Ezra #2: Proper Praise (Ezra 3)

PRAY

Welcome to the worship wars! Which is no new thing in Christianity, believe it or not
Ever since the fairly early church, we've debated or even divided over how we are to worship:
How formal or structured our liturgies or worship gatherings should be
How involved the clergy and congregation are to be, respectively
How to celebrate the Lord's Supper... How central preaching should be in worship...
Whether more charismatic spiritual gifts have a place in the modern-day church
Oh and music of course... Music *really* gets us going:
Whether to only sing Psalms, or only hymns, or allow other kinds of songs to be sung
Whether to sing *a capella*, or with approved instruments, or with any instrument we want
For a long time, it was debated whether to allow *congregational* singing at all
And no joke: Once upon a time, churches with organs were the rebellious ones
Only later did we fight over drums and electric guitars
Today, thankfully we're largely past the so-called 'worship wars' of the late 20th century
Yet go online, and you'll find plenty of video and blog debates
Over whether we should sing songs from questionable sources
Over whether there is value in more traditional liturgical forms
And even over the permissibility of using AI-written music or songs

Now, I don't bring this up to debate viewpoints, or even to explain where we land as a church
I say all this really just to ask this question: Why do we get so passionate about these matters?
I believe the short and true answer is because worship matters
These may seem like trivial things at times... And I'm sure some of them were!
But deep down, we know that the way we worship God is of extreme importance
In the same sense: impure, incorrect, or improper worship is a major issue
For worship is a primary way that our hearts connect to the heart of God
And it's what we were made for... It gets at the core reason for our existence
I was made to magnify my Maker... I'm created to worship my Creator

The book of Ezra in the Bible is all about restoring worship under God's hand—under his lead
Worship in that day, 5 centuries before Christ, had gone wrong
Defiled or idolatrous worship was one of the core reasons for the exile
Then during the exile, it was like worship had gone *gone*—it'd gone away, disappeared
God was stirring them up, bringing them home, in order for them to bring worship back
Back to where it belonged *and* how it belonged
So what was worship done rightly? What good things needed restored? What was proper praise?
For that matter: Is it the same for us today? What does proper praise look like for us?
Let's consider these things as we **TURN** together to Ezra chapter 3... Ezra 3 [page #389]

Ezra covers the history of God's people as they return from exile,
Under the encouragement of the Persian king, Cyrus,
And in order to rebuild the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem
As we face our own big projects or endeavours as a church, like church planting and rebuilding,

I hope Ezra, and then Nehemiah, will teach us how to work together as God's people
But even better, I hope they'll more basically teach us how to *live* as God's people,
While staying focused on our mission and spiritual restoration

Chapter 3 begins with the people, who were re-settling into their hometowns and houses,
Turning their attention to the house of the Lord: **READ v.1**[1]
"As one man"... As if they were one person, with one purpose, one heart, and one mind
Like a sports team or military squad
that knows they need to operate as one unit to achieve their objective or win
So the children of Israel were all after the same thing, the same goal
And we know this is how God loves his children to work together: in unity
Remember Jesus prayed for us before he died: *"...that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."* (John 17:22-23)
So whatever tasks he gives us as a people today,
May we pray and strive to maintain the unity (or oneness) we have in Christ

[tr] I picture the people rallying each other:
'Alright folks, remember why we were sent back here... It wasn't to just re-populate this land...
We were given a job to do... Cyrus allowed us, but God put it on our hearts to rise up'
So they all gathered together in Jerusalem, with one mind, to break ground and get to work
It would've been easy to just be happy that they arrived safely, and sit back and get comfortable
But not only did they have a mission to complete.... They had a calling to live up to:
In Exodus 19, the Lord had said, *"you shall be to me a kingdom of priests"*
As such, they had a special role to act as mediators between God and people,
And to offer pleasing sacrifices to the Lord... To lead the way in worship
They'd been prevented from doing so for decades... Now it was time to resume
So, the first thing they built wasn't a market, palace, hotel, or condominium... They built *an altar*
READ v.2[2]... See how worship was their first priority? It mattered more than anything
But despite their fervour for this, they didn't just start putting things back together recklessly, however they wanted... There was something guiding their decisions and giving them direction
What this text stresses is that they made sure they started restoring worship *properly*
Exactly the way the Scriptures prescribed for their worship to operate... See:

Proper praise <u>follows</u> the <u>prophetic</u> <u>Word</u> (v.1-7)

[r] Proper praise follows—it's based on—the prophetic Word (which applies just as much to us)

Their goal was to restore worship... To do that properly, eventually they would need a temple
But things could get started, even without the full building in place
I think of a few years ago when we renovated our church offices over here
As we put things back in order, before we got all the furniture and amenities back in,
We could start working as long as we had a desk, a chair, a computer, and a printer
So first things first: Get the essentials in place so that operations could resume
The temple's operations and functions could resume, even before the temple itself was there
That makes sense, considering Israel worshipped for generations before having a temple
They had a big tent. a tabernacle, which housed the altar and facilitated sacrifices
And long before even the tabernacle, the Bible tells of people building altars to God

The temple would come... But the most essential part could come first, long before then: an altar
So like Noah stepping off the ark, or Abraham first arriving in the Promised Land
They went: Let's first set aside a place to pray and praise and sacrifice to the Lord
We could liken this to the way this church building was constructed over the years
Back in the early 1900s, the first thing the people of this church built was a sanctuary
Before washrooms or classrooms or halls or kitchens or nurseries or offices,
They recognized what a church most needed was a place to worship

Why did these folks feel the need to start with an altar? I think the passage hints at two reasons:
1) They needed the Lord's help, and 2) They needed the Lord's forgiveness... Look:
READ v.3[3]... So they saw the people who'd begun to inhabit the lands around Jerusalem,
And they were afraid of them... 'Oh man, if we start re-establishing a society here,
How are they gonna feel? What are they gonna do? We're small and fragile...'
If we know our bibles, it sounds bad that *'fear was on them because of the peoples'*
They shouldn't have been afraid of other people, should they have? Maybe not
But whether this was unhealthy fear of man or healthy fear of danger was beside the point
The point was: When they got afraid, they decided they needed God's help
Misplaced fear or not, their response to the fear was right: they turned to the Lord
So they built the altar, so they'd have a place to collectively cry out to him
In Exodus 29:43, God promised that there, at the altar, he would meet with them
What better place was there to go?
In short: They felt the world's hostility and intimidation, and decided to worship anyway
When you are afraid, is your first impulse to turn to the Lord for help?
Or do you try to pacify the people, to make sure they're not upset with you?
Or do you start calculating your wealth and insurance, to make sure you're covered?
Or do you start stockpiling supplies, thinking you need to take care of yourself?
Or do you start doom-scrolling, trying to numb or distract yourself from your fear?
May we pray along with Psalm 56:3-4, 'When' (not if): *"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?"*

But the returning exiles didn't only foresee needing help; they knew they needed forgiveness
After all, what had caused their exile in the first place? Blatant and persistent wickedness
That was a stain upon them as a people... And that needed to be made right
And how did they make things right, or atone for sin, in the Old Testament? Sacrifices
Therefore, there was an urgency that as soon as they were able, they had to resume sacrifices
In order to plead with the Lord for his forgiveness and cleansing for them as a people
That's what 'burnt offerings' were for, after all: atonement for sin: **READ v.2b**[4]
The people now knew, from experience of the Lord's discipline in exile,
That while his covenant with them was unbreakable
They would only enjoy its blessings inasmuch as they loved and obeyed him
Thus, only once they secured the forgiveness and renewed favour of God on them,
Would they feel comfortable proceeding with such a sacred task

So, you might wonder: Do we need an altar today? If so, where is it?
The fact is we don't need to build an altar, or even build churches with an altar in them,
As we already *have* an altar, where the perfect, once-for-all-time sacrifice was offered

