

First Things First

Ezra-Nehemiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the third chapter of the book of Ezra. Ezra is an Old Testament book right behind 2 Chronicles, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra. So that's one of those memory things when you were a kid are really a blessing. Anyway, we're in the third chapter of Ezra. We began looking at this about a month ago, this book. We're looking at Ezra-Nehemiah together. We believe that these were given as one book. That's the way it was in the Hebrew Bible for the first 1,500 years of the church and so we're gonna look at Ezra, then Nehemiah, Lord willing, together and this morning we come to the third chapter of the book of Ezra. The title of the message this morning is "First Things First." First things first. What we're gonna see is that as we look at the historical events of the third chapter of the book of Ezra, we're going to see an example of how the people of God put first things first. They were called by the Lord to make worship central. That's why they were returning. Remember, the people that we're looking at in the text or the events described happen around 536 BC and it's the return of the nation of Israel, the Israelites actually from Judah itself, the southern kingdom of Israel, but the people of God, the people of Israel who had been in the Babylonian captivity for 70 years. Babylon had sacked Jerusalem for the first time in 606 BC, took captive a host of the Israelites to Babylon. There was a second assault by Babylon on Jerusalem in 597, just nine years later, and another group of exiles were exiled to Babylon and then finally in 586 the final assault when Israel basically, I mean, Judah, the southern kingdom, kept revolting against Babylon because of the teaching of the false prophets and Nebuchadnezzar came back and each time with more force and in 586, 20 years after the beginning of the exile for some of the nation of Judah, he sacks Jerusalem, destroys the temple and carries off most of the rest of the people.

Well, the events we're reading take place 50 years after that, 70 years after the beginning of the exile in 606 or in 536 and 50 years after the destruction of the temple and what we see is the recording of the return of the people to the land of Israel, why God sent them back to Jerusalem, and we're gonna see that what they did was put first things first and it's instructive for us today, these words, you know, that describe events that happened more than 2,500 years ago, having abiding relevance for you and me. All Scripture is profitable. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable and so the Lord wants us to learn how to put first things first and if you want to kind of get the theme of the message because we're gonna walk through the narrative, sometimes it's helpful, I think, to have

the basic theme, it's first things first and what we're gonna see is the people when they return to the land, they put the first priority on worship; that putting worship at the center of your life is the calling of a person who belongs to God. Worship is to be central and so they, we're gonna see them demonstrate that because the first thing they do is to start building the temple.

We're gonna see there's another first thing that happens and that is they not only put worship central, as they begin to worship, as they approach God in worship, they put the sacrifice first. The first thing they do in building the temple to make worship central is to build the altar and we're gonna learn that if we're gonna be all that God wants us to be and we're gonna live faithfully for Jesus Christ in a world that is increasingly difficult to live that way, we have to keep worship first and we have to keep the sacrifice of God, that is, the cross first as we approach God and we'll see this exhibited in the life of the people of Nehemiah's day.

So we're gonna read verses 1 to 7. We'll read the entire chapter. It's only 13 verses. It's not as long. Last week that 70 verse chapter, it was how long did that take to read it. This is gonna be refreshingly short and not so many complicated names as last time either. I'm thankful for that. So Ezra 3:1,

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. 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. 3 So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required; 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. 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. 7 Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia. 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 house of the LORD. 9 Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and

brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God. 10 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. 11 They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness 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. 12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' 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, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we ask now that You might open the eyes of our hearts, that You might illuminate Your word by Your Spirit, apply Your truth to each one, and bring about the result that You desire in each heart. We pray that You would bring about more repentance, turning from sin, more faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and we pray all of this so that He might be glorified. We pray in His name. Amen.

First things first. The people of Israel as they returned back to the land around Jerusalem with a commission from Cyrus the king of Persia to rebuild the temple, what we see in this is lived out for us an example of how we should live for God in days that are difficult because these were difficult times. We're going to see they were going through great difficulty as we look at the events of the text in Ezra-Nehemiah, we're gonna see that they experienced all kinds of opposition and difficulty, and then when we consider the fact that this work, Ezra-Nehemiah, was written and inspired by the Holy Spirit and given to people, now think about that, the events described take place at a certain time. We're looking at 536 BC today but the actual composition of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah was later than that. The composition of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah was probably more like 420 AD because we're gonna see, we're gonna go, it's gonna cover over 100 years of history in this book and it wasn't finished until all that had happened.

So one of the things that we have to remember when we're reading the Bible is to think about the original audience and the circumstances of the original audience to the written composition. Do you see what I'm saying? It's not 530 BC so much, I mean, that's important, 538 BC is important, 536 BC is important but also 420 BC. What was going on with the people of God in 420? What were their circumstances? And when we look at that, we see there's a lot of similarities between what it means to be a follower of God as a Jew in Jerusalem and its surrounding area in 420 BC as it is to be a Christian today in the United States of America. They were people who were living disenfranchised from society. We're beginning to be that way more and more in America. We don't have the political power and everything that might have used to be sort of somewhat aligned with

a Christian worldview is no longer there. We find an environment that is increasingly hostile to our faith which it is increasingly difficult to live holy lives because there's opposition around us. That's exactly what they were living. It's also what the people in the circumstances of the actual chapter were living too, 538 and 420 weren't that very different.

