

Burnt Offerings to Living Sacrifices

Ezra 3:1-7

In preaching through the OT, I am not interested in merely understanding what the people did in the context of Judaism, which would be a rather common approach today. Let's understand the Jews and their religion, in their own context. To the contrary, my objective this afternoon is to understand instead what the Old Covenant people did with an anticipation that looks forward to the coming of Jesus Christ in the New Covenant.

So, after 70 years of exile, the people are back, all Israel is living in their own town. Life has returned to normal. Well, almost. One thing is still missing. One project is still required. The building of the temple. But that didn't stop the people from beginning to worship. Even without the temple, they assembled themselves together and offered the prescribed sacrifices—with great lessons for us and abiding truths for our edification.

And so, as I've defined my points today, they are all given in universal language, language that applies directly to us, and I want to study this restoration of the OT worship of the people of Israel in those general terms. And so my subject is not simply OT worship, but just worship. So the general principles regarding worship found in this passage apply to us just as they did then. Beginning with the main one, which is simply this,

I. GOD REGULATES THE CORPORATE WORSHIP OF HIS PEOPLE.

I use the word corporate worship to mean the worship of the body, the assembly of the congregation. Clearly, individuals do many things that we might rightly describe with the word worship. But worship has a very specific, technical meaning when referring to that which God's people do when they assemble together in his

presence. Corporate worship is what is being described here in Ezra 3.

v.1

What a marvelous definition of worship! "The people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem." That's what we do when we come here to worship. We gather together as one. We join ourselves together to the larger body, and we offer our sacrifices of worship to God as one. That is a crucial concept. We are not all coming to offer up our own individual sacrifices. We act as a body. We offer one sacrifice. What is important is the action of the body, not merely the individual actions of specific people.

And we read so consistently in Scripture is that when that assembly of God's people takes place, God regulates what happens, God gives the instructions. In our reformed tradition, we call that the regulative principle of worship. What we do in worship is specifically what God commands us to do, and nothing else. In other areas of life, we are given freedom to do whatever we want, as long as God doesn't forbid it. But worship is different, only what God commands. That principle is given most clearly in,

Deut.12:1 "These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2 You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3 And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. 4 You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things. 5 "But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there

you shall go. 6 There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. 7 And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. 8 “You shall not at all do as we are doing here today —every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes...13 Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; 14 but in the place which the LORD chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you.”

Further down in the chapter,

Deut. 12:28 “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God...32 “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

That’s the general principle of worship. “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” That’s what we see here in Ezra 3. The people acted in obedience to God’s instructions. Every step of the way.

v.2 “As it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.”

v.4 “As it is written.” Or, “According to the rule.”

Do you get the idea? Well, let’s look more specifically at what those regulations really were. In the external emphasis of the Old Covenant,

A. God regulates the place and time of worship.

First, they came to Jerusalem, presumably to the very place where the previous temple had been laid.

v.1

And the time? What was written? The time prescribed for the Feast of Tabernacles was the seventh month, specifically, the fifteenth day of the seventh month. God regulates the precise time and place when his people were to worship. So we read,

v.4

But then I should ask, how does that carry over to the New Covenant? Well, the principle is still valid. First, with regard to the time. The weekly sabbath. And the place? We now have much more freedom of location. We are able to meet for worship in every place, as Paul writes to,

1 Timothy 2:8 “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; 9 in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing.”

Still, the principle abides. The place in the OT meant a place separated from the heathen. And so the place for us, as regulated by God, continues to carry that meaning. We are to separate ourselves from the heathen. That’s what this place is, that is why it is a sanctuary. We are set apart from the world. So it’s not so much what building we meet in, but that we don’t meet to do the very same things that the heathen do in their places of worship. We don’t imitate the world, “everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes.” God regulates the place and time of worship. And,

B. God regulates the sacrifices offered in worship.

In the OT, that was pretty easy to understand. It was all spelled out in black and white, with all the details clearly specified.

v.4

You can read chapter after chapter in the OT regarding those sacrifices. With almost endless detail. And what is the point for us? God regulates the sacrifices offered in worship.

So what are those sacrifices? What are the elements of our worship which God has determined. Just go through our worship service. The call to worship. The reading and the preaching of God's word. Public prayer, including a confession of sin. Congregational singing. The sacraments. Public confession of faith and other oaths and vows. The collection of tithes and offerings. As well as the benediction.

That's it! And you can label that however you want. Most people would use the label of traditional, and most people today would include under the label of contemporary any number of additional elements of worship, elements not identified by God in his word. But again, the broad principle demonstrated here in Ezra 3 is defined by those words in,

Deut. 12:8. "You shall not at all do as we are doing here today —every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes..."

