

Rebuilding the Temple, the tears and the rejoicing

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[0 : 00] We turn now to our Bible reading, which is taken from the book of Ezra. And you'll find this if you have one of our big church Bibles on page 390, page 390.

And the reading tonight is Ezra chapter 3. The story so far, the year is 538 BC, more or less, and a large number, about 50,000 Jews, have returned from Babylonia after the exile.

They've got back to Jerusalem, and they're just on the point of rebuilding the altar and starting the rebuilding of the temple after their many years in exile. So they're quite excited, but there are troubled times ahead.

So Ezra chapter 3. When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

Then arose Jeshua, the son of Josedach, 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.

[1 : 15] 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.

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. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid.

So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food and 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.

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 Josedach, 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.

[2 : 34] They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. And Jeshua, with his sons and his brothers, and Cadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Hanadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

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 symbols, 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.

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 shout was heard far away. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us this evening.

[4 : 08] Let's have a moment of prayer again. God, our Father, our hearts are, by nature, empty, sinful, and so much in need of hearing from you day by day.

So we do pray that you will open up to us now your word, refresh us, and teach us, and guide us, and give us a greater vision of yourself, your glory, and your work.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn to Ezra chapter 3 again, on page 390. My title for tonight is Rebuilding the Temple, The Tears, and the Rejoicing.

I used to be the minister of a parish in a small town in Derbyshire called Glossop.

Our parish was called Whitfield Parish, and the neighboring parish just up the hill was called Charlesworth. And a day came when the vicar of Charlesworth moved away, and he was replaced by a new vicar.

[5 : 22] I discovered that the new vicar, like his predecessor, was an evangelical, and I went to visit him shortly after he'd arrived. And as I walked into his house, I was very struck by a large framed picture there in the front porchway.

It was very striking. It was a line drawing, it was expertly done, of a Roman city, which was in the process of being built. It wasn't an ancient drawing, it was a modern drawing, but it was a drawing of an ancient scene, of a Roman city being built.

So there were great blocks of stone lying around, and great pillars, some of them still lying flat that way, others had been put upright. And there were dozens and dozens of men who were working hard with all the gear, with ropes, and block and tackle, and pulleys, and spades, pickaxes, and so on.

It was a scene of great activity, and you could almost see these lovely, classical, beautifully proportioned buildings rising up before your eyes. So I said to my new friend, tell me about this picture.

And he said, I love this picture, because it reminds me of the building of the Lord's people, the building of the Lord's church. Something beautiful is being constructed, but it's a long way from completion.

[6 : 37] And it shows me, he said, it shows me two things. First, that there is a lot of hard work to be done, but second, the final goal is absolutely glorious.

Now, I wonder if you sometimes feel like that about the building of the Lord's church. I hope you do. There is plenty of hard work to be done by the grace of the Lord, but the final outcome is eternal and glorious.

Now, this third chapter of the book of Ezra, which we're looking at tonight, is about the very start of the rebuilding of the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. And this has a powerful bearing on people like us today, as I hope we will see over the coming minutes.

First, let me remind you briefly of the history. Ezra, the events recorded here in Ezra chapter three, took place in the year 538 BC. Ezra himself, who may well have been the author of the book, did not play his part in Israel's history until some 80 years later, in the 450s and 440s BC.

So, in the first six chapters of the book of Ezra, he's recording history that happened some three generations before his own time. Now, the original temple in Jerusalem, the great temple, had been built by Solomon in about 950 BC.

[8 : 01] It was a magnificent building. And as I'm sure you know, it was knocked flat by the Babylonian army in 587 BC, when the exile began. So, it was built in about 950 and destroyed in 587.

There were then some 50 years of exile for the Jews in Babylon. And then in 539, the new emperor, the new Persian emperor Cyrus, came to the throne and he issued his famous decree allowing and encouraging the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.

That decree is recorded in chapter one that we were looking at last week. And Ezra chapter two records the names of the Jews who courageously set out across 600 or so miles of desert from Babylon to go back to Jerusalem.