So we're gonna look at this today. First things first. I want us to consider this passage under five main points and the main points are gonna help us follow the narrative, the description of the story, and what we're gonna do on each point is we're gonna talk about the doctrine of the passage and what we're actually taught in the passage about the people in the story, and then we're gonna, that's like it's 1A is like the doctrine of the passage, 1B is how that applies to us today. 2A will be the doctrine of the passage, 2B how it applies to us today. Do you see what I'm saying? So we're gonna go five points but there's really 10 points total, so it's like, isn't that great? So and there are probably some extra subpoints along the way too, thrown in for no extra charge. Okay, so but you kind of see how we're going. We want to look at, we want to observe the text and then want to see how that relates to us today.

So first point this morning: first things first, how do we put worship central and the cross at the foundation, the central questions with it, and we're looking at the events in Ezra 3:1-7, the first half of that chapter we read where they build the altar and start offering sacrifices but the temple is not yet rebuilt. First point. What we see in the text is that the people, we could say they are committed to their calling. They are committed to their calling. As you observe the text, one of the things that jumps out at us is they were committed to the calling that God had given them. They were called to go back to Jerusalem, go back to the area, repopulate the area and build the temple and they're committed to that calling. You see it in 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." You see how he describes that. We know there's about 50,000 people and last, remember and this is really why it's important to read the Scriptures in context, think about what we did last week in chapter 2. We read about those 50,000 returnees, 49,000, a little less than 50, and remember we saw in chapter 2 there was 124 names and family names. They didn't take time to give us all 49,000 names, that would, I forgot how long I said that would take. It was like take hours to read 49,000 names, just reading them. It's like if you went to graduation ceremony and there's 49,000 graduates, take a lunch with you.

So anyway, just to read the name would take that long if they're running across the stage. It would take that long, so he doesn't give us all 49,000 names, he gives us, though, 124 names of families and cities with clusters of people represented and we're told in chapter 2, verse 1, look back at that for a moment, "Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon," and look what he says, "and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city." And then look at the last verse of chapter 2, verse 70, "Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities." Kind of an inclusio around that chapter

that they went to their cities. Cities around Jerusalem but in the greater Jerusalem area, and they began to rebuild their homes, gone to their ancestral lands. They're working to rebuild their homes, rebuild their, barns and to plow the ground. But in chapter 3, verse 1, now those, all those 49,000 people with 124 different names come as one man to Jerusalem. Do you see how that, the contrast there even brings out the emphasis. All those names, name, name, name, name. Now they came as one man to Jerusalem. There's such a oneness of mind, oneness of commitment. They are committed to the work that they've been called to do. They're going and what is the work they've been called to do? To rebuild Jerusalem by repopulating it and repopulating the area and by restoring worship to its central place, putting worship at the center. That's what they're called to do and we read in the second half of the chapter which we'll look at, Lord willing, next week, that they actually began the foundation of the temple. In a few months, they have to order materials, the materials come in, they gather again, they build, start building the temple.

So they're committed to putting worship at the center. They're committed to their calling. Their calling is to build Jerusalem by putting and build the people of God by putting worship at the very center of their lives. So what is our calling? They were committed to their calling, the question 1B is are you committed to your calling? If you name the name of Jesus Christ, if you profess faith in him that you've repented and placed your faith in him, what is your calling? Is it not to put worship at the center? Is it not to build the people of God, to build the kingdom of God, to build Jerusalem by sanctifying Christ as Lord in your heart, centering your life upon worship that wherever you go, the one thing that is central about you is you are a worshiper, a follower of Jesus Christ and that your desire is not only to prepare your heart more and more and more to be a home for Christ, but that you are seeking to reach others to become a part of that as well, to build Jerusalem. And Jerusalem really, we've seen this before but I'll remind you of it, Jerusalem is something that God uses in the Old Testament to be a picture of a spiritual reality that's coming, the same way we've seen that Canaan is a picture of heaven. Jerusalem is a picture of the church. I mean, in its time it was important and it was important they build the walls as Nehemiah will do here later in these books. It's important that they go back and build the temple but we see that these things are really teaching us spiritual truths that are larger than the physical realities. Jerusalem is really a type of the people of God, the people that God is building from every tribe and tongue and kindred for himself. We see this vividly in Revelation 21 where we read that, "Behold, I saw a new heavens and a new earth and I saw the city of Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem descending out of heaven." Jerusalem, new Jerusalem descending out of heaven. What are the next words? "As a bride prepared for her husband." The new Jerusalem is the church, sanctified, made holy.

