

Ezra 3. Israel was granted permission to leave captivity in Babylon and return to Jerusalem; a very small group left captivity. Their purpose was to establish the temple, a place to worship God. Without the temple, God's presence wouldn't come. They had been in a place of desolation. Jeremiah prophesied that the desolation would not remain. **Jeremiah 33:10-11** *"This is what the Lord says: 'You say about this place, 'It is a desolate waste, without people or animals.' Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither people nor animals, there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord, saying, 'Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good; His love endures forever.' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,' says the Lord.*

God does not want any of us to remain in desolation. Israel was as low as you could go spiritually in captivity in Babylon and yet this was the new beginning the Lord had promised to Israel. God is a God of new beginnings, both corporately as with Israel and individually to those in need. Are you hoping for a new beginning? He is a God who gives not a God who withholds. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Begin today to prepare a place for God to come and dwell.

1. BEGIN AT THE ALTAR WITH SACRIFICE. The altar was the starting point for the Israelites in rebuilding. Renewal must begin at a place of sacrifice. The altar provided the starting point of their relationship with God. It began with forgiveness and symbolized their redemption. The Old Testament altar was a shadow of what God would do on the cross through Jesus Christ. Christ willingly laid His life down to restore our relationship with God. The altar represents what Jesus did for us on the cross. The cross is the beginning for renewal. That's where we must begin... at the altar... at the foot of the cross.

Hebrews 9:22 *And almost all things are cleansed with blood, according to the Law, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. I John 1:9* *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

2. LOOK TO HIS WORD. They didn't guess what this new beginning should look like. They went back to what God had said in His Word.

Ezra 3:2 *Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, rose up and 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. Verse 4* *They also celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written... Verse 10* *Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of King David of Israel.*

God's Word gave them what they needed to proceed. God's Word is the only standard by which we live today. God doesn't soften His Words for our age so that it is easier to follow. Daniel wanted to know how to pray and he went back to Jeremiah's Word. We should never fight a battle that we have not first sought in God's Word and in prayer. The Bible has words to live our lives by... rebuke, edify, build up, correct, exhort, direct... Do we value human words over God's Word? New beginnings begin at the cross and continue with an obedience to His Word. Who will we serve? Who will we follow? To whom will we yield?

3. BUILD THE TEMPLE. The temple was God's dwelling place and was significant as that was the purpose of rebuilding. This was a shadow of the New Testament temple. **Ezra 3:6** *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 had not been laid. I Corinthians 3:16* *Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?* Paul is speaking to the Corinthians who were living without restraints, living comfortable. Paul informs them of their body being a temple. The Jews knew the temple meant God's dwelling place. The Holy Spirit

came to dwell in us. Some come to church today seeking God's presence but God's presence dwells in people's lives not in a building. Our bodies are sacred to God. God's presence is not about going to the right place but surrendering the right things to make room for Him. It begins at the cross by accepting His sacrifice, by accepting His Word, by accepting His truth for our lives to become a temple capable of holding His presence. Jesus Christ made that possible. Living for ourselves, living in opposition to God's Word, finding another way, is desecrating our temple today.

How do we build our temple?

***Stand Together. Ezra 3:3** *So they set up the altar on its foundation, because they were terrified of the peoples of the lands.* They stood together - unity. They first built their worship when they were frightened. They faced their battle with prayer. They came together. Don't fight your battles alone! Stop trying to do on your own. Ask for help. We are waging spiritual battles and need to face them by first coming to the altar. **Matthew 6:33** *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you.* What are "these things"? It was what they were concerned about. What is weighing on you? What do you need fixed? The solution starts at the cross. The Israelites fought by worship, by coming as one, and with purpose. Courage is standing confident with the one who is standing with you.

***Work together. Ezra 3:1** *they gathered as one man.* **3:9** *they stood united with one another.* A united people is a powerful people. Unity is the responsibility of every individual. Unity falls on each one of us - to create, to restore, and to protect. When we are divided we are fighting by ourselves. Israelites did things together - fight, give, worship...

***Young and Old Together. Ezra 3:11-13** *And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, "For He is good, for His favor is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout of joy when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, because the people were shouting with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.* These Israelites (the older men) began to weep. The older had seen Solomon's grand temple. This rebuild was smaller. Sometimes we get caught up in what was instead of what is. Do you think about what God did and overlook the what is? The young men only knew captivity. Here they were for the first time seeing the outline of the dwelling place of God. They were overjoyed. In the midst of the ruins of Jerusalem, some were rejoicing and some were weeping. **Haggai 2:3** *Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?* **Haggai 2:9** *'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the Lord of armies, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the Lord of armies.* They did not know that in this temple Jesus would be dedicated; He would teach; the veil would be torn; God's presence left the building and came to a man.

We don't know what God is doing in a moment. His Word promises that we move from glory to glory. Today can't compare to tomorrow's glory. The young and old could have separated as they saw things differently, but it didn't affect their unity. They celebrated together. Unless reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movement of today, they cannot lay a solid foundation for the temple of the future. Young and old must work side by side. What God is doing requires a people together.

Is there a place in your life that needs a new beginning? Where will you begin?

How is the altar and temple a foreshadowing of Christ?

What change can be made within as you notice different reactions of the young and the old as in verse 11-13?