

Laying Gospel Foundations

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 0 0] building. But we're going to turn now this evening to our Bibles, and Paul is leading us through the book of Ezra. If you don't have your own Bible with you, if you need to borrow one, then there are some at the side, some at the front and the back. Go and grab one. It's page 390 on those Bibles. We're in Ezra chapter 3, after Chronicles, before Nehemiah, continuing this time of the history of God's people following the exile.

And we begin reading in chapter 3. I've just gone off. Oh, I've gone back on again. Yeah, good. Ezra chapter 3, then, in verse 1. When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Yeshua, the son of Jeruzadak, and 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 is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

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, the Feast of Tabernacles. As it was written, they 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, of 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.

[2 : 1 1] 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 Yeshua, the son of Josedach, made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests, the Levites, and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity.

They appointed the Levites, from 20 years old and upwards, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. And Yeshua, with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, worked together, supervising the workmen in the house of the Lord, along with the sons of Hendam, 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 cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David, king of Israel. And they sang responsibly, 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, the Levites, the head of the Father's houses, old men who had seen the first house, they wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of the house being laid.

Although 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. Amen. And may God bless to us his word.

Well, please have Ezra chapter 3 open in front of you. And we'll spend a few moments thinking about this chapter together. Ezra chapter 3 is a chapter that speaks very much of God's grace to a wayward people. This is primarily a chapter about God's grace. Yes, as we'll see, the people here in Ezra 3, they lay good gospel foundations. They prioritize correctly. They take the right steps. But the overriding reality, the big thing we can't miss here, is the fact that God is wonderfully, scandalously gracious to his people. You think about where Ezra comes in the Bible story.

[5 : 04] After the disobedience of God's grace, after the disobedience of God's people, the horrors of exile, the ransacking of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, after all of that, there is a way back from the dark paths of sin. There is a way back. By the end of this chapter, the altar has been rebuilt in Jerusalem. The worship of God in Jerusalem has been re-established after all those years. The temple have been laid again. The very dwelling place of God is starting to be rebuilt in Jerusalem.

And that is absolutely astonishing. When you consider the previous decades of what's been going on. And Ezra 3 is telling us that God is not finished with his people. The promises he made all those years before have not been forgotten. The passage of time, nor the failings of Israel, have done anything to dent God's ability to keep his promises, to his desire to dwell in the midst of his people, to be their God.

Those promises have not gone away. And that is what the whole Bible story is about, isn't it? God dwelling in the midst of his people. The Bible begins in a garden.

Genesis 1 and 2. With God dwelling with his people, with Adam and Eve. Genesis 3 tells of the Lord God walking in the midst of his garden. And Adam and Eve are there trying to hide themselves from his presence.

He was in their midst, dwelling with them. But the decision that caused Adam and Eve to try and hide from God's presence, well, that was the sin that would require God to drive them out from his presence, to send them out east of Eden to exiles, away from his presence.

[7 : 07] But they weren't exiled without hope. See, the Bible traces God's great promises of restoration, how he can again dwell with his people and be their God.

The Bible tells the story of how that is going to happen. The tabernacle and then the temple. That was the place where God himself, he made himself present on earth.

The place where his glory dwelt, in the midst of his people. That was how God was going to dwell in the midst of his people, in his temple. But his people could only draw near, they could only enter his presence, if the problem of their sin was dealt with.

Hence, the altar. The place where sacrifice for sin were made. God could not dwell in the midst of his people, unless sin was atoned for.

Unless blood was shed. You couldn't have a temple, the dwelling place of God, without an altar. You couldn't have the presence of God, without the constantly renewed provision, for the forgiveness of sin, of cleansing.

[8 : 19] The aim of all the rituals you read about in the book of Leviticus, is to make possible God's continued presence among his people. And of course, the temple, the tabernacle, the altar, all those sacrifices pointed forward, ultimately, to the coming of Christ.

We read in Hebrews, these words, but when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then, through the greater and more perfect tent, he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

It goes on, therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean, from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

Do you see what we have living this side of the cross? We enjoy a fuller reality of what the temple and the altar pointed forward to. And we will one day enjoy the fullness of that reality, when Christ returns, and we will dwell with him forever in the new creation.

We will dwell with God, we'll be with him, in his presence. There is nothing more wonderful than that, for people like you and me, than to be in God's presence.

[9 : 56] And yet, and yet we so often despise it. That is what necessitated the exile in the first place. God's people despised God's presence.

Now these words will be familiar to us, given our recent studies in the book of Ezekiel. But listen again to the tragic reality of the people's sin, and of their turning away from God, which necessitated the exile in the first place.

Hear these words from Ezekiel. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me visions of God to Jerusalem. And he said to me, Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.