So Jerusalem is a type of that, so we are called to put God's agenda at the center and his agenda is to build the new Jerusalem in your life, in your heart, in your family, and in the church here and through opportunities to minister to people around you through evangelism and edification of believers. So are you committed to your calling? Is worship at the center? Think about that. How important is worship, corporate worship in your life? How are you discipling your children in that? How important is worship? How

important should they see worship based on your example? How important is worship just as a part of every day? I mean, God doesn't just intend us to worship him on Sunday and Wednesday, he intends us to worship him continually. We're to pray without ceasing. We're to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength. We're to always be loving God. Everything is to be caught up into worship, that's why he calls the church a kingdom of priests. When you become a follower of Jesus, you become a priest in the kingdom and a priest was someone who was devoted to one thing, to worship.

So they're committed to their calling. At this point in history, their calling is to build the physical city of Jerusalem and to build the temple and they're committed to building what God has told them to build. That's the first thing we see, the first point, they are committed to their calling. Secondly, second point, they have experienced God's blessing. They've experienced God's manifest blessing in their life. I mean, they really have. The coming together as one man is evidence of God's hand in their life. The fact as we saw last time, they've come home from more than 800 miles away and remember we saw how as we looked at the groups of the descriptions, that God has preserved every group they need. Everything, they have everything they need to build his house. They have gatekeepers for the temple. They have builders for the temple. They have singers for the temple. They have priests. They have Levites. They have everything they need. They have in God's provision all of the vessels for the temple that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen. You would have thought at some point they would have melted those and turned it into cash but they didn't. God preserved those.

So they've come back with all of that and now they even in a sense, they feel the wind of God's Spirit in their sails as they gather together in Jerusalem on the seventh month. It's interesting, the first words in the text are actually as they are in English, in Hebrew it's the same way, "When the seventh month came." Now when you look at that and it's easy to pass over those things, isn't it? It's not like it says like seventh month, we're in the seventh month, it comes tomorrow, July, right? But we, in the Bible, of course, the numbering of months is different. The Hebrew calendar was different but the question here would be if you're really trying to interpret carefully you'd say, "Was this talking about the seventh month after they left Babylon?" Possible. Is that it or is this talking about the seventh month because they would, they just referred to their months often just by the number of the month, not always the name.

Well, context is gonna tell us that it's actually the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar because we know that because the feast of booths that they celebrate, in just a moment we're told about that, that happens in the seventh month, the month of Tishri which is September/October aligned to our calendar. It's the seventh month of the Jewish year is when they get back or when they've been back for a little while but not long, and in God's providence it's they're back for the seventh month. There's a lot of neat things about the seventh month. It's actually for the Jews, the seventh month, that Tishri which I said it moves around because they have a lunar calendar and we have a solar calendar, it moves around a little bit in September/October. This is why, for instance, you will, well, when you compare like Hanukkah to Christmas, it's real easy to predict the day of Christmas,

isn't it? December 25. Hanukkah, though, moves around. It's because of that same thing. Easter, we're more like them on Easter, aren't we? You can't tell what Easter's gonna be either. Anyway, I'm sorry. I got into, the numbers distracted me for a moment.

But the point of this is the seventh month. It's the most important month on the calendar for the Jews, the most spiritually significant month. Now Passover is in the first month, the month of Nisan, and it's incredibly important but the seventh month, the first day of the seventh month is the Jewish new year, the day when the trumpets were to be blown. Rosh Hashanah became to be called, the Jewish new year, and the tenth day of the seventh month was the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, the most significant day of the whole year. Now it's interesting we're not told about Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur was the day when the high priest would wearing the breastplate with all the names of the people of God would choose two goats to be offered as sin offerings on that day, one a scapegoat and one the sin offering and he would confess over the head of the scapegoat the sins of the people, and then the sin offering, the blood of that sin offering would be offered and the high priest would go in behind, the one time a year that anyone went into the Holy of Holies, the holiest place was Yom Kippur. The one day a year when God's presence was fully experienced and fully restored, Yom Kippur, the tenth day of the seventh month. They would go behind the veil and offer the blood of that sin offering on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. The scapegoat would be driven into the wilderness to symbolize this is what should happen to sinners, driven away from the presence of God. Do you see how that pictures our salvation? And Jesus is the fulfillment of both the sin offering and the scapegoat because he himself offers his own blood on the true mercy seat, the throne of God in heaven. How did he do that? He also became the scapegoat because he was driven away from God's presence while hanging on the cross, bearing the wrath of God against sin, separated from the Father. He cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" quoting Psalm 22:1. He knows why but he's crying out of his anguish of his heart and he's letting us know this is what has happened. The scapegoat has been driven away from the presence of God.

Well, the tenth is Yom Kippur. Why are we not told about it? Well, they couldn't celebrate Yom Kippur because there was no temple. You see, worship has been eradicated, true worship has been eradicated; that when the temple went down, it wasn't just like a building, a fire as devastating as that could be if the church building was to burn down or one of our homes burn down, what a terrible thing, you lose so much, how much more they lost when they lost the temple. It was the place of meeting God. Well, the seventh month was rich with all of that, the wealth of religious spiritual significance. It was new year, first day; tenth day was Yom Kippur; the fifteenth day was the beginning of the feast of booths, or we call it sometimes the feast of tabernacles for eight days, seven days and then the eighth day they had special offerings that were to be offered.

