joy must have filled the hearts of the people as they saw the smoke ascend to heaven once again.

For us, the altar has been replaced by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Christ's sacrifice is once and for all time. It never has to be repeated. So it's hard for us to appreciate what the resumption of these sacrifices meant for the people.

However, the sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper, while they do not repeat Christ's sacrifice, they are visible reminders of what God has accomplished for us in the death of Christ. Imagine not having baptism and Lord's Supper for seventy years. What a travesty that would be! I can't even imagine a year without baptism or Lord's Supper. We need these spiritual reminders of the gospel promise in order to be strengthened and encouraged in our faith.

And so the altar, which pointed ahead to Christ's sacrifice, was rebuilt. But verse six mentions a shortcoming. But the temple wasn't quickly

rebuilt. This became a major problem. Not even the foundation of the temple was laid.

But that first step in rebuilding the temple was soon taken care of. This rebuilding parallels the building of the first temple done under Solomon. First, the construction materials came from the same place. Both times the wood came from Sidon and Tyre in exchange for food. Second, the building projects began at the same time of year: in the second month. These parallels were intended to encourage the people in their task.

What's the parallel of the temple to us today? It's not this church building. As the NT clearly teaches, the people of God are now the temple of the Lord. God dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. What makes this time special, what makes this space unique, is that we are gathered together as the people of God in worship.

As the foundation of the temple was important for the worship of the Lord in the OT, so our gathering is important because it is a gathering for the purpose of worship. Worship needs to be the priority of God's people. That was true in the OT and it continues to be true for God's people today. Worship is a priority.

Why should worship be such a priority? Why should it be a key component of our walk with God? Why is its neglect, a grave spiritual danger?

Because worship keeps God's people focused on God and his claim upon our lives. Because through worship, we are in dialogue with our God—as God speaks to us and we respond to him. Because through worship, we are strengthened and encouraged in our faith.

In the OT, God offered his means of grace through the altar and the temple, but in the NT, the means of grace has changed. Now the Spirit uses the preaching of Word to challenge and encourage us in our faith, and uses the sacraments to confirm that faith in our hearts. As a result, faithful, regular worship is vital to the life of a believer and for the growth of the community of believers.

Because worship is also what ties all the aspects of the work of the church together. There are other tasks and responsibilities of the church: There is the need to evangelize, to share the good news of Jesus. There is the need to educate our children and youth so that they will know what we believe. There is the call to social justice, offering compassion and mercy to those in need. But what holds all these aspects together, what sustains them, is worship.

In a way, worship will be the final task of the church. In the New Jerusalem, there will be no need for social activism because we will all live

in harmony. There will be no need for evangelism, because all will know the Lord and so education will be very different. What remains is worship. Is it any wonder that the final book of the Bible, Revelation, is a book of worship?

Worship, then, is to be a priority for believers. But does that mean once or twice on Sunday? That's a loaded question. Most of us, including the leadership of the church, have concluded, once is enough. The last three weeks, we have averaged 180 in the morning service, 32 in the evening. Whether the evening service is sustainable is an open question.

But what bothers me is not so much the conclusion that worship once is sufficient for our spiritual nourishment; what bothers me is that even weekly worship is being neglected. It's the attitude that if I miss worship this week or even next week, oh, that's okay. Our second service, at least, allows the opportunity for those who can't attend the morning service, to at least worship God on the Lord's Day. It saddens me when that option isn't even considered by those who miss the morning worship service. As Hebrews 10:25, says, "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing."

Worship is to be a priority for God's people. But that's not always easy to maintain. Worship is threatened by both internal forces as well as external forces. This chapter mentions an internal danger, while the next chapter identifies an external threat.

When the foundation of the temple was finished, there was great rejoicing amongst the people. The trumpets and cymbals led the people in singing. But we read in verse 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.

Those who could remember the first temple, the great and glorious temple erected by Solomon, saw this meager beginning of the second temple; they made a comparison and they concluded that this second one was no match to the first one. As a result, they wept.

Perhaps that's understandable. This second temple would never contain the Ark of the Covenant, which was forever lost and destroyed. Its structure could never match the grandeur of Solomon's temple. But that misses the point. This older generation failed to see how God was at work in the restoration of worship. Sure, this may have been a meager beginning—but it was still a sign that the worship of God was once again going to be at the center of the life of God's people. That's something they should have

rejoiced in. They should have joined with the worship of God and sung about the faithfulness of the Lord.

It seems to always be a danger in the church to look to the way things were done in the past and think that's the way it always should be. Earlier I mentioned the touchy subject of the second service. It's easy for some to remember when the second service was almost as full as the morning service and lament the present state of affairs. Or maybe some remember when Dixon's and this church were worshipping together and you think that's when we were the strongest. Or maybe you recall when this facility was build, with lots of extra room expecting the pews to quickly fill up, but instead, we have this empty space in front of me, and you wonder, what happened.

It's easy to look back and think the past was an golden era—which is often doubtful—and fail to see how God is at work in the here and now, neglecting to see how the Lord has blessed us with the people we have presently have in worship, especially our young couples and their young children. Not that we can be satisfied with the status quo. But to thankful to the Lord for the blessings of the present, as we give thanks for the blessings of the past.

And while others might compare this worshipping community to the past, others might compare us to other worshipping communities in the present. Today, with modern media as well as visiting other churches, we are exposed to a wide variety of worship communities. It's easy than to compare. Perhaps, glad that we have youth, when the church you're visiting has few under the age of 60. Or maybe glad that we have those over 60, when the church you visited only caters to the younger generation.

Other times, you might wish we had a praise team; a power point system, and more "contemporary" music. Or that we could offer the programs of a mega-church. Or that we might allow people bringing coffee into the sanctuary. If only we were like...

While indeed, we need to open to self-evaluation, we need to aware of the spiritual danger of this type of attitude that always compares; especially an attitude that results in being negative to the worship that we are privileged to partake in. We need to remember that worship is not about us, but about God.

God calls us to worship. Worship that shapes and sustains our faith in God. Let us then, with praise and thanksgiving, worship our God. Amen.