

God Is Seeking Worshipers

Ezra 1:4-11

We started a study of the book of Ezra last week, with a very clear and obvious emphasis upon God's promise as Jesus declared it to his disciples,

Mat. 16:18 "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

You should remember that Ezra was written at the end of a long, 70-year exile of the nation of Israel. They had been captured by the Babylonians and carried off away from their land. But God stirred the heart of the Persian King Cyrus to send the people of Israel back to their land. The year was 536 BC.

v.1-3

The focus in all of that was upon the promise that God would build his house. That's why the Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus, so that the people of Israel would return and rebuild the house of God. They would rebuild the house of the Lord. For Ezra, the house was, of course, the temple in Jerusalem. And the importance of that house was that it was place where God would dwell among his people. God's house was the place where God's presence would be made known. And if the house would be in Jerusalem, according to verse 2, then God would be in Jerusalem, according to verse 3.

But now, let me emphasize something and make it as clear as possible. The house of God, representing the presence of God, was the place where God would be worshiped. God is present in his house to be worshiped in his house. We read in 1 Kings 8 of Solomon's prayer upon the dedication of the first temple that the Babylonians had destroyed.

1 Kings 8:27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold,

heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! 28 Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, 29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. 30 And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive."

So the house of God is the place of worship, because it is the place of God's presence. And that same principle is extended into the reality of the New Covenant with the existence of the church. That is why this is such a valuable and edifying book for us to study. This is the connection that I want to make clear, and is the foundation for the whole sermon last week. The significance of God's promise to build his house is that this promise is ultimately fulfilled in the New Testament church. Just listen to these words,

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

That's the church, what Paul calls "a holy temple in the Lord." "A dwelling place for God." The house of God, the household of God. And again, here is my point. God is seeking worshipers! That's what the book of Ezra is all about. God is seeking worshipers, to worship him in the place he determines, the place he decides. That "place" is called his "house." And that "place" of

worship now is called the church! The house of God is now the church of Jesus. The place of worship for the people of God is no longer in the temple in Jerusalem, but in the church of Jesus Christ wherever she meets, two or three gathered together in Jesus' name.

God is first and foremost interested in establishing the faithful worship of his people, the place where his people would faithfully worship him. So the importance of rebuilding the house of God is to reestablish the place where God would be worshiped. We aren't simply studying the history of the nation of Israel in the 6th century BC. Rather, we are studying the way of God with his covenant people, and that begins with worship. Corporate, public worship. In the place which God assigns. And the place is so very, very important. We read in,

Deut. 12:4 "You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. 5 But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, 6 and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. 7 And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. 8 "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, 9 for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you. 10 But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, 11 then to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the

contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the Lord. 12 And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levite that is within your towns, since he has no portion or inheritance with you. 13 Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, 14 but at the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you."

In that context, I began our worship this afternoon with a reference to that place of worship as I called you together to worship.

Ps. 27:4 "One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple."

So the book of Ezra is all about the building of the church, and the building of the church is all about the worship of God, for the church is now the place where God has established his presence in order to be worshiped.

With that, let me demonstrate to you the priority of worship. The priority which God has established for his people. That priority in Ezra 1 becomes obvious, that the whole purpose of God stirring the heart of King Cyrus was to rebuild this house of worship. But the people, as it turned out, weren't too faithful. The prophet Haggai writes some 18 years later.

Haggai 1:1 "In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 "Thus says the Lord of hosts:

These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” 3 Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. 6 You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. 7 “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. 8 Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. 9 You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. 10 Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 11 And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.”

Verse 8 there is the key: “Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.” That is the language of worship. God commanded his house to be rebuilt so that he could pleasure in the worshiped offered by his people, that he might be glorified. It was true then. It is true now.

I. God seeks worshipers.

That is what Ezra is all about. And that is what Jesus himself makes so clear. Let me make a direct connection of Ezra 1 and the words of Jesus. John chapter 4, the account of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well. After he exposed the sinfulness of her life by noting her five previous husbands as well

as the man with whom she was living without being married, the woman decided to change the subject. She thought it would be clever to bring up a good discussion question, such as the place of worship. So with reference to her Samaritan ancestors, she declared,

John 4:20 “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24 God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

God is seeking worshipers! That’s what Jesus says. God is seeking true worshipers, those who worship in spirit and truth. “The Father is seeking such people to worship him.” And he still is. God will build his church, his house, so that his people will be worshipers. God will build his church throughout this age, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, so that his people will continue to gather together in the church to worship him. That’s the priority. And that is to be our priority!

Worship. That’s the priority of the church, not anything else, no other program has priority. God is seeking worshipers! So that is your calling. That is my calling. That is our calling together. To be worshipers, for together, we are his house!