So they celebrate the feast of booths. So it was like, it's kind of like and if you think this isn't really worthy but it sort of gives you the idea. Think about as an American, if you're from a different culture and you came to America and you live here now, you know the significance of Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year, how it just falls, boom,

boom, boom. You know, you go into, it's the holiday season, right? And so, you know, there's all kind of benefits and blessings and joy, family time and all of that that comes. Well, November, December, January, those are things that you just kind of know that. Well, the Jews, they had that, the way their calendar operated and the seventh month had that kind of weight but even more precious because it was spiritually truly significant.

So on the seventh month, they gather. Interestingly enough too, you'll find either in Kings or Chronicles, I can't remember which account, maybe both places, but Solomon, you know what month he dedicated the temple when they build the temple? It was the seventh month. They dedicated the temple when they built, when the tabernacle became permanent in the temple, that now has been destroyed, that now they're about to rebuild, they dedicated it in the seventh month. So it wasn't by accident that they have gathered. The Lord even encouraging them that they were able to come together as one man in Jerusalem on the seventh month. They've experienced God's blessing. God has brought them back from Babylonian exile and now they're back in the land and they're at the place of the temple.

They've experienced God's blessing. They've committed to their calling, they've experienced God's blessing, the question is look at how you've experienced God's blessing. You have been, if you belong to Christ you have been called out of darkness into his marvelous light. He has given you the gift of saving faith, repentance. He's given you his Spirit. He's at work in your life. He has been at work in your life. You may feel like today, "I don't see him working like I wish that I did. I'm struggling in areas." Well, look back and see if you see his hand at work.

They had experienced God's blessing and because of that they should have been very confident. They'd experienced God's blessing as I said a moment ago, they have all that they need. They have priests, they have Levites, they have singers, they have everything they need. They had the resources that they need. God has miraculously provided that they have wealth and they have all the offerings even of Cyrus himself to build the temple. So the work they're called to do, they have God's evident blessing upon them to do it and the reality is if we belong to Jesus Christ, so do we. We have everything we need.

So it's with that sense of joy and expectancy that they come to gather in Jerusalem. So now that brings us to the third point. We've seen they are committed, they were committed to their calling, they've experienced God's blessing, third point, they have valid reason to be afraid. Isn't it interesting when you read the text, it ought to jump out at us as we read it, verse 3, "So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands." Why are they afraid? I mean, remember if you're reading this for the first time and you're not familiar with this story, you don't know that all the opposition is coming, think about what you've seen so far. Cyrus, the king of Persia, issues an edict in chapter 1 and he gives, and he delivers all of the wealth of the temple that had been stolen back to the people and he commissions them, "Go and build God's house." God orchestrating through Cyrus, guiding the king to do exactly what he wants and then you see the Lord stirring the hearts of 50,000 people basically to go back

to build, and as you're walking along and you're hearing, "We have 4,000 priests in our caravan. We have, you know, we have all these Levites. We have these gatekeepers. We have everything that we need." They get back to the land, begin to see it's a little more daunting than they thought, but they have the wind in their sails of God's blessing and yet he says here in reality even as they gathered with God's blessing upon them, they were terrified and we're gonna see that they had reason to be.

Now put in context, if God is for you, who can be against you? But that's sometimes easier said than done, isn't it, or believed? And so looking at their circumstances, looking at the difficulty, looking at the opposition, they had reason to be terrified. They were already, this tells us they were already experiencing ostracism and persecution. Cyrus has told them that they're to build the temple. The king has told us, but they're far removed from Cyrus, they're out there and now what's happened here, we're gonna see, I think this is a good explanation of one of the reasons that the local officials that are, you know, like we're gonna meet a guy named Tadini and a guy named Sanballat and there's others who are like rulers over parts of the areas around them. I think what happened, one of the commentators I read suggests this, is that when Cyrus sends them back to build the temple in Jerusalem, he carves out some land from some surrounding areas and says, "This is now Judah, Judea. And Sheshbazzar, you're the governor," and then later Zerubbabel will be the governor. Now that's what he did and he took some territory from some other people. You know, it's like the government taking your land. They weren't happy about that and then when you add to that the spiritual opposition that people who hate God and don't really want to worship the living God, the true God, the way he insists on being worshiped, the spiritual opposition.

So they're sensing that, they're sensing they're in a place that is spiritually very dark. They've been plopped down there and they can sense the hatred. It's like the fact that we believe, isn't it amazing how much antipathy we can get even when we're trying to be very kind and loving to people. You know, you tell someone, "Listen, I really care about you." You demonstrate that you care about them, that you accept them as human beings even though they're living in an ungodly lifestyle. We know we're all sinners. For example, today it's, you know, homosexuality is not just accepted, it's like advocated in the culture. It's not just applauded, it's supported and endorsed and encouraged. So as Christians, we believe the Bible is the word of God and the Bible says that he created man and woman to be in a union that lasts forever; that sexuality is not something that's supposed to just be explored and enjoyed according to the whims of the human heart. No, sin has distorted us so much that we must do it God's way. We must use God's blessings God's way. In the sense, the Bible's an owner's manual and so, you know, you buy a piece of equipment at Home Depot and you better use it according to the owner's manual. Or you buy a piece of cooking equipment and you'd better use it according to the owner's manual. There are certain things you need to do and if you don't do that, it's not gonna work.