Hebrews 13:10 says: *"We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat."*, referring to Jesus being sacrificed on our behalf on the cross
If the cross has saved you, you have no need for any other altar
For if you have the crucified and risen Christ, you need no other sacrifice
At the same time, you may need warned: If you do not have Christ, your sin still demands death
Even with a sacrificial system no longer in place, you still have guilt and need forgiveness
So I plead with you to put your faith in Jesus, believing he died and rose again in your place
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us
You may not need a burnt offering today, but you definitely need Jesus... Come to him

We can see the priority the people put on worship... And praise that followed the Word of God
I called it 'the prophetic Word' because of how following Moses' instructions is highlighted:
READ v.2c[5]... I don't believe Moses was a side-note here
Moses, the historic hero of their people, the writer of the law given by God,
the first prophet of the people of Israel, and here simply *'the man of God'*
God's Word—God's Law that came through Moses was to be obeyed
And unlike the people who got sent into exile, those who returned sought to obey it
Watch for how this is stressed over the next few verses: **READ v.4-6a[6]**
Whether the burnt offerings, or the Feast of Booths, or the various other offerings or festivals,
The people here were clearly seeking to have the Word shape their worship
All their community religious practices were described in the Scriptures
And they sought to practice them in accordance with the Scriptures

The same goes for us, even as we now have significantly more books in God's Word
Everything we do in worship ought to be informed, guided, or even controlled by Scripture
As Jesus put it: True worshipers, the kind God is seeking, worship in spirit and in *truth*
Some churches follow what is called 'the regulative principle'
Which says every part of a church's worship should be explicitly seen in Scripture
And while I believe some take this principle too far, in a legalistic manner,
The basis is sound: We should only ever worship 'by the book'
To attempt to connect with God in ways he has not endorsed is a dangerous business
So this is why we intentionally plan out various regular practices as a church in worship:
Welcoming people, calling people to worship, singing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs,
giving, praying, reading Scripture, partaking of the Lord's Supper, preaching the Word
You can find rationale for every one of those things in the Bible
(Read the N.T., and you'll also find rationale for why we *don't* still do all the same
practices as the Jews of the O.T... Jesus has changed the game, in beautiful ways)
But we've got to make sure we keep the Word as the foundation of all our worship

Speaking of foundations, though: **READ v.6b[7]**... That was obviously a problem
If they were ever going to have a building in which to put this new altar they made,
It required a foundation... So what would this unified people do about it? **READ v.7[8]**
Again, the people of God gave generously toward the work of God
This would've been above and beyond their usual tithes and offerings
They saw a need, and knew the Lord would provide for the need—through them
As well as through the grant Cyrus had given them... Again, a surprise benefactor

But the Lord deserved only the best... They sought out good, fine, beautiful materials
No expense was spared to try to procure what was required for the temple
Just as the Lord had promised in Isaiah 60: the wealth of the nations would flow to Jerusalem,
Including the 'glory of Lebanon' in order *"to beautify the place of [his] sanctuary"*

If you wonder what the big deal was about the temple...
In very short, from Genesis to Revelation, God's aim is to purify a people for himself,
with whom he will dwell forever... God dwelling (or living) with man
We see it in pure form in Eden... We see it in Israel's Tabernacle and then Temple
—Each a place for God to specially dwell in the midst of his people
We see it in the Incarnation: Emmanuel, God with us, and Jesus as the true Temple
We see it in the church: as God's Spirit dwells in us, we too become God's temple
And we see it in the New Jerusalem: *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."* (Revelation 21:3)
Rebuilding the temple was their era's expression of this ultra-important goal of humanity
But therefore, realize there's always hope in the midst of uncertainty and unfinished projects
God does intend to dwell again with us... And he who began a good work will complete it

[tr] Proper praise meant following the prophetic Word
But we can see a second aspect of proper praise appear as we keep going:

Proper praise requires priestly leadership (v.8-9)

True, faithful worship of God requires someone to bridge the gap between us and God
And that's what priests do... [r] Proper praise requires priestly leadership

READ v.8a[9]... They *'made a beginning'*... Even though they had done so little so far
Even though the conditions weren't ideal... Even though there were many hurdles to face
They did what they could, without the full picture of what they were working on
Sometimes getting started is the hardest part
Right, kids? As you stare at your schoolwork, feeling overwhelmed
Or believer, as you wonder how to get a good habit or spiritual discipline started
It's hard, but sometimes you've just got to take a small step and start *something*

But what was the beginning they started? How'd they get the ball rolling? By appointing leaders
For any project of their scope would require good leadership
A project centered on worship needed priestly leadership, in particular... They: **READ v.8b[10]**
Who better to ensure they did things right than those who'd been trained and appointed to do so?
And this—Zerubabbel and Jeshua appointing many others to lead and supervise—
Follows a clear biblical pattern of the need for appointing godly leaders
From Moses appointing priests, to Christ appointing apostles, and Paul appointing elders
God's people have always been healthiest when they have healthy leaders leading

Priests, specifically, were called to be go-betweens, mediators, between the Lord and his people
They represented God to the people, and they represented the people before God
So... If this text shows the need for priestly leadership, it raises the question:
Should we have priests over us today? Well, yes, but not like they needed priests then

You see, we already have a better High Priest in Jesus, who is our eternal mediator
And through him, we ourselves can now act as priests... Every believer is a priest
We are a royal priesthood, as we recently heard 1 Peter 2 put it
Which means we can *all* now approach the throne of God with confidence
This doesn't mean that we no longer need godly, qualified leaders over us
It just means they don't need to act as priests, but instead as elders and deacons
That said, they are priestly leaders in the sense of being set apart and consecrated to lead

v.9 tells us more of how the appointed leaders led: **READ v.9**[11]
Not much to say here, except that things were clearly done in an orderly manner
Both the work and the workmen were carefully supervised
Showing the value of good management and administration
Go thank a board or committee chairperson today... Or a worship leader organizing our music...
Or a deacon serving as ministry coordinator... Or our office administrator
And, of course, praise Jesus for being our Great High Priest over the new house of God

[tr] Proper praise follows the prophetic Word... Proper praise requires priestly leadership
And we'll see one more major truth about worship as chapter 3 reaches its climax:

Proper praise elicits kingly passions (v.10-13)

[r] Right worship—proper praise elicits kingly passions (I'll show you why I say 'kingly' soon)

Under the steady leadership that was appointed, the first part of the project was completed
The foundation was a significant milestone, which was worth celebrating
And check out the enthusiastic response of praise: **READ v.10-11**[12]... Can you sense their joy?
People couldn't help but sing their hearts out... People couldn't help but shout
They had their worship leaders lead them in a musical, responsive, loud worship service
The loudest part being not the trumpets and cymbals but the people's lungs
I was once at a Sens' playoff game where 18,000 people were shouting with excitement
It was thunderous... Since around 50,000 exiles returned, think of that, times 3

I personally love how our church sings... People who visit us often remark about that
But I think we also have plenty of space to grow in expressing our passion
Canadians like being reserved and dignified—unless they're at a hockey game
But I know you feel deeply... And if you feel love for the Lord, joy of your salvation, gratitude for grace, or praise for the cross or resurrection,
Your whole being ought to show it: heart, voice, and body
If you brought a non-Christian friend to church, and they watched your engagement,
Would they believe your faith is real to you?
Reverence is good, but reverence doesn't mean stoic or passionless... It means you're in awe
So may the truths of God and what he's done stir our passions... And then may we express them!

God *is* good! His steadfast love *does* endure forever!
And at this point of history, because of Jesus, we know this about better than anyone
Christ is our true and better Prophet, Priest, and King
He speaks his Word to us, paves the way to God for us, and now reigns over us
He is the rightful centre of praise, for children of the King

Now, I said proper praise should elicit *kingly* passions
The reason why is because of that passing mention of David *as king* in v.10:
READ v.10b[13]... On one level, this again shows they wanted to worship by the book
They were carrying out biblical instructions that'd been laid out by David
But David, the greatest king of Israel, was also known for his many Psalms,
Which happen to be some of the most emotionally expressive words in Scripture
David expressed exuberant joy many times, including the words quoted here,
"Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!"
By the way, those same words were sung the day Solomon's temple was finished
And, Jeremiah 33 prophesied that these exact words would be heard again
In Jerusalem, after the exile: *'the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness'*
Against all odds, God's people were witnessing God's goodness and steadfast love again
And so: they were gonna party till the neighbours filed noise complaints
'Proper' doesn't mean 'prim and proper'... 'Kingly' doesn't mean 'dignified'
After all, David was the one who said he'd become more *un*dignified,
If that meant praising God appropriately... He is a worthy example of joyous worship

But David also expressed so many negative emotions as well—sorrow, anger, despair, lament
And check out what happens here, in the middle of such great joy: **READ v.12-13**[14]
Talk about mixed emotions!
So many shouting: 'LET'S GO!' while so many others cried: 'OH NO!'
Some of the older folks, who must've only been kids when they were dragged off into exile,
could remember the glory of the former temple that had been destroyed
And the memory of that temple clouded their emotions on this day
Because they could tell, even at this early stage, that it wasn't going to be as great as before
Someone described the scene this way: *"So their very audible mourning blended with the ecstatic joy of others to produce a weird cacophony of confusion."*[15]
This points to a couple really important principles for us

For one: The devastation of sin and ensuing discipline often means diminished glory
Even when God restores us from sin, things often aren't as good as before
Sin has done its damage to our hearts... And it's worth lamenting the aftermath
Restoration can be wonderful, and sometimes make us rejoice more than ever
Yet things are often lost because of sin that aren't regained on this side of glory
Innocence, reputation, shamelessness, relationships, health, and more
This is a sobering reality that should make us want to avoid sin at all costs
While also increasing our compassion for those suffering from its after-effects

And also: In this broken world, our praise will usually involve mixed emotions
That's what I'm referring to as 'kingly passions', in the example of David
We will have (and need) both joy and sorrow, rejoicing and lament
Proper praise is jubilant... Proper praise involves lament... So proper praise is bittersweet
Because we're in the already (or the now) and the not yet
We need to make space in our praise for both triumph and disappointment
To *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep."* (Rom. 12:15)

It's why we can sing 'Joyful, joyful we adore Thee'

and 'Lord, from sorrows deep I call' on the very same day

On any given day, different hearts here need different passions expressed

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, though, we should all take hope, even in the midst of disappointment or lament

Both the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who ministered during these days,

Seem to gently rebuke the despair some were feeling

Haggai told these very lamenters: *"Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong... Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts... My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not."* (Haggai 2:3-5)

And Zechariah and *"...Whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice"* (4:10)

So do not despise small beginnings... Do not despair over disappointing outcomes...

Don't even look down on low-key, unextraordinary times of worship as a church

God is at work, even on the smallest, most ordinary, or even dreary days

We can lament, and rightly so... Things are broken and not yet fully restored...

But we must not give up hope... For this is not the end of the story

The joyful praise of the children of God will yet be heard far away, to the ends of the earth

PRAY **Benediction: prayer, <u>5min</u>,**

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[1] When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.
[2] Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they 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] They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening.
[4] they built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it
[5] they 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.
[6] And they kept the Feast of Booths, **as it is written**, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number **according to the rule, as each day required**, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the **appointed** feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord.
[7] they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid.
[8] So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.
[9] Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning
[10] made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord.
[11] And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.
[12] And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." 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.
[13] to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel.
[14] But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.
[15] Dale Ralph Davis