

Text: Ezra 3:1-13; 6:13-22 (Pew Bible, pg.463)

Title: “Complete the Task”

INTRODUCTION

God is at work in your world. Do you truly believe that? I don't want you to sit on the bank as the mighty river of God's activity rolls by as you just watch from a comfortable distance. I want you to wade in and feel the tug of the current pulling you in the direction of what God is doing. God is on a great redemptive mission in this world. The world is broken because of sin and He sent His Son Jesus to save the world. And one day it will be complete when Christ will come again and make all things new. And that means that God is not just on a mission in your world; He's on a mission in your life to rebuild your life into the image of His Son Jesus. So this great river is flowing.

And when you wade into that river you are caught in the great current of God's activity in this world. But it will never be easy. There are rocks and rapids and whirlpools that threaten us all along the course of the river. And sometimes it can be so difficult that people decide they don't want to be part of it anymore. They get out of the river and sit on the bank again. And because of the difficulties they quit ... and they miss out on God's great work in their world and in their lives.

And this is what happens on the pages of the Bible in the OT book of Ezra. Turn to Ezra 3. The Jews had returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon because God was at work. God moved on the heart of the pagan Persian King Cyrus to let them go home to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple that had been destroyed by their enemies seventy years before. God also moved on the hearts of many of the Jews in Babylon to get in the river and join God in the rebuilding of their broken world. So...

Ezra 3:2 - Then Joshua ... and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel ... and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Ezra 3:3 - Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

Ezra 3:10 - When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD ...

You'll recall that as they began the work Ezra 4-5 tells how they were met with heavy opposition and many obstacles, and sadly the work of rebuilding was stopped for about 20 years. But with the help and grace of God they began to build again.

Ezra 6:14 - So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah ... They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia.

So twenty years later ... after all the opposition and difficulties and false starts, the Temple is finally finished. And notice what happens.

Ezra 6:16 - Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

The people of God and their leaders have overcome great adversity and opposition. And with the help of God they have completed an important goal. Today is a special day for us just like the people of Jerusalem had a special day. We get to dedicate a building that will be used for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ and connecting with our community. So today we celebrate like the people of God 2500 years ago.

Now let's go back to the beginning of their rebuilding program. I want you to see what kept them on course.

Ezra 3:1 - When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem.

After they had gone back to their homes in their villages and secured things there, it says that they gathered as one man to Jerusalem. We're talking here about 50,000 people or so. How can that many people be "as one man"? We're talking about unity. Unity is not waiting for everyone to come over to your side. Unity is all of us moving to a place together to do the work of God and celebrate the work of God. They were one in heart, one in spirit and one in their confidence in God that He would strengthen them for the work of rebuilding their broken world.

And as they gather to do the work there were at least three priorities of the people of God that motivated and propelled them to complete the task of rebuilding their broken world. We do not learn *about* this; we learn *from* it. Their first priority was:

1. ATONEMENT (Ezra 3:2-6)

Atonement is a biblical word that describes how we as human beings can be made right with God. Our sin has separated us from God. This is the reason we have broken lives and a broken world. So something has to be done to atone for our sins. In the OT Law of Moses God prescribed exactly how this would be done. And the leaders of the people of God understand.

Ezra 3:2 - Then Jeshua ... and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel ... and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Ezra 3:3b - They built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

The altar of the original Temple built by Solomon was in a specific place. Everything in the Temple was designed to communicate the holiness of God. The altar was located at the entrance to the

sanctuary. Before the priest could enter the presence of God offerings must be made to atone for their sin.

But why did they build the altar first? It would be like starting a new house and installing the kitchen sink first. These rebuilders understood that their world was broken because they had sinned. And friends, if we don't deal with the sin problem properly there can be no rebuilding of broken worlds.

God has one way, and one way only for atonement to be made ... a sacrifice. Someone or something has to pay the price for our sins. Estranged parties are reconciled at the altar of sacrifice. (Atonement = At One Ment). The Bible says that apart from the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. And the OT system that God first put into place required animal sacrifices to be made over and over again. You see it in the following verses. Five verses in a row (Ezra 3:2-6) speak of the offering of burnt offerings over and over again. Why? Because we keep sinning, and because no one animal's blood (no matter how perfect that animal may be) could atone for everyone's sin.

But that system ... the Old Covenant ... was provisional. It would be completely fulfilled in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. In Christ all the requirements of the sacrifices and offerings of the OT Law were completely satisfied.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So there's no need for thousands and thousands of animals to be sacrificed. The sinless, perfect Son of God became the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 2:1-2 - My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Everyone has a sense that they have a sin problem. This is the starting place for rebuilding your broken world. If you try to start somewhere else, it will fail. Turn to Christ today.

So atonement was the first priority the rebuilders had.
But there's another priority the rebuilders had that sustained them...

2. OBEDIENCE (Ezra 3:2,4; 6:18)

Where they went wrong in the first place is that they stopped obeying God. And the result was that God had to discipline them through the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon for seventy years. As they rebuilt their broken world, they wanted to do things by the Book this time. So they built the altar...