Well, God has given us his owner's manual and he says one man, one woman for life, and so it's a loving thing for us to actually as we have relationships with people to say, "Listen, I know this is hard for you to accept given the culture but the Lord's really clear

about this. And I've learned that when I follow my heart, it leads to death. The Bible in fact says that, "There's a way that seems right to a man but the end thereof is the way of death," Proverbs 14:12, and it's repeated also in the Proverbs. So I've learned that and I'm just telling you don't trust your heart, trust God's word. He is a loving God who forgives all sinners. We're all sinners." You just have this conversation and watch the hatred that you might encounter and maybe the person that you are talking to actually is under conviction and they might get saved, but the people around you hate you because you were having that conversation.

That's what it is to live for Christ in an increasingly dark world and when you move into certain areas, you can almost feel the evil. Have you had that experience where you can almost feel the evil and oppression in certain, you know, circumstances, places, that there's just a lot of people who are opposed to God here? Well, what do you do? Well, this tells us there's reason to be afraid. It would be foolish just to laugh it off, "Yeah, no big deal," and kind of have a bumper sticker Christianity, "Greater is He who is," I mean, this is Bible, this is true but we can use it as kind of a bumper sticker, "Greater is He that is in me than he that's in the world," and just kind of charge on ahead. No, we need to be wise and discerning and biblical. Yeah, we really don't have a cause for fear if we are walking with the Lord. Now he may allow us to be persecuted and killed. It could happen. It's happened to a lot of Christians throughout history and happened to a lot of saints in the Old Testament too. So the issue is not so much what's happening in the natural realm, it's what happening in the spiritual.

But they had reason to be afraid. I mean, there were echoes and I think they are echoes here of previous circumstances. You think about it, they've come back into the land from they were in Babylon, they've come back into the land and they're afraid, or they're entering the land and they're afraid. I think it echoes, in a sense, Numbers 14. That's when the people left the exodus, they left Egypt and they were gonna go into the land and how did they feel about that? Man, they were scared and it wasn't that they were wrong to be scared, it was that they wrong not to trust God in their being afraid. Psalm 56, "When I'm afraid, I will trust in You." So they should have trusted in God but they didn't go into the land in Numbers 14. Remember, they rebelled against God and were ready to kill Moses and Aaron. They heard the report about the walled cities and the giants and, "There's no way we can do this. We're not trained for war. What are we doing? We shouldn't be here." This is what they're thinking. But God had said, "The land is yours." Remember, Joshua and Caleb were, "It doesn't matter about them, the Lord will give us the land. He promised us."

That's why I think that's an echo of that. They've come back into the land, they're afraid, but I think it's also an interesting echo of their father Abraham. I mean, think about this, in God's providence the country that took them captive was Babylon. Where was Abraham from? He was from Ur of the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans is an ancient name for Babylonians and so when Abraham was called by God in Genesis 12 to, "Go to the land that I will show you," he left Ur of the Chaldeans and he trekked virtually the identical path that they had taken across Mesopotamia through Syria to the land of Canaan. They're walking in his footsteps and one of the things that you read in Genesis 12 is you

read about Abraham, what he does when he first gets there and then you also read what happens right after he gets there. He has a good start, he builds altars, worships the Lord, but then there's a famine in the land and he goes to Egypt and what happens? He is afraid. He's so afraid he tells the Egyptians that his wife, Sarai, is really his sister. Pharaoh takes her as his wife and God deals with Pharaoh and basically in spite of Abraham God protects Sarai as she becomes Sarah later, as his wife. If that weren't enough, in chapter 20 later on in Abraham's life, now Abraham and Sarah, they're in another part of Canaan and Abraham, is in the region of Abimelech, the western side of Canaan and he's afraid and he says, "Honey, you know that thing we did years ago? We need to do it again. You tell them you're not my wife because I think they may kill me, just like I told you in Egypt because they want to marry you." And so she went along with it a second time and they did it again. Isn't it amazing? God protected you when you were in Egypt, he put plagues on Pharaoh's house to make them let you alone and leave, and you left wealthier. Why can you not trust God?