Now, this third chapter of Ezra's book is all about the start of the rebuilding of the temple. And you can't escape the sense of activity and commitment and also emotional pressure which builds up to a head of steam in the final verses where some of the people are shouting with joy and praising the Lord but others, the old men, are sobbing because they're thinking about the first temple which they had seen and known and worshipped in in their youth.

In fact, that final verse of chapter three, verse 13, I guess is one of the loudest and noisiest verses in the Bible. It must have been a bit like the noise produced at Ibrox when the home team score the first goal of the afternoon.

[9 : 31] Now, we'll come in a moment in a few minutes to the key question of what the temple meant and why it was so important for the Jews to rebuild it. But first, let's get a feeling of the atmosphere that we have here in chapter three.

It was anything but gloomy and tired and stale. Let's notice three things about it. First, there is unity amongst the people. Verse one, when the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in the towns, settled in their towns near Jerusalem, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. As one man. Now, the verse says this happened in the seventh month which means the seventh month after the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem which is pretty impressive.

It means they'd taken only six months to become re-established in their towns. They would have had to rebuild so much. They'd have had to rebuild their houses, restock with tables, chairs, beds, sofas, exercise bicycles, microwaves, iPads, all the other things, all the other gear without which it is impossible to live.

But they did all this in six months. Why the hurry? Because they wanted to get on with the really important thing which was the rebuilding of the temple.

[10 : 52] But when the seventh month came, they left their towns and their villages and they gathered as one man in Jerusalem to begin the work. Now, Israel had not always enjoyed that kind of unity.

Do you remember back in the book of Judges how cross, how angry various tribes used to get with each other? In fact, at the end of the book of Judges, Benjamin, the tribe of Benjamin, gets virtually wiped out by the other Israelite tribes.

There's a terrible civil war, horrible bloodbath. A bit later on when David and Solomon ruled Israel during the 10th century BC, the kingdom remained united more or less.

But as soon as Solomon died, Israel became two disunited kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south and they remained in a state of considerable tension with each other.

But here, in Ezra chapter 3, the returned exiles gather together as one man. Now, it's as important in the 21st century AD as in the 6th century BC for God's people to be united to tackle the Lord's work as one man.

[12 : 02] Not as clones. Wouldn't that be tedious if we were all exactly like each other? It would be awful, wouldn't it? But rather deeply united in spirit and aim and purpose, bound together in love as we roll up our sleeves and get on with the Lord's work as one man.

Now, second, let's notice the leadership of the people. Verse 2, Then arose Jeshua, the son of Josedach, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, with his kinsmen.

Now, these two men, they proved to be important figures. They are not elected leaders. They were not the equivalent of David Cameron and Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeshua, the son of Josedach, was the chief priest and he was descended directly from Aaron, the high priest himself. And as for Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, he was a direct descendant of King David.

He's not here seen as the king, he's a leader, but he's a direct descendant of David. And he features in the genealogies of Jesus, which are recorded in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels.

[13 : 09] So he is an ancestor, humanly speaking, of Christ himself. Now, do you remember these lines from John Newton's famous hymn? Jesus, my shepherd, brother, friend, my prophet, priest, and king.

Jesus is the priest who brings all priesthood to an end, and he is the king before whom all other kings must bow. So in our verse 2 here, we have a foreshadowing of the ultimate leader of the people of God.

If you meld together these two figures of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, you have a distant preview of Jesus himself, who is the king and priest of God's people.

And what do these two men do? Well, look at the beginning of verse 2. They arise. In other words, they step forward. They take responsibility. And, verse 2, they build the altar of the God of Israel. In other words, they reopen the means of access to God. Just as Jesus, 500 years later, caused by his death the tearing apart of the temple curtain, which showed that access to God had now been fully and finally opened up.

[14 : 22] Then, third, let's notice how the Israelites were determined to obey their Bibles. Now, you might say, but what kind of a Bible did the Israelites have in the 6th century BC?