God regulates the corporate worship of his people. And, secondly,

II. GOD DEFINES THE MEANING OF CORPORATE WORSHIP.

I want to spent a little time looking at that meaning for the burnt offerings and the Feast of Tabernacles this afternoon, in order to see how that meaning has transferred over to New Covenant worship even though the external form has been done away with. In other words, though the outward form has changed, the meaning of the burnt offerings and the meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles are still the meaning of the sacrifices of worship we offer today.

We have been freed from the ceremonial regulations which applied only until the time of the new order, which the writer of Hebrews defines as,

Heb. 9:10 "...concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

But what, then, is,

A. The meaning of the burnt offerings.

v.2-3

First and foremost, the burnt offering was an offering of a sweet smelling aroma, pleasing to the Lord. The primary meaning of the sacrifice was a sacrifice intended to be pleasing to God, offered for his pleasure. The very first reference to such an offering is,

Gen. 8:20 "Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done."

Think for a moment. What was so pleasing about this burnt offering? All of it was offered. The burnt offering was often called the whole offering, or whole burnt offering. Everything was offered to God. Nothing held back. And it had to be a perfect animal, representing the very best that you had to offer. That's what was prescribed in the Old Testament.

So what's the meaning? I hope it is somewhat obvious. We are to offer our whole lives as a whole burnt offering. We are to hold nothing back, but lay ourselves upon the altar as a living

sacrifice.

Rom.12:11 “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.”

That’s the NT equivalent of the whole, burnt offering, a sacrifice of sweet smelling aroma pleasing to the Lord. There has been a change, from burnt offerings to living sacrifices. No more dead animals in our worship, but rather the sacrifice of your whole life.

Please let these thoughts sink deeply into your heart and soul, so that what you offer to God is your best. And if it is your best, then you make it a priority. You make it the most important. You prepare. You participate. And if you don’t make your sacrifice of worship the sacrifice of your whole life, then it isn’t pleasing to God! So give him your best. And give him everything. Give to him your whole life. That’s the meaning of the burnt offering. God also defines,

B. The meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles.

v.4

Lev.23:39 “Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the LORD for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. 40 And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. 41 You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42 You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in

booths, 43 that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.’ ”

So this feast is a time of remembering, a time of Thanksgiving, for the end of the harvest and for the provisions which the Lord has supplied. Our modern, national holiday of Thanksgiving is certainly in this context, but even more importantly, so is the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, particularly. As an element of worship, that sacrament carries forward the very same meaning as we just read for the OT feast of booths, or tabernacles, and I would make that connection for you.

We are made to be worshipers. And when our worship is done for his glory, for his delight, it becomes a very delightful experience for you as well, for that is how you were made. And as we see in Ezra 3,

III. GOD REVEALS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP.

And what is that significance? Let me go back to where I started, that marvelous definition of worship given in,
v.1

We gather together as one. That’s the significance of worship. We gather together as one, in the presence of the Lord.
v.6

Even before the foundation of the temple was laid, even before the external building was intact, the OT people of God still entered his presence. And that’s worship.

A. Corporate worship is the opportunity for God’s people to enter the presence of God.

There should be one overriding concern in your heart and soul

as you gather for worship. And that is to enter the presence of God. So our worship service is structured in order to give you that sense of God's presence. How does it begin? God speaks to us, inviting us to come. A call to worship. And we respond with singing and prayer. God speaks. We respond. It's a dialogue. A conversation, a holy conversation. Between God, the creator of heaven and earth, and us, his people. That worship ends with God speaking to us again, his blessing. His word of blessing upon us as we leave the assembly and go our separate ways.

My goal in leading worship is to lead you to the presence of God, as a congregation, in this place and time set aside for that very reason. This experience of corporate worship is to be the centerpiece of the work of the church. Other programs may be useful and edifying, so we schedule them, but they are not the focus of the work and ministry of the church. Corporate worship is, and that worship must be our priority as a congregation. It must be my priority as your pastor. The opportunity to enter the presence of God. And then, in the presence of God, to offer God your life as a living sacrifice. Indeed,

B. Corporate worship is the opportunity for God's people to offer the sacrifice of their whole lives to God.

Notice again the example of the people in Ezra 3.

v.5

The freewill offering demonstrates the willingness of what was given, without which the sacrifice would be meaningless. And the extravagant commitment of the people to provide for the worship of God is clearly shown in,

v.7

They would do whatever it took to get the temple built, so that they could continue to offer their sacrifices of worship to the Lord.

As you read those words, please learn to think about your participation in worship in those terms. This worship service today, as is the case with every worship service we hold, is an opportunity for you to enter God's presence and to listen to him. But it is also an opportunity for you to speak.

It is an opportunity to renew your commitment to God. And to renew the sacrifice of your whole lives to God. So offer every part of your life to God, all of it. Give it all to God, all of your life. Everything. Everything you do, all that you are, give to God. All for Jesus. Your whole life, every bit of it, a burnt offering, a living sacrifice.

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 [your spiritual worship]."