Well, there had to be some comfort in that as they think back, we come just like Abraham did and here we are afraid and like I said, Abraham if you look at it naturally, he had reason. Now he's got no army, he's just got a few, you know, a few dozen people. The same is true for us. If you look at things humanly speaking, the culture is more opposed, the numbers are against us, it's always a minority that are truly believers in the culture, a remnant, and so if it comes to a popular vote, we lose. So do we not put our hope in those things but we can understand, yeah, there's reason to be afraid and beyond that, think about this, what are we called to do? We're called to build God's house, we're called to put worship first and love him with everything that we are and prepare a heart that is more and more his and help other people to have their hearts be more and more his, become more and more holy, and that is incredibly difficult in this world, not just because people socially don't like it, because we are up against tremendous forces spiritually. The world system is against it. Everything around you every day is advertising that you not trust God, not believe God, not love God. The devil, you have a real spiritual enemy who's a deceiver who's constantly trying to deceive us and to lie to us and to tempt us away from faith in the Lord. And not only do you have the world and the devil, you have the flesh, we have the enemy within us. We have a sin nature. As Christians though we've been born-again, we still have the pull of our sinful desires.

Now live for God, put worship first, keep everything centered on that against those enemies and help other people around you do that. Help your children do that. Help other believers do that. I'm telling you, we have reason to be afraid. You look at it honestly, the odds are against us apparently but the good news is, of course, if God is for you, who can be against you? If you're really doing his work, nothing can stop it. He is mighty. His word is mighty and he loves to put people in positions where things seem hopeless so that he can show his glory. This is his agenda. This is why he did it this way in Ezra-Nehemiah. I mean, he could have brought them back in the land, he could have nuked, he could have done a nuclear bomb that didn't leave any nuclear fallout. He could've just nuked everybody there, moved everything back in, rebuilt the temple, poof, like that. "Look at My glory." Showing the people, he could've done that. He could just defeat all of his enemies continuously, people resisting him, he could just knock them down but

that's not God's way. God's way is to seek not to overpower people by his omnipotence but is to invite people to faith freely offered, freely received, of course with the help of his grace. That's the nature of God.

So he shows his glory in hopeless circumstances and so we find ourselves exactly where they were, exactly where Abraham was, tempted to be afraid. We look around us, we see the difficulties, we want to quit. We get discouraged. It doesn't seem to be working. I'm still having the same battles I've had. When is it going to end? Does it ever get easier? We expect this like we're gonna coast at some point but the Christian life is a continual run uphill or maybe it's a bike ride that is always uphill. But the wonder of it is you have the power of God to help you up the hill and God is glorified in that.

So they had reason to be afraid. They were committed to their calling, that was our first point. They've experienced God's blessing. They have reason to be afraid. The fourth point, what we see in the text is they have sought God's face according to his prescribed path. In their fear, they did the one thing that they should do. They did it and that was they sought God's face according to the way God had prescribed for them to seek it. That's the point of verses 2 to 6. They arose and built the altar. If they're gonna put worship first, the first thing they have to do is build the altar. If they're going to put God in the place he needs to be in their lives, they must build the altar and they must do that, why? There's only one reason you build an altar and that is to make sacrifices. Biblically that's the only reason you have an altar is to offer blood sacrifices on that altar.

The phrase "burnt offerings" occurs six times between verses 2 and 6. Look at the repetition. They built the altar of God of Israel, verse 2, "to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings." You see burnt offering, burnt offering, burnt offering. The first thing that you do to seek the presence of God is you offer an offering. This is something that is clear from the very beginning of the Bible. We don't think sin is that bad. That's our problem, we don't think sin is that big a deal. We really don't. Naturally we are more wicked than we can imagine and yet we have no idea of it. This is how we come into the world. We are exalting ourselves as our own gods. That's the incredible wickedness. We want to determine the course of our life. We want to call the shots and that is to try to take God off of his throne.

That's the essence of sin. That is heinous and wicked. It's incredibly egregiously evil and it's indigenous to the heart of sinful people like you and me. We came into the world thinking that. That's how babies are. As beautiful as they are, they want what they want, when they want it. You know, a nine-month-old is not thinking, "I know mom needs to sleep. I'm hungry but I can wait. I have a dirty diaper, I can wait. I'm gonna let her, she looked really tired last time I saw her." No, they want what they want and they want it now and you can see that, the rage even in a little toddler's eyes. Isn't it amazing so beautiful, so precious because of the image of God, there's dignity, there's beauty, they're

made to be like God and yet sin, the determination just to do what they want to do against authority. That's one of the clearest expressions early that you have given birth to a sinner. 100% of the time it's guaranteed you will give birth to a sinner but we have a great Savior who saves sinners.

So the Lord makes clear that there's one thing you have to do is build an altar. So in the very beginning, Genesis 3, when they sinned, remember they sinned, they rebel against God, and they see they're naked. What do they do? They cover their nakedness with fig leaves. Was that acceptable to God? No. He covered them with, what? With animal skins. He's prattling with us, he's baby-talking with us there telling us at the very beginning so we can understand it in a visual way, "You cannot cover sin apart from the shedding of blood." Sin is so much more wicked than we realize. Shedding of blood, without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, the book of Hebrews says that.