Ezra 3:2b - In accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Ezra 3:4 - Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles...

All these things were required in the Law of Moses. After they had completed the task of rebuilding the Temple...

Ezra 6:18 - And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses.

As you rebuild your broken world, just do things God's way. When it comes to your sexual behavior, do things God's way. When it comes to who you date and marry, just do things God's way. When it comes to your finances, just do things God's way.

James 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

And this leads me to another great priority for the people as they were rebuilding their broken world.

3. WORSHIP (Ezra 3:10-13; 6:16-22)

Let me take you to a worship service where nearly 50,000 people attended. Worship had been part of this from the beginning. After the altar was built ...

Ezra 3:4 - They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles ...

They worshipped in the middle of the project. When the foundation of the Temple was built...

Ezra 3:11 - With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

They worshipped at the end of the project. When the Temple was completed...

Ezra 6:16 - Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

Remember what they are building ... the Temple. The Temple is the physical, visible focus of the worship of God. Obviously each person worshipped God privately, but the corporate worship of God was central to the life of the people of God.

Now there's no worship if there's no sacrifice. We "offer" worship. We give up something as we worship. What kind of worship is it if it doesn't cost you something?

WORSHIP INVOLVES OUR RESOURCES.

People gave their money to pay for the materials and to pay the workers who did the work on the building.

Ezra 3:7 - Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.

This is part of their worship.

WORSHIP INVOLVES OUR SERVICE.

Ezra 3:10 - When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel.

Now in OT times the priests were the representatives of the people before God. Their calling was to serve God. They do a lot of the worshipping. But in the NT time in which we live, we are all priests who offer our service to God in worship. Your service is to be worship to God.

WORSHIP INVOLVES OUR ENERGY (PASSION).

Notice what energy and passion is put into their worship.

Ezra 3:11 - With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: “He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

The word “praise” translates the Hebrew word from which we get our word “hallelujah.” It means to boast about something or someone. It is extolling the virtue, honor and glory of Almighty God. And this is done passionately. It says the people “gave a great shout of praise to the Lord.”

ILLUSTRATION – Have you been to a sporting event or a concert lately ... maybe your child’s soccer game or band concert? At some point you’re going to be out of your seat, cheering on your team ... boasting about their achievement. And at times you just have to sit down. When is the last time you poured yourself so passionately into your worship that you just had to sit down to catch your breath. Isn’t God far more important to us than a sporting event or a concert? That’s what was happening here in Ezra 3:11. They were shouting for joy ... at least most of them were.

Ezra 3:12 - But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.

Now why were the older folks in the crowd weeping while the rest were shouting for joy? It says that they had seen the former temple, and when the new foundation was built they were grieved. Why? They remembered the good old days when the glorious Temple that Solomon built was still standing. And the new temple wasn’t going to be anywhere near as glorious. Change is difficult for some. O how we long for the good old days!

But perhaps they were also weeping because they realized that it was their generation that had disobeyed God so much so that God had to discipline them with the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the Jews. And maybe the rebuilding was just another reminder that they had failed.

Remember that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were exhorting the people with messages from God as they rebuilt. Haggai saw this and he chastised those who were weeping.

Haggai 2:3 - ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’

Friends, there’s nothing more demoralizing when you’re trying to rebuild your broken world than to have someone come along and say, “Oh, that’s nothing compared to what it used to be.”

Zechariah put it this way:

Zechariah 4:10a - “Who despises the day of small things?”

The lesson: Don’t despise small beginnings. It’s the start of something great that God is doing. Do you realize that this Temple 500 years later would be the Temple where Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to dedicate Him ... the Temple where Jesus as a boy sat at the feet of the leaders and amazed them with His knowledge and wisdom ... the Temple where Jesus would teach ... and the Temple where the curtain was torn when He was crucified?

So the people worship with all their heart, soul, mind and strength.

Ezra 6:16 - Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

There’s great joy in being part of something God is doing.

Ezra 6:19 - On the fourteenth day of the first month, the exiles celebrated the Passover.

For the first time in seventy years, the worship of God’s people was fully functional. They observed the Passover as the people of God had done for centuries and centuries, celebrating God’s deliverance.

Ezra 6:22 - For seven days they celebrated with joy the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

They were worshipping because they saw the activity of God from start to finish. They realize they can’t rebuild their broken world on their own. Only God could have made this happen, and they worshipped with great joy.

As you are going through the difficulties of rebuilding there will be a day when you look back and see how God has orchestrated everything. Your failures and brokenness can't stop God.

ILLUSTRATION – Tim Keller's book, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, contains the testimony of a woman named Emily whose life was a showcase of God's abundant blessing. Then her world fell apart when, out of the blue, her husband left her and their four children for another woman. She said that her heart died within her when that happened. She wondered, "How could this be happening to me?" Her life and the life of her family spiraled out of control. She was forced to sale their house, and not knowing where she and the four children would live. The children didn't understand why their dad had abandoned them. But then she tells of how things began to turn as she began to rebuild her broken world ... and worshipped: Read from pp.33-34.