So I went in and saw, and there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things, and loaths and beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. And before them stood 70 men of the elders of the house of Israel. Then he said to me, Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures, for they say, The Lord does not see us.

[11 : 12] The Lord has forsaken the land. And as a result of what God's people were doing, God withdrew his presence from the temple.

He withdrew his presence from his people. They were swept away by the Babylonians' exile. There could be nothing worse for God's people than for God to withdraw his presence.

That was 70 years prior. And what do we have here in Ezra chapter 3? All these years later, God is giving them another chance.

The temple is being rebuilt. What grace. When you consider what God's people did to necessitate the exile, here they are, back in Jerusalem, back rebuilding the temple.

This is of staggering proportions. This moment. That this should be taking place. It speaks of God's astonishing grace. He is a God of second chances. Even though his people had neglected him, abused his means of grace so terribly, so bad was it, that God removed those means of grace entirely.

[12 : 30] Even though that was the reality, God was restoring them. And what we read about here is the reestablishment of the altar, of the temple.

What we see here is the relaying of gospel foundations for God's people. God will once again dwell with his people.

There is nothing more precious for God's people than that. God is gracious. And there will be no doubt many times when we realize that we have strayed and that we need to come back to God as individuals, as churches.

But here the message of Ezra 3, God is a God who gives second chances to those who return to him. He can again dwell with his people. Two key things to note from this chapter about people who are given a second chance by God.

Two marks of a people who are given a second chance by God. Number one, they will be a people who demonstrate humble obedience and careful dependence upon him.

[13 : 47] As you read through these words, these opening words, it's apparent that these people are being careful in their obedience. God has stirred their hearts.

We've seen that in these last two weeks. God stirred their hearts to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. But they are so careful in their obedience as they go.

They are doing things by the book. They are doing things in the way that God has instructed them to do it. Look at verse one. When the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

That's a wonderful picture, isn't it? Of God's people gathering as one man together in Jerusalem. What a moment to see the people gathering there as one.

The God who scattered them is now, in his grace, gathering them back together, his people. And the fact this takes place in the seventh month is significant.

[14 : 46] That was a key month in the Jewish calendar. Major feasts took place in that month, including the Day of Atonement and, as we'll see, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles.

And the very first thing they do, look at verse two, is to rebuild the altar of God as it is written in the Law of Moses. You get that phrase again in verse four.

They kept the Feast of Booths as it is written. As it's written. As it's written. Here was a people who were careful to obey all of God's commands.

They had learnt the lesson of exile. They had learnt that God really did need to be taken at his word. If his word commanded it, then they'd be careful to do it as it is written.

The very first thing that Abraham did coming into the Promised Land, Genesis 12, was to build an altar to the laws. And the first thing we read of these people doing as they return to the land is do what?

[15 : 55] Build an altar. In Numbers 29, you can read a detailed description of the Feast of Tabernacles, which we see here in Ezra chapter three, verse four.

And we're told that again, they kept the Feast of Booths as it is written. They offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule as each day required. They were careful to obey God's

word just as it was laid out.

Now, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles was an annual reminder of God's people and the time they spent in the wilderness. After the exodus from Egypt, they spent 40 years before they reached the Promised Land.

And during this festival, they would literally live in these booths, little sort of tents, as a reminder of God's provision during those years in the wilderness.

And flowing on from that, it seems they established a regular, ongoing pattern of sacrifices and worship of God. Look at verses five and six. After that, the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon, and so on.

[17 : 04] They are being careful to do exactly what they are supposed to do in terms of bringing sacrifices and offerings to the Lord. They do things by the book.

They are careful to obey the Lord. They demonstrate careful obedience. But also, the very thing they are doing in terms of rebuilding the altar and establishing the sacrifices, that in itself demonstrates an attitude of humble dependence.

In the very act of building the altar and making sacrifices, the people are saying to God, we come not on our own terms. we do not come before you on our own merit, but rather we come humbly.

We come obeying your word. We come recognizing that all we bring to the table is our own sin. We need forgiveness.

We need to bring these sacrifices as a payment for our sin. You see, there is no other way that God can dwell with his people than by the forgiveness of their sin.

[18 : 13] And the people know that. They know that before they can even contemplate building the temple, they need to be right with God. And so too for us.

Before we can think of doing anything, we must be made right with God. And there is only one way, and it is through the cross of Jesus Christ. He died in our place for our sin.

So we must go there and seek forgiveness for our sin, first and foremost. And that humbles us, doesn't it? To recognize again that I bring nothing to the table but my sin.

It reminds us that we don't come to God on our own terms, but his. And the people of Ezra 3 knew that. They knew they couldn't do this on their own.

They had to do it in God's way. And his way demonstrated very visibly their total dependence on him and on his provision for the forgiveness of their sin.

