

The Foundation Is Laid

Ezra 3:8-13

With my engineering mind, I love watching construction projects, especially the building of a foundation. Watching a foundation being laid is such a meaningful thing because from the foundation, you can imagine the whole building. It's size and shape, and even its design and character. The foundation defines and determines the whole building. We noted that image this morning as well with reference to the apostles Jesus chose, those 12 men who would be called the foundation of the church.

As we study this afternoon in Ezra 3, as the people of Israel returned to Israel after those 70 years of exile, we observe just such an event. The foundation of the temple was built. And when that happened, it was an exciting event, for everyone could begin to see the whole temple which they would again have in which to worship. But they didn't wait for the temple to be completed before they started to worship. Just the sight of the foundation was enough to stir them on, and so in our text in Ezra 3 today, we have God's people again worshipping at the sight of their new temple.

So just as it was last Sunday, the subject this afternoon is worship. Last week, in the first 7 verses of Ezra 3, we studied the regulations which God gave the people for their worship, particularly the specific sacrifices they were to offer. And where. Today, the emphasis is more upon,

I. THE JOY OF WORSHIP.

Not so much an emphasis on what you do in worship, but how. And both are important, so this sermon should be a good balance to our study last week. How did the people worship? What was their spirit? Their attitude? What was their state of

mind? A word word answer to all those questions. Joy.

v.10-11

For now, note the reaction of the people. Their exuberance. Their excitement. Their obvious and expressible joy. "They shouted with a great shout." They were excited that the foundation was laid, because they could foresee the end result, the restoration of the temple. And they began their temple worship with just the foundation in place. Their opportunity to worship had returned. We are given a few details of how that came to be.

v.8-10

Let me put all of that this way for you.

A. The opportunity to worship should cause you to have great delight.

Worship should be a delight, and that delight should be the motivation to come. And even with our schedule, to stay as you have done for this afternoon service. There can be a danger, I fear, that we could focus so much on the necessity and importance of coming to worship, even the afternoon service, that we forget that we should be delighted to come. I hope you haven't missed that even today!

If coming to church isn't a delight, then you ought to try to figure out why? It might well be that there is a heart problem, an issue of the soul. It might well be that you take for granted the opportunity that you have to be in God's presence. If worship isn't a delight, begin by asking God to make it so! Then participate fully. Join in the shouts shouted by the people of Israel. As you make the commitment to fully participate, you find out how delightful it really is.

So why isn't worship such a delight that many people don't take advantage of every possible opportunity? Well, for one, we are often simply too busy. I would even say that under most circumstances, at least ordinary circumstances, if you are too busy to get everything done in six days, then you are too busy. And something needs to go. Something other than worship.

Some people are willing to accept the spirit of our age, which is inherently selfish, thinking that time to myself is actually of more benefit than time devoted to God. Our priorities are often quite wrong, and our habits follow suit. And often we need to train ourselves to take delight in something, not merely wait around for some great emotional outburst to overcome us. The example before us this afternoon is that when the people of Israel finally had the opportunity to worship, they delighted themselves in it.

But not everyone in Israel was delighted.

v.12-13

Why this weeping? They wept in disappointment, because the building wasn't going to be as nice.

Haggai 2:1 "In the seventh month, on the twenty-first of the month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying: 2 "Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, saying: 3 Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? 4 Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,' says the LORD; 'and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,' says the LORD, 'and work; for I am with you,' says the LORD of hosts. 5 'According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!'

6 "For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; 7 and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,' says the LORD of hosts. 8 'The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,' says the LORD of hosts. 9 The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts. 'And in this place I will give peace,' says the LORD of hosts."

The older men who had seen the first temple looked at this foundation and realized immediately that this new temple was smaller. Much more humble. And how could they ever get used to that? When compared to the incredible beauty and luxury of that first temple. They were looking only at outward circumstances, viewing their circumstances in the flesh and not by faith, demonstrating that,

B. An emphasis on our external circumstances will diminish our joy in worship.

Outward surroundings shouldn't be the determining factor in the measure of our joy in worship. And all of us must admit, in a good way, that this building is a very humble building. And the joy of our worship shouldn't be any greater if we had a more exalted place to meet. And the joy shouldn't be any less if we had a more humble place to meet. But there really should be no difference.

The outward circumstances should not be the determining factor in the extent of our joy in worship. For if they are, we would be on dangerous ground. So it was on that great day of worship at the foundation of the new temple, many shouted aloud for joy. But others, overcome by the humility of their outward circumstances, merely wept. And the two contrasting noises were almost indistinguishable from each other.

Let's move on. How is that joy to be expressed? A one word answer, MUSIC.

v.10-11

II. MUSIC IS THE OUTWARD EXPRESSION OF OUR JOY IN WORSHIP.

Let's look at bit more closely at their music in worship. Music in worship is entirely different than music in any other public assembly, for in nearly every other context, music comes in the form of a performance to be enjoyed by the audience.

I enjoy a good concert, as a listener and as a participant. Last year I started playing my French horn again after many, many years. I'm playing in a community orchestra in Winston-Salem that rehearses every Monday evening. We perform two concerts in the fall, and a third one in the spring. I absolutely love it! I have enjoyed playing in many, many concerts over the years. I enjoy good concerts as well. I often say lightheartedly, but sincerely, there are only two things I miss from my years in Atlanta. Being able to watch the Atlanta Braves and going to Atlanta Symphony concerts. We have found some good concerts here, especially in Wytheville, but it still isn't the world class quality of the Atlanta Symphony. But there is a fundamentally different use of music in a worship service than in a concert. And we must always be aware of that distinction.

Worship is not simply a musical performances, and certainly not a performance for the appreciation of the audience. Something is obvious in the ceremonial shadows of the OT.