The answer is, they had most of the Old Testament. They had, as the chief cornerstone, the five books of Moses, which were already 900 years or so old in 538 BC.

But they also had the works of the great writing prophets, who lived a century or two before. Remember how Jeremiah is quoted in the opening verse of the book of Ezra. They had the Psalms. You'll see, in fact, that the Psalms are quoted here in verse 11 as authoritative scripture. Now, let's look at this important feature of chapter 3.

Verse 2. Jeshua and Zerubbabel built the altar for what purpose? To offer burnt offerings on it as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

[15:26] So they were following the book of Leviticus at this point. Then look on to verse 4. And they kept the feast of booths or tabernacles, which no doubt had not been kept for a long time.

But they kept the feast of booths as it is written. In fact, it's written up at great length in the book of Numbers. And reading on, they offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule. That means the rule of Moses. And other offerings are mentioned in verse 5. The regular burnt offerings, the monthly new moon offerings, the feast day offerings, and the free will offerings, all of which are described in detail in the books of Moses.

So as you read these verses, you get the feeling that the books of Moses, the law of Moses, is being rediscovered after the ruin and the wreckage of the exile.

Copies of the law of Moses have obviously survived the exile. They're now being dusted down and carefully studied. And Jeshua and Zerubbabel and the other senior people are leading the charge to reestablish the rule of the God of Israel in the land of Israel by obeying the law of Moses.

[16:36] But it's not only Moses that they're listening to. They're also following the pattern set by their two greatest kings, Solomon and David.

Solomon first, although he's not actually mentioned by name. But look at verse 7. 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.

Now that is exactly what King Solomon had done as he prepared to build the first temple, the great cedars of Lebanon, which you still see in the grounds of great houses.

If you go to a house like Killein Castle or Dumfries House, you'll see these wonderful great Lebanon cedars. They're wonderful trees. They provided the best timber for building wonderful buildings.

And you can read in 1 Kings chapter 5 of how King Solomon made an arrangement with the king of Tyre, whose name was Hiram. And they had this wonderful trading venture.

[17:38] Hiram, the king of Tyre, would get the great trees cut because Tyre is not so far from Lebanon. He'd get them cut into planks and beams, which were then taken to the sea, tied together to form rafts.

And the rafts were then floated down along the sea coast from Tyre and Sidon all the way down to Joppa. I took out my Bible atlas and I measured it. 90 miles, roughly speaking, from Tyre and Sidon down to Joppa.

What kind of a marine engineer do you have to be to do that? It's a big job, isn't it? But then the timber, having arrived at Joppa, would have been transported by wagon to Jerusalem. And how did Solomon pay King Hiram for all this timber?

Well, he paid him in wheat and olive oil, large quantities of it. And here we are, 400 years later, 538 BC, and the Israelites repeat the process and they pay the Sidonians and Tyrians in food, drink, and olive oil.

So they're following Solomon's example. Then there's David, mentioned in verse 10. 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 symbols to praise the Lord according to the directions of David, king of Israel.

[18:57] Now David, as you know, loved music and he was a skilled musician who knew that the Lord is to be praised with song as well as with speech. So he left instructions with Israel about trumpets and cymbals and lots of songs which he wrote.

Many of them are preserved for us in the Psalms. David, when you pause to think of it, is no doubt the main reason why the Christian church is so full of music and always has been.

David is the main reason why skillful Christians continue to write new hymns and songs. And the basic theme that underlies all the songs of the people of God is there in verse 11.

For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel. That is the current that flows through everything we sing.

Every hymn, every song, every scriptural song has that as a basic theme. He is good and his steadfast love, his covenant love endures forever towards his people. So here we are in 538 BC.

[20 : 06] Out of the ruin and devastation of the exile, the people are now turning back to Moses to relearn how to sacrifice and approach the Lord.

They're turning back to Solomon to relearn the arts of building and they're turning back to David to relearn the art of musical praise. So they are submitting once again to the instructions and patterns laid down for them in the Bible.