So, back to history. Back to Ezra. What do you read in verse 5?

A. God stirs the hearts of his people.

God is at work, seeking worshipers. God is stirring the hearts of his people to be worshipers. And if God would bless the labor and work of my preaching, he would be stirring your hearts to be worshipers today.

Sunday School is important and helpful for our Christian education and training, but ultimately it is not essential. We could even say its optional. Good and useful, to be sure, but still optional. Not so for worship! And God actually gives us a whole day to worship, which is why we frame this glorious day each week with worship services morning and afternoon. God is seeking worshipers. God stirs the hearts of his people to be worshipers. So this is the song you should always be singing,

Ps. 84:1 “How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! 2 My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...4 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; They will still be praising You.”

In Ezra, God does even more. Notice how,

B. God provides for the needs of his people.

When Cyrus sent the people of God back to Israel, he sent great riches along with them.

It seems that even the non-Jewish neighbors of the people would help them, and give them goods and livestock. And the Jews would bring to the temple their own free-will offerings. As worship. Those free will offerings were the most cherished of all the sacrifices, for they would most closely reflect the heart, those things given out of devotion, freely, cheerfully. Not out of mere

precept or obligation. Thus, under God’s direction, King Cyrus calls the people of Israel to be cheerful givers. To offer the worship of freewill offerings in the place which he determined. God would be worshiped. And,

C. God makes clear the blessing of free-will offerings.

They are mentioned in both verse 4 and verse 6. The New Testament transforms the Old Covenant shadows and emphasizes this sense of free will offerings with Paul’s words in,

2 Cor. 9:7 “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

This sense of a freewill offering is even further broadened in the familiar words of Romans 12, in which our whole bodies are to be offered as a sacrifice of worship to God, a living sacrifice as compared to the dead sacrifices of the Old Covenant.

Rom. 12:1 “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

All of that is built upon this basic concept of the central purpose of God in seeking worshipers to worship him in his house as he makes himself known among his people. In that context I want to look further at,

Here, actually, we learn more of,

II. THE NATURE OF WORSHIPERS.

The people would be accompanied by the precious things of the land. With all the wealth that had previously been theirs. Restored in fullness. But why such detail, you might ask? In one sense, because God is a God of detail. God is a God who

measures everything perfectly. But further, I believe this description of the wealth which accompanied the people of Israel became a symbol of those people themselves. In other words, God's people are to him precious things. So here in Ezra,

A. God's people are represented by objects of greatest earthly value.

Basins of gold. Basins of silver. Vessels of gold and silver totally 5,400. The image is similar to the words of God at Mt. Sinai,

Ex.19:5 "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

To the people God said, "You shall be my treasured possession." That language is quoted in the New Testament and applied to the church. God's people are his own special treasure, and here in Ezra, that treasure actually accompanies the nation as they return to their land to build God's house. With amazing specificity.

Something else should be emphasized from the description of those precious things and all the wealth which would go back to Israel with the Jews. Those riches would also represent our final inheritance as God's people.

B. God's people shall inherit all the riches of heaven and earth.

Just as the OT people of Israel inherited all the riches that were rightly theirs, so we read of our eternal inheritance.

1 Peter 1:4 "...an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

So the riches of the inheritance which went with the people of Israel in Ezra are representative and symbolic of the riches which we as God's people shall ultimately inherit. And what is included in that inheritance? All the riches and wealth of heaven and earth, described in such glorious detail in,

Rev. 21:10 "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates...18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass."

So ultimately the inheritance of God's people is not limited to 5,400 vessels of gold and silver. Instead, the city of gold, the New Jerusalem, is represented by all the riches of heaven and earth.

I doubt very much that Cyrus understood all of that. Or any of it! Perhaps you have never thought about the book of Ezra this way before, either. Cyrus seems to be a very willing and eager servant of the Lord's purpose here, and he is certainly used by the Lord to fulfill his own sovereign purposes. The return of the Jews to their promised land after the 70 year exile was a great OT

event. But don't miss the greater import, the sense in which we, too, as the people of God, are living in an exile. And we, too, shall be restored to the fulness of what God has promised us in our eternal inheritance.

In that context, let us build the temple of God today, the household of God. Let us build the church. Let us be ones committed to the worship that takes place in that house of God, as the first priority of your own lives. For God is still seeking worshipers who will worship him in spirit and truth.

When it comes to our worship, we still need to heed the warnings we read in the Old Testament, "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes." Instead, "to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you."

Where is that place? Where does God's name dwell? Right here, in the church.

Ps. 84:1 "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!...4 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; They will still be praising You."