[19 : 24] Notice also verse 3, it's a strange thing, isn't it? In verse 3, they set the altar in its place for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands.

Remember the situation? These exiles have been away for 70 years and now they were back, strangers and aliens in their own lands. And the locals were no doubt wondering, what's going on here?

Who are these people? And God's people no doubt felt very much out of place. Here they were back in Jerusalem, back at the site of the altar and the temple. No wonder fear was upon them. They were aliens in Jerusalem. They looked around them, they felt fear. And that verse 3 implies that their fears drove them to worship God, to seek God.

Now is that legitimate, do you wonder? Should we not have higher motives for doing this? Should they have not had higher motives for building the temple than fear?

[20 : 28] Is that a legitimate thing? Well, what's wrong with it, really? In our fears, what better recourse can we have than God?

Why shouldn't we take our fears to his altar? It's the very best place to bring them, isn't it? it is possible, isn't it, to be fearful and faithful at the same time? There'll be many things that drive fear into our hearts.

Some will be personal circumstances, illnesses, financial pressures, relational breakdown.

Sometimes it will be the pressure that we feel as we make our stands for Christ.

No matter how small they might be, we feel the pressure, don't we? We fear those around us and what they might think of us as we stand for Christ. But that fear, well it should drive us to seek God. And as we come to the place of sacrifice, those fears are abated, aren't they? Those fears are put in their right place.

[21 : 39] Because at the place of sacrifice, which for them was the altar, for us it's the cross of Christ. As we come to that point, we see what is of ultimate importance. And we learn to fear God more than man, don't we?

We see everything in its right perspective. Eternity, salvation. So for them, in their fear, to seek to reestablish the altar, it's a good thing to do with your fear, isn't it?

So be faithful in your fears. And in your fears, come to the cross by faith. Don't go anywhere else. God so what we see here with the people as they return to Jerusalem, we see humble dependence and careful obedience made visible in the right worship of God.

The marks of a people who know they've been given a second chance. We approach God on his own terms, coming to the place of sacrifice and worshipping him.

That's the first thing, that's the first mark of a people who've been given a second chance by God. Number two, they will be a people who look to the future with hope. They'll be a people that look to the future with hope.

[22 : 59] So, immediately following the building of the altar, the careful obedience in terms of sacrifices and the feast of tabernacles, we see there at the end of verse six, that the foundation of the temple had not yet been laid.

They'd done the altar, the temple was yet to be started, and so the people get to it. The priority of worship in verses one to six, led to action.

Looking to the future from verse seven and following it led to preparation for the building, the organization of the building, and the celebration once the building got started. And the right worship of God, which we see in verses one to six, will always lead to visible and tangible efforts to build God's kingdom.

Not, of course, in our own strength, but rather flowing out from humble dependence on God. That will be the result. And that's so clear, isn't it?

The activity of verse seven has flowed out from the right worship established in the first six verses. So, look at verse seven. they give money to the masons, the carpenters, food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon.

[24 : 19] The preparations for the temple rebuilding are made. And there was evidently no shortage of provision for the work. No shortage of material terms, no shortage financially.

This is the evidence of a worshiping people. The materials flow out. And that remains the case today.

Observe a church that is dwindling and dying with a building that is crumbling and neglected and you'll find a people who long ago ceased to really worship the Lord.

Observe a church alive with real love for one another, with life it will provide for the material needs of the church.

You'll find a really worshiping people there where the church is visibly flourishing. So there's preparation and it flows out from right worship.

[25 : 23] But there's also the right organization. Look at verse 8. The right organization was put in place. Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel and Jeshua made a beginning together with the rest of their kinsmen.

They appointed the Levites from 20 years old and upwards to supervise the work of the house of the Lord and so on. There was real leadership here from Zerubbabel Paul and Jeshua.

We saw last week they were the kingly and the priestly heads and they appoint certain Levites to the task of supervising the work and the people are named here.

Care and thought has gone into this important task of building the temple. God's people need organizing for kingdom work both then with the rebuilding of a temple but also today with the rebuilding of living stones we seek to build a living church.

And the thing is every church is organized. Every church has leadership structures. They can be thought through and done well or they can be haphazard and chaotic.

[26 : 42] So which should it be? Well I think it ought to be well done if we can. We ought to organize well. We ought to be clear in our structures to enable the flourishing of the work.

The task we're about is the most vital task in human history. Do you think that? Do you think the church is the most vital institution in the world?

Because God's word says it is. The church will last into eternity. and the work we're about is of the most vital importance.

Time and eternity are in the balance. People's salvation is what our task is. And so we would do well I think to be organized for that task.

It would be odd wouldn't it? If we fail to give careful thought to doing the very best job we can in organizing ourselves for the sake of evangelizing our city and seeking to build each other up in Christ.

