

You Were Made to Worship

Ezra 3

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It's wonderful to be with you this morning. A question for us this morning, friends: Why did God put you on this planet? A light bulb has one purpose in life, and it's to shine brightly. A compass, its one purpose is to point north and to always point north. A watch has one job, and it's to keep time, and if you've kept up with daylight savings, it's to keep time accurately. A wedding ring has one job: it's to symbolize the union between two people. A fly's entire existence is to annoy as many people as humanly possible.

Friends, why did God put you on this planet? The Bible makes it really, really clear for us. The Bible tells us that you're here to worship your Creator. Friends, you're here to worship your Creator. The Westminster Shorter Catechism beautifully answers the question: What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Friends, you were made to worship. You were made to glorify your Creator.

And the Israelites in our passage this morning, they knew this. They knew this very deeply. In our time together this morning, I want us to consider the two gifts that God gave to His people Israel to make worship possible: The two physical places that made meeting with and worshiping God possible. Two places: the altar and the temple. The altar and the temple. And I want us to see that wrapping our heads around these two gifts from God to His people is vitally important, not just for them but for us this morning. It's important because it is the keys to understanding. It unlocks our understanding to what you and I were made for. My prayer is that we don't just learn something new this morning, although I hope you do learn something new. But I want our hearts to be captured by these truths in this passage. I want our lives to change as a result. And hopefully, as we look together, you'll see that our lives have to change because you were made to worship.

Friends, let me pray for us in our time together. And we'll look at this passage as you pray with me. Our Father, as we come to Your Word now, we confess our complete and utter dependence upon You. These spiritual truths will remain a mystery to us unless You grant us understanding by the power of Your very own Spirit. So please, would You help us comprehend and to be transformed by this portion of Your Word today. And we

ask it for Jesus' sake, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, after 400 years—400 years of disobedience, idol worship, wayward kings—God says enough is enough, and Jerusalem falls. The Babylonian siege succeeds; they break down the walls, they ransack the city, they destroy the temple, and God's people are led away in captivity to Babylon. No more worship, no more sacrifices, no more coming into God's presence. But after 70 years of exile, the Lord frees His people under the hand of a new king, Cyrus. Israel is sent home; they're going back home. And this is where our book, the book of Ezra in our passage this morning, picks up Israel's story. Ezra is a priest, and along with a whole bunch of other Israelites, they head back to Jerusalem to the rubble, I should say. But this time is different. See, they've learned from their ancestors' mistakes, and they know that they were made to worship. And so they worship the only way they know how, and the way they know how is by building an altar and then by constructing a temple.

And let me say again that these two things are good gifts from God to the Israelites that have enabled them, that enables them to worship. So let's look together at the first gift. Gift number one: the altar. Before we dive into the passage, can you picture, just for a second, what comes to your mind when you hear the word "altar"? Create a picture in your mind. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "altar" for the first time? Keep that image building, and we'll compare it with what we see in Ezra 3:1. Let me read it for us again. If you have your Bibles, keep it open to Ezra 3:1.

"When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man in 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. They set the altar in place, for fear was on them because of the people of the land, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening."

Now, friends, I'm not sure what you had in mind just then when I asked you to picture an altar, but what we have here isn't a fancy table at the front of a church building with a really expensive white tablecloth on it. It's kind of more like a barbecue, kind of like those massive slab barbecues you see at Lizard Log Park. You're familiar with these; you can fit like a hundred sausages on it. You have a really big barbecue, but this barbecue that they construct sits outside the entryway to the temple. It sits and it waits, and it is the place where animals are sacrificed on their behalf because, before you enter the temple, friends, you have to pass by the altar.

Now, what does this have to do with worship? Why are the Israelites even bothering to rebuild this big barbecue area? Why are they so interested in sacrificing burnt offerings? Friends, what do they see that we don't see this morning? Well, I think they saw a gift. I think they saw the gift that God had given them, the gift that enables them to be in relationship with God, the gift that enables them to worship. You see, as you come to the temple to meet with God, you had to come by the altar. The altar stood as a vivid reminder that you don't have free access into the temple of God. The altar stood as a reminder that you don't have the right to come into God's presence. There is a separation between you and God that requires you to come to the altar first. Why? Because of sin. See, friends, there is a sin problem here that is separating God from His people. Having transgressed His laws, having done what is evil in His sight, they are tainted, they are marred, and they are under His judgment.

Because of a person's sinful state, the uncleanness of their soul, friends, it is impossible for someone to walk into the presence of God and live unless they come by the altar. Can you see why the altar is actually a good gift from God to His people? So it was the place that provided access into the temple where worship and fellowship and communion could be had with God. If you wanted to come into the temple, though, to meet with God, you had to come by the altar. And you know what? We really aren't all that different, are we, if you think about it, from those ancient Israelites all those years ago. So you and I have the same sin problem separating us from God today, don't we? We also are in great need of an altar where our sin can be dealt with before we gain access into God's presence and to meet with Him, to know Him, to have Him as our Father.

Just as those ancient Israelites stood, just as that altar stood outside the temple all those years ago, friends, we have an altar, don't we? It stood outside the walls of Jerusalem about 2000 years ago. In fact, the whole book of Hebrews, if you're familiar with it, is essentially drawing out this comparison, this altar of Judaism contrasted with this altar that's shaped like a cross. Where we are just as much in need of an altar today as those Israelites were coming out of Babylon all those years ago. Only our altar wasn't made of stone, didn't look like a barbecue. No, it was made of wood, wasn't it? It was shaped like a cross.

As Israelites in Ezra's day sought to build and approach God through this altar built with their own hands, Christians today, friends, what do we do? We look back, don't we? And there at the cross, do we find our access into God's presence. The significant thing about an altar isn't just the altar itself, is it? No. A barbecue is just a barbecue; two pieces of wood stuck together are just two pieces of wood. What's the important thing about an altar, friends? It's what's done on the altar. It's what's done on the altar;

it's the sacrifice that matters.

I heard a friend once say—this is about a year ago—he said that his favorite book in the whole Bible is Leviticus. Now, granted, this is a Bible college student speaking, but what was he referring to? What did he see in Leviticus that makes us modern Westerners, most of us, it's good for putting us to sleep, you know? Now, what else is Leviticus used for? What's it all about? Well, primarily, friends, it's a handbook of how God's people can come into His presence, and unsurprisingly, there's a lot of talk of sacrifices.

You see