Let me add this. If you ever find yourself as part of a church which is disintegrating and falling apart and falling away from the Lord, there is only one way back to joy and strength and that is for that church to rediscover the Bible and to resubmit to it.

When a church falls to pieces, it means that the Bible has been pushed to one side. Some of you may need to remember that in years to come and in places where you may find yourselves. Now as we turn to this central question of why the temple was so important, let's bear in mind these characteristics of a people who were seeking to please the Lord and to be revived by him.

First of all, their unity as one man. Second, their submission to the leadership of the priest and the king or the man of David's line. And thirdly, their desire to rediscover and to resubmit to the teaching of the Bible.

[21 : 27] In a sense, that's the job of the church in every generation, isn't it? To rediscover and resubmit to the teaching of the Bible. So then, the temple.

Maybe you're thinking at this point, I'm preparing now to be bored. I do not need a lecture, thank you very much, on ecclesiastical architecture. I mean, we don't need fancy buildings, do we?

After all, the church is the people of God, not the buildings that it meets in. Well, yes, brother or sister, I agree entirely. The New Testament says nothing about church buildings and nothing about ecclesiastical architecture.

And if we lived in a reliable and warm climate, which we don't, we wouldn't need to have buildings at all. We could just meet out in the open air and it would be lovely. A church building is nothing more than a comfortable rain shelter.

Now, all that is true and that's important that we understand that. Buildings are not important as far as churches are concerned. But, the temple at Jerusalem was not a church building like the church buildings that we know.

[22 : 32] It was entirely different. It was unique and it had a unique importance. And if we love the Lord Jesus, we shall learn to love the temple that stood in Jerusalem.

Because the temple teaches us about who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do. If we love him, we shall love the temple. The temple is a detailed portrait of Jesus, given to God's people centuries before he actually arrived.

Now, let's start with this question. Why was Solomon's temple, that great temple, knocked down? Why was this magnificent, sumptuous building raised to the ground?

It was the Babylonians who did it in 587 BC. They'd been besieging Jerusalem for some time and when the city finally capitulated to the Babylonians, they captured the last king of Judah, whose name was Zedekiah.

They gouged out his eyes. They took him away bound to Babylon and they knocked the temple down. They burned it. But the question is, why did God allow it?

[23 : 41] Why did God not protect the temple from destruction? I think it's best to let the Bible itself answer that question. Can we turn back just a couple of pages, literally, to 2 Chronicles chapter 36.

2 Chronicles 36. You'll see that Ezra really runs straight on from the end of 2 Chronicles. Now this chapter, 36, is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible and I'll read a section beginning at verse 11 where King Zedekiah's reign is described.

It's a very sad and difficult passage but we need to understand why the temple was knocked down and this tells us. So verse 11, Zedekiah was 21 years old when he began to reign and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke from the mouth of the Lord. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear by God.

He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord, the God of Israel. All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had made holy in Jerusalem.

[25 : 04] The Lord, the God of their fathers sent persistently to them by his messengers because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. That's the temple. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people until there was no remedy.

Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, that's the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged.

He gave them all into his hand and all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his princes. All these he brought to Babylon and they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels.

Now that story, I think, puts it very clearly. Verse 16 is so poignant. It was the wrath of the Lord rising against his people until a point was reached of no return, no remedy.

The Lord God is patient but not endlessly patient. This was the tragedy of this part of Old Testament history. The Lord God, who had commanded the temple's construction, in the end, commanded the temple's destruction through the agency of the Babylonians.

[26 : 39] And it wasn't just the godlessness of this unfortunate King Zedekiah. He was the last in a long line of kings who had refused to offer the people godly leadership.

The rot stretched back for many, many years. Jeremiah the prophet had been passing on the Lord's commands to repent for about 40 years but he was hated and despised.

You can see the Lord's patience and persevering love in verse 15. He sent persistently to them by his messengers, his messengers being prophets like Jeremiah, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place, Jerusalem at the temple.