[27 : 49] They do it well here. They are well organized. So they get organized and then verse 10 they begin the work. Look with me there verse 10 and when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets it's a glorious instrument the trumpet 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 towards Israel and all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the temple had been built.

There's great rejoicing at the beginning of this temple reconstruction and no wonder remember all they've been through in the years prior and these words from Jeremiah would have been in their minds I'm sure at this moment Jeremiah 33 spoken all those years before he says this I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride the voice of those who sing as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord give thanks to the Lord of hosts for the Lord is good for a steadfast love endures forever for I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first says the Lord those words from Jeremiah would have been in their minds at this moment think what it would have been like when the

Babylonians finally flattened Jerusalem and the temple I do not imagine they ever thought this day would come the day when in Jerusalem the temple would be beginning to be rebuilt do you see why those words in verse 11 are so significant as they sing for his love is good his steadfast love endures forever they show they reveal to us Jeremiah's promises are being fulfilled at last what Jeremiah said was going to take place is taking place against all the odds from a human perspective God's people saw God's goodness again and perhaps we need to remember that in moments of despair and sadness we need to be reminded you will yet see the goodness of God again and it may not be for some time it may not be until we see our saviour in glory but we will see his goodness again we will have reason to sing for he is good for a steadfast love endures forever we will have reason to sing that again we can look to the future with hope because we belong to a promise keeping

God we've seen that in Ezra already God keeps his promises and we can look with hope to the future but don't neglect the present reality of God's goodness either don't neglect the provision that God has made for us at this moment every time we gather as a church we are seeing something of the goodness of God what these people waited 70 years for we get to enjoy every week twice on a Sunday what a privilege and do we really see and cherish what we have here do you cherish what we have at this moment are you moved by it does it move you as we gather here together these people were moved deeply they shouted with joy to the Lord there's an outpouring of emotion here are we ever moved as we gather for corporate worship it need not be great shouts or visibly demonstrative shouldn't be coming from me but if you're never moved if you're never moved to joy never moved to tears even if no one sees them rolling down your cheeks are there tears in your eyes ever as we gather together here if you're never moved then perhaps you've not grasped the magnitude of

God's grace to us maybe you've never grasped the privilege of what we have here week by week as we gather and we come in different states don't we every week sometimes we come with joy sometimes it's deep sadness but what a privilege to gather and be reminded of our great God but in the midst of the joy and the celebration there is I think here a note of caution as well look again at verse 12 but many of the priests and the Levites and the heads of the father's houses old men who had seen the first house wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of the house being laid intermingled with the joy is weeping some of the older saints those who remember the glory of the old temple weep they don't join in with the joyful shouting now in one sense you can perhaps understand they are perhaps reminded again of just how far God's people had fallen the memory of the great temple has been rekindled they remember what it was like but what they see in front of them is a long way from that all they see is some foundations in the earth perhaps it's a right weeping a right sadness of what's been but I wonder if there's also a danger in nostalgia here in fact

the prophets

[34 : 21] Haggai and Zechariah condemn this attitude in the returners they warn the people not to despise the day of small things and we also must not despise the day of small things the days of laying foundations and what was once a glorious temple sometimes nostalgia like that can kill a church I've seen that happen I've seen a church fellowship that constantly was harking back to the glory days of a ministry who passed 15 years before now it's right to give thanks isn't it for faithful servants in the past but this was more than that there was an unhelpful nostalgia and it killed the church the church had dwindled away to almost nothing no no we don't hark back for the glory days no no we look forward we look forward in anticipation of all that God will do in the future and we don't despise the day of small things that was a day of small things in many ways all they had to show was a foundation in the earth it would take another 20 years for it to be finished don't despise the day of small things we tend to think don't we what is low key and ordinary and plain and simple must be rather worthless and that sort of attitude can infect

God's people we want something big and spectacular don't we something impressive looking but don't despise the ordinary the small as one preacher put it what matters is not that the church be grand but that it be genuine that's the most important thing not grandness but genuineness and God can use a people like that God can use a church like that so here are the marks of a church that knows it belongs to a God who gives second chances it's a church that will demonstrate humble obedience and dependence upon him a church that carefully obeys his word there'll be a church that looks to the future with hope because our God is a gracious promise keeping God it'll be a church that enjoys the present reality of God's presence a church that knows that it belongs to a God who wonderfully gives second chances to his wayward people for he is good his steadfast love endures forever amen let me pray our father God we thank you that you are a God who delights to extend grace to wayward people thank you that you are God of second chances how glad we are of that fact and so help us continually to keep coming to you in humility coming in repentance and faith and will that be our constant mark as a church we ask in Jesus name amen thank you thank you to

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