Chapter 4, the next chapter, Genesis 4, things get bad. Cain kills Abel. Why does Cain kill Abel? Cain kills Abel because Cain offered a sacrifice to God to seek God's fellowship, he brings some of the produce, he brings his garden goods. Just like he has some great tomatoes and he's like, "These are awesome." Just had a BLT, well, he could have had, no, he wouldn't have had a BLT then. Yeah, he could have. He could've had a BLT, that's before the dietary laws. So he might have, anyway, forget that. He had a tomato sandwich and he's like, "These tomatoes are awesome," and he brings them and he brings some corn, he brings some grain. He says, "This is awesome," and he gives it to the Lord. "This is an offering to You." And his brother Abel kills a lamb and offers the fat portions to God as a burnt offering and God receives the offering of Abel and not Cain and Cain becomes enraged and kills his brother Abel. What was that teaching us? You cannot meet with God as a sinner apart from a sacrifice and God goes to Cain graciously and says, "Why are you so angry?" Before he kills Abel, "Why are you so angry? Just do what is right and you'll be accepted." How gracious and kind of God.

So then you have that, then in chapter 12 I mentioned when Abraham goes into the land, turn to Genesis 12. He's called from Ur of the Chaldeans and he goes to Canaan and he finally arrives in Canaan in verse 6, Genesis 12:6, "Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'" God appears to him, he's in the presence of God, "So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him." Why did he build an altar? To offer a sacrifice.

Look at verse 8. He travels on from there, "Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD." If you meet with God, if you call upon the name of the Lord, you must do so with an altar making an offering. This is what God is teaching us, prattling to us in the beginning of his written word in his dealings with people.

So what's the first thing they need to do when they get in the land? To build an altar. In fact, you see this also, just look at this, I'm not going to take time to read it, Deuteronomy

27, verses like 1 to 7 or 8, they're told right before they go into, remember Numbers 14 I said they didn't want, they didn't have faith to go in the land, remember? They were told to go into the land, God's gonna get you in. Joshua and Caleb say we can trust the Lord, trust the Lord. The other 10 spies, no, we can't do it. So they didn't and so 40 years they wander in the wilderness, then chapter 27 of Deuteronomy they're told when you go into the land, when you cross the Jordan River, when you cross the Jordan River and your feet step into the land of Canaan which is a type of heaven, a type of God's presence, what is the first that you're to do? You are to take stones, you are to build an altar and offer burnt offerings. How can you get into God's presence? You must have a sacrifice.

So back to Ezra, they're back in the land and they know this. When Abram came into the land, he built an altar and he offers sacrifices. When the people of Israel went into the land, they built an altar and made sacrifices. When we come into the land, how do you come into God's presence? You must make, build an altar and make sacrifices. That's the, and the other thing that's emphasized in the passage, look at important words here. Look at verse 2, they "built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it," next phrase, "as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God." That is powerful way to highlight and underscore he's not just, it's not just the law, it's the law of Moses, the one they revere. Then they add to it, you didn't need to add "the man of God." The man of God is a technical term to mean the man who has the word of God in his mouth. So Moses, the man of God who had the word of God in his mouth, spoke and wrote these things down and we better do it exactly as he said.

You also see that same phrase, "as it is written." Look at verse 4, "They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required." You see, they had to do it exactly as God said. God says, "You must offer sacrifice and the sacrifice has got to be where I said it's got to be and it's got to be done exactly as I say it must be done. It's got to be done exactly in accordance with the way I prescribe." When you read Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, it gets a little wearisome at times. You're like, he goes over like, I meant to tell, the feast of booths discussion in Numbers 29, I encourage you to read it this week. What you're gonna see is that when the feast of booths started on the 15th day, on the first day you must offer 12 bulls, 2 rams, male rams, all without blemish, without defect, 14 male lambs and one goat along with grain offerings, and it's like it's all worded out there carefully. And on the second day, you must offer 11 bulls, 2 rams, 14 lambs, 14 sheep, and one goat. On the next day, 10 bulls, the same number of rams. This is how I would have said it, offer 12 bulls and then each day a lesser number of bulls but keep the number of rams and lambs and goats the same. It doesn't change. Could have said it a lot quicker. Why did God say it the way he said it? Because he wanted you to hear it again and again and again, and part of what's happening, the sacrificial system, offer a sacrifice, what's that all about?

I remember I had a conversation with a young lady who had trusted Christ, she was about 15 years old, precious young lady, now she's in her 30s, and her mom told me she wants to come talk to you. She has some real questions. She's struggling. She had just become a believer. She came into my office and with her mom and she said, I said, "What's going