But what did the people do? Verse 16, they responded to the prophets by mocking them and by despising God's words and scoffing at all his prophets until the point was reached when God's judgment on the city became inevitable.

So it all came down. Royal David's city burned, demolished, the temple, the city walls, the houses and the people were taken away across the desert to Babylon.

[27 : 50] By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. The word tragedy is not strong enough to describe it. It was the end of everything or that's how it seemed.

That's how it seemed. It's put like this in the first verse of the book of Lamentations. How lonely sits the city that was full of people. How like a widow she has become.

She who was great among the nations. She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. So the people of Judah turned against their God.

They no longer valued him. His words sent to them by the prophets no longer weighed with them.

They had no weight or power with the people. They'd come to despise the altar which was the place of atonement and forgiveness and sacrifice.

They had no concern to keep the Ten Commandments and they blocked their ears to what God was saying to them then and there. Look again at 2 Chronicles 36.16 and look at the verbs that are used which describe the attitude of the people.

[29 : 00] Verse 16 mocking mocking despising scoffing mocking the messengers of God scoffing at his prophets despising his words.

Now think for a moment of our country in 2016 how much weight do the words of God carry in public life today or in public discussion or decision making.

can you imagine the reaction of members of the House of Commons if one of their number if a Christian MP were to argue a case for new legislation by basing his arguments on passages from the Bible.

Imagine their reaction wouldn't MPs say to each other what kind of a dinosaur do we have here that sent him back to Jurassic Park? The Bible carries no weight in public discourse today.

Think of Glasgow the city's old motto was let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of your word and the praising of your name. That motto was all about the Bible shaping the city's life.

[30 : 11] What do we have now? People make Glasgow. A barren creed if ever there was one. Now back to the Old Testament the judgment fell the exile came because God's people were despising God and God's words.

But those decades in Babylon gave the people time to consider their ways. And when Cyrus the new king issued his proclamation in 539 BC that the Jews should return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple some of them took their courage in their hands and they went.

It was a kind of second exodus crossing the wilderness again and re-entering the promised land. Now it seemed that quite a number of Jews remained in Babylon because only about 50,000 of them made the journey back to Judah.

But those who went back realized that the Lord was giving them a fresh start and a new opportunity. The covenant had not been torn up. God was still their God if they were willing to seek him.

So to the temple. Back to Ezra chapter 3. In the seventh month they gathered as one man to Jerusalem and the first thing that happened in verse 2 was that Jeshua and Zerubbabel built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it as it is written in the law.

[31 : 44] So God's law do you see is no longer being despised. It's being rediscovered. And its instructions are being put into practice once again. You'll see in verse 3 there was a further incentive and that was fear.

They set the altar in its place for fear was on them because of the peoples of the land. That's the Gentile peoples who were living nearby who had watched them, observed them coming back across the desert and were suspicious and hostile of these Jews coming back to Jerusalem. These Gentiles who were living there they weren't rolling out the red carpet or cracking bottles of champagne to welcome the Jews back. Not at all. In fact, their hostility developed soon afterwards and the opening verses of chapter 4 tell us a lot about it and we'll look at that next week.

So the returning exiles wanted to get the altar up first as the first priority so that they could begin to pray and ask the Lord to protect them from these hostile neighbors.

God had said to them back in the book of Exodus and he was speaking here about the altar. He said there at the altar I will meet with the people of Israel.

[32 : 57] I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. So if fear sends us to our knees sometimes, it's not always a bad thing.

But this altar, as well as giving access to God, was there primarily as a place of sacrifice. It was designed for that purpose, to slaughter an animal and to present its blood to the Lord.

And what did this mean, the presentation of the blood to the Lord? Let me read you a verse from Leviticus. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.

It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. The blood makes atonement for one's life. Now, I said earlier that if we love the Lord Jesus, we will learn to love the temple because it teaches us so much about him.

And this is the most important reason why Jesus came into the world. The altar in the Jerusalem temple was a picture of the greatest altar ever.