A. Music is a priestly sacrifice offered to God.

Notice who the musicians were.

v.8

The priests and Levites are the ones mentioned. They were the ones to oversee the work of the house of the Lord. And they were the ones who would be the musicians in that temple.

v.10

Look at a couple cross references,

2 Chron.5:11 "And it came to pass when the priests came out of the Most Holy Place (for all the priests who were present had sanctified themselves, without keeping to their divisions), 12 and the Levites who were the singers, all those of Asaph and Heman and Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, stood at the east end of the altar, clothed in white linen, having cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them one hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets— 13 indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever," that the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, 14 so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God."

The priests were the singers! The same tribe, the same family, who would be offering the animal sacrifices. Some of them were set aside as musicians. And I hope that the point is obvious. Just as the priests who cut up animals and placed them on the altar were offering sacrifices of worship, so were the singers. Music was, and is, an appropriate sacrifice of worship. A priestly sacrifice. A sacrifice offered to God. And so we understand music in worship today. A sacrifice offered to God.

And in that regard, we ought to be careful not to appoint priests to do the sacrificing for us! For in the New Testament, in

the fullness of the new covenant, we are all priests, a royal priesthood, according to,

1 Peter 2:9 "...that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

We are all a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We are all a royal priesthood, reigning with Christ even as we offer sacrifices to him. And we have no other high priest but Christ. There is no other mediator, none other than Christ. Thus the emphasis upon joining together as one when we sing, to offer up a sacrifice as one. Corporate singing. The singing of the congregation.

Col.3:16 "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

So we join together, all of us as one, to offer up to God this most glorious and joyful of sacrifices. Music. Music in worship is be a corporate sacrifice offered to God, and not an individual performance for the entertainment of the human audience. But actually, music in worship is a performance. And we are the performers. God is the audience. The application is obvious, isn't it? Sing! Sing to God. Shout to God. Make a joyful noise. Sing a new song.

In the words of,

Ps. 95:11 "Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms."

Music is a priestly sacrifice offered to God. And with reference to last week's sermon,

B. Music is a prescribed element of worship.

When we speak of the regulative principle of worship, the specific regulations which the Lord gives us for worship, certainly music is among those elements. And worship without music isn't worship!

Notice the commitment to God's regulations here, very similar to what we saw last week.

v.10

"...according to the ordinance of David king of Israel." They followed the directions. Now, in the age of the New Covenant, the Levitical order of priests is done away with, but music remains as a prescribed element of worship. There are people today who believe, as a matter of conviction, that God's prescription for music means that congregational singing should be exclusively restricted to the singing of psalms, those songs given under inspiration of the holy spirit and included in the pages of Scripture. And that view has much to commend it, and has been the view of many of God's people throughout history, including many in presbyterian and reformed traditions. It is not my view, nor, obviously our practice here. But surely it is a good thing to sing those psalms, as we do. Not exclusively, but certainly enthusiastically. The 150 inspired Psalms certainly they ought to be included in the singing of the church, for that's why they were written. And the content and style of those inspired songs should give us insight into our other songs for worship. Notice the description of the content of what was sung, in,

v.11

Even if we avoiding the issue of whether or not the singing ought to be exclusively psalms, still this principle should govern.

C. Music is the outward expression of praise and thanksgiving to God.

What we do when we sing is to express praise or thanksgiving to God! And in traditional definitions, that's exactly what makes a hymn, a hymn. It is a song which expresses praise or thanksgiving to God. The example given in verse 11 is a frequent refrain in the psalms,

Ps. 100:5 "For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations."

And of course,

Psalms 136:1 "Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. 2 Oh, give thanks to the God of gods! For His mercy endures forever. 3 Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords! For His mercy endures forever."

Music must be the outward expression of praise and thanksgiving to God. Many well known songs and hymns become much more preoccupied with personal experiences than with praise to God, and some seem to almost entirely lack this element of praise and thanksgiving to God. That's not a good thing. We shouldn't be singing to God about ourselves. We should be singing to God about God! And in that regard,

D. Music is a recitation of the nature of God.

Back to,
v.11

They sang of God's goodness. And they sang of his mercy, or lovingkindness. Those are two of the more prominent aspects of God's nature, two of his more prominent attributes. And those attributes of God ought to be the subject of our singing.

You ought to think about the sorts of songs that we sing in that regard. When you sing a hymn, whether it is a familiar old favorite or if it is entirely new to you, be sure to ask yourself an

obvious question, "What is the subject of this hymn?" "What am I singing about?"

Sometime, take a close look at the index to the Trinity Hymnal. Notice the listing of subjects. The hymns are arranged right down the list of God's attributes which we have in our catechism definition of God. Then the hymns whose subjects are works of God. And those peculiar to the revealed nature of Christ. And that is as it ought to be. We ought to be singing to God about God.

So the measure of a good hymn is not really how much you enjoy it, but how faithfully, and how accurately, and how thoroughly the hymn resonates with the character of God and the nature of God. And how thoroughly it fixes your eyes upon God. The measure of a good hymn is how much God enjoys it! How pleasing and pleasurable it is to him. How much it glorifies him by ascribing to him the proper aspects of his own nature.

To be sure, the psalms are perfect examples. As we close, let's look at just one example, a psalm which defines what music in worship ought to be.

Psalms 100:1 "Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands! 2 Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. 3 Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. 4 Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. 5 For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations."

So let it be! Regardless of your ability to sing, regardless of how well trained in music you might or might not be, let your singing be a priestly sacrifice which you offer to God in

accordance with his directions. Let your singing be your outward expression of praise and thanksgiving as you sing about God to God. “Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing.”