on? What are you struggling with?" She said, "I really don't understand why animal sacrifices are in the Bible." This was a young lady who had, you know, love of animals and she was genuinely hurting over that and I said, "You know, in many ways I don't either." I mean, if you really look at it, it's pretty astonishing. I said it's probably a lot worse than you even think. And you know, when you look at it, what they did when they first started the, you can look at this in, if you read Exodus through Deuteronomy you get the whole picture in different passages, but they start off the day every day when the temple was functioning or the tabernacle was functioning, they offered burnt offering, first thing was they killed a lamb in the morning and a lamb in the evening and they made burnt offerings to bookend the day, and then they would just do the offerings of the people. So if you got, you know, 3 or 4 million people, then you just have the scent, there are five offerings in Leviticus: there's the sin offering, there's the burnt offering, there's the sin offering, there's the peace offering, there's the guilt offering, there's the grain offering. Four of those involved animals dying. The grain offering is just grain. So if you sin, you do some kind of sin, then you offer a sin offering or you offer a burnt offering, you offer a guilt offering. Somebody in your family, you've got to go to the tabernacle and do this, so that essentially the tabernacle became like a killing place. The temple, I mean, I did the math. If the people were even moderately spiritually minded, they were killing like 2,000 animals a day. That's like three a minute, goat, bull, ram, lamb dying continually. Blood is flowing everywhere. I didn't tell, I was not quite this emphatic with this 15-year-old girl. I was more gentle with her. But I told her, I said, "You know, when you look at it carefully, what are you, what should you feel?" I said, "You feel what you should feel, honey. You feel appalled at the carnage. That's exactly what God wants you to feel as you look at it."

Now put this in context. This is why it's so important when you see something that troubles you in Scripture, don't run away from it, you run to God with it and keep reading your Bible because put it in context and this is what I shared with her, I said, "You know, the Lord made every animal that you love and look at the complexity and beauty of the animal kingdom." You know, the Bible says that he knows when a sparrow falls from heaven. He's so concerned, he knows every single one of his birds. He's got them numbered and when one falls, he knows it. The Bible says he causes the deer to calve. He causes the sheep to have, to give birth. He's causing them to conceive. He fashioned them. He makes them. And when he looked at all that he made, he said, "Behold, it is good," and when he made the world, there was no death and there was no killing and there was no meat eating. She was also a vegetarian. There was no meat eating. But when sin entered the world, everything changed and do you know what that sacrificial system is telling you that I said earlier our sin seems small to us but it's not small to God. God sees it rightly and one of the ways he was prattling with the people in the Old Testament was to say when you sin and you go and you have to take the lamb or the bull and you take it all the way to Jerusalem and then often you would have to, the man would cut the throat, it wasn't always the case, the priest did it some too, prescribed in different places in different ways, you might have to cut the throat of the animal. You did that and that animal just dying to protect you and you saw all of the blood and you, the smells, the offensive smells. In Malachi it says the priests were, they were getting tired of the work and it was becoming nauseating to them and they were resenting it rather than, it was

appropriate to be appalled but the problem was turn your appalment, turn your indignation to where it really belongs, to yourself. The God who loves all of his creation is telling us our sin is so bad that something this appalling must happen on a daily basis to allow me even to continue to allow you to exist and all of that was pointing to a day when the most, when the far more appalling thing would happen when this sinless and holy Son of God, righteous in every way, would be nailed to a cross and experience the outpouring of the wrath of God against all sin, the unbridling of evil in a way that the world has never known before or shall never know again. That moment the greatest moment of the outpouring of God's wrath in history, that moment was the most appalling thing that has ever happened and it happened because of my sin.

It happened because of your sin and God is teaching us that. How do you put worship at the center of your life? How do you live for God in the world? You continually go back to the one sacrifice. We don't make any sacrifices so we don't have to build any altars anymore, what we have to do is continue to keep our face and our eyes on Christ and our feet planted at the cross. The one sacrifice that God has done that enables me to stand as holy before him, that enables me as imperfect as I am and you as imperfect as you are, in a world that's against you, with a sin nature that's against you. How can you possibly live for God? You must cling to the cross. It is the first thing before everything else. Worship is first but if you're gonna worship, you must cling to the cross. Continually clinging to Christ crucified. Jesus crucified in my place, bearing my sin, taking it out of the way, that is my hope. And if you keep that first, then you will experience the presence and the power of God to help you do everything he ever calls you to do, even if he calls you or me to die as a martyr. It will be that we're clinging to Christ crucified in the moment that will give us the strength to do it to his glory because I tell you, I'm scared of pain. I don't like any of that stuff, but I know that Jesus is able and that's what God wants for us. We don't have to be discouraged. In fact, as the world gets darker, the glory of Christ gets brighter and isn't it true that as the world gets darker, it makes you want to go to heaven more. I mean, we should want to go to heaven more anyway but it's one of the good things the Lord is doing. Our God is good.

Let's pray to him right now.

Our Father, we praise and honor You, just the glorious plan of salvation. Your incredible patience and kindness and forbearance with sinners, Lord, help us look at the things of Scripture to see how really wicked our sin is. It's so hard for us to see but thank You for giving us Your word that shows us these images, shows us all of this shed blood and then finally all of that shed blood was ended when the Son of God came and offered once for all a sacrifice that need never be offered again. And Lord, for us today, we put worship first by having broken hearts before the cross, broken hearts over our sin but before the cross, trusting that even as we come in our brokenness the blood of Jesus cleanses from all unrighteousness, the blood of Jesus empowers us, it purifies us, and the resurrection life of Jesus empowers us to give You glory and to walk in a way that is pleasing to You. Our Father, we praise and honor You. Help us be worthy and walk worthy of the calling we've received. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.