[34 : 06] And that altar is cross-shaped. And the blood shed on the cross-shaped altar was the blood of the one that John the Baptist described as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Just think of a woolly lamb, a sheep lamb, lying on the altar in Jerusalem. Its death and its shed blood brought a token atonement, a token forgiveness, if you like, a picture forgiveness.

Now, a picture of something is not the real thing. The letter to the Hebrews says, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. But what the blood of bulls and goats could not do, the blood of Jesus Christ has done.

And we can never thank him enough for it. The joy of the Christian life has at its heart the joy of sins forgiven and the assurance of sins forgiven.

And it's the cross-shaped altar which has won that assurance for us. Now, let's follow the story again in Ezra chapter 3. The first thing, the thing of first importance is the building of the altar.

[35 : 15] That's done in verses 2 and 3 in the seventh month of the first year. But then things begin to move quite quickly. And in the second month of the second year, as verse 8 tells us, Zerubbabel and Jeshua then made a beginning.

That is, a beginning of the actual rebuilding of the temple structure itself. And verses 8 and 9 describe the focused activity of appointing supervisors, young Levites and so on, foremen, clerks of works, to get the project moving.

And then verse 10 arrives. The foundation of the building is now actually set in its place, the trenches have been dug, and the first course of great stones has now been laid.

And to celebrate the laying of the foundation, they organize a ceremony of praise to the Lord. Just picture the colorful activity here in verse 10. The priests put on their ceremonial vestments, and they step forward in serried ranks, holding trumpets.

Then the Levites come. You'll see they're described as the sons of Asaph. And we learn from the books of Chronicles that Asaph was one of David's chief musicians, kind of chief choir master.

[36 : 31] Our queen today, as you probably know, appoints every few years a master of the queen's music. I think it's a lady at the moment, but she's still the master of the queen's music. Now Asaph, I think, was the master of King David's music.

And his particular skill seems to have been in playing the cymbals. Have you ever done that? I did when I was about four. You're given a cymbal, aren't you, when you're a little boy?

Playing a big cymbal, it looks easy, but it's not. Any percussionist will tell you it's not. The key thing is to make the noise at the right moment. That's the difficulty. So, fanfares of trumpets, verse 11, the clashing of cymbals, and then they sing responsively back and forth across the building from one side to the other, and they sing, for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever towards Israel, Psalm 136.

And this great rush of musical celebration and praise has an electrifying effect on the great crowds of people who are there. They shout with a great shout in verse 11.

Why? Because the foundation of the house of the Lord has now been laid, and they're thinking, we're on our way. At last, the Lord is graciously reestablishing his people in the land from which they were driven away because of their sin.

[37 : 51] But that great shout of joy is not their only reaction. Look at verse 12. Amidst the shouting and the singing and the joyful music, another emotion bursts up from the depths of the hearts of the old men.

They weep with a loud voice. They sob as only Middle Eastern people can. Why? Verse 12 tells us. They had seen the first house, Solomon's great temple, destroyed 50 years previously when they'd been young men or boys.

They remembered it. Well, of course they did. How could they forget the sight of its destruction, the sight of the roofs and the rafters and the walls of Solomon's temple blazing, the searing heat, the collapsing of the walls, the stench of burning, filling their nostrils with choking filth?

You don't forget that kind of experience if you've once witnessed it. But surely there was something else that made them weep and wail, and that was the knowledge of why God had done it, why God had allowed it, why God had caused the Babylonians to come flooding into Jerusalem, raising it to the ground.

These old men knew why the city and the temple had been destroyed and why they'd been taken into exile as young men 50 years previously. These old men had had 50 years to think about it, 50 years of captivity in the land of Babylon, working away as slaves, driven by slave masters.

[39 : 23] 50 years of plowing fields for the Babylonians and building houses for the Babylonians, digging canals for the Babylonians, for their barges to transport goods, working for the Babylonians as tailors and cooks and bakers and joiners and household servants.

50 years as a subjugated people enduring hard labor in a land 600 miles from home. And they knew why God was chastising them.

It was because they turned their backs on him and had given themselves to idols and had despised his words. King Manasseh of Judah in the 7th century BC had been perhaps the worst of these kings.

It was his behavior, we learn from the history books, which had finally hardened the Lord's resolve to send Judah into exile. This is how Manasseh's reign is described in 2 Chronicles 33.

He built altars in the temple of the Lord, that is altars to other gods, in the temple of which the Lord had said, my name will remain in Jerusalem forever.

[40 : 30] In both courts of the temple of the Lord he built altars to all the starry hosts, the sun and the moon and the stars. He sacrificed his children in the fire in the valley of Ben Hinnom.

He practiced divination and witchcraft and sought omens and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger.

He took the image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, in this temple and in Jerusalem which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.

Manasseh's influence and Manasseh's deeds had deeply corrupted the people. But he wasn't the only godless king, there had been several others. But the people now were despising the prophets, worshipping the sun, the moon and the stars and the vile gods of their pagan neighbors.

And the old men, they knew this history and they wept because of it. They knew how their parents and their grandparents had been behaving.

[41 : 40] They knew that God was thoroughly justified in sending them away and sacking their beloved city. these were tears of remorse and regret and repentance. But didn't they also weep because they were now seeing that God had not cast them off forever?

The temple, symbolizing his presence amongst them, symbolizing his approval of them, was beginning to rise up before their eyes. For six months now, the blood of the appointed sacrifices had once again been running down the sides of the altar, the altar which their leaders had rebuilt. It was not the end for the people of God. It was a new beginning and they wept because of it. Look at the words again that they were singing in verse 11.

For he is good for his steadfast love endures forever towards Israel. Now the people had sung those words 400 years beforehand when Solomon's temple was dedicated.

But to be able to sing them again now, after all that had happened, after their wretched years of sin and rebellion and idolatry, wasn't that a great marvel? Wasn't that moving for them?

[42 : 52] To know that God was restoring them after their punishment and that the only reason why he could possibly do so was his sheer undeserved grace.

Now our situation today is different in many ways but there are great similarities. In this country, the Church of Christ, the Church that bears his name, has much in it to encourage us today but at the same time there are great swathes of dilapidation, especially in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland.

The book of Ezra teaches us that God is patient but not endlessly patient with those who despise his words and worship idols. the exile of Israel to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem show that God is willing, is prepared to bring to an end everything that rebels against him.

So this third chapter of Ezra ends with an extraordinary mixture of joy and weeping. Weeping for the exile, weeping over the rebellion of those who should have loved the Lord and served him, but great joy as well.

Joy at realizing that God had not given up on his covenant, that indeed his steadfast love endures forever towards his people. Now our task, friends, in our day is the rebuilding of the temple in modern Britain.

[44 : 25] Not, of course, a temple of timber and stone, but a temple of people, the people of God. Since the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the task of the Lord's people is to bring others to Christ from all nations, to preach this good news of repentance and the forgiveness of sins and the joy of fellowship, the joy of belonging and new life and working together in this great work of building the church and rescuing the lost.

But I hope we have it also in our hearts to weep, to weep over so much in our culture and in our churches that despises the Lord and is ashamed of the Bible's teaching.

I hope we have it in our hearts to weep over the ignorance of the Bible, the rejection of its weight and majesty and power, the willingness to embrace sexual immorality and a lifestyle where pleasure becomes paramount and service is discounted.

Walking with the Lord will always involve tears as well as rejoicing. But let's not doubt that the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

The Lord God who graciously rebuilt his people in the 6th century BC is more than able to bless and enlarge and extend his temple today and to go on extending it until Christ returns.

[45 : 58] returns. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Lord God, our Father, have mercy upon us, we pray, and put it deep into our hearts to give ourselves to this wonderful, glorious work whereby by your grace and power we might see your temple, your people enlarged and become increasingly beautiful and glorious.

Revive us, we pray. Give us strength and great joy in our hearts as we work together. And we ask it to the honour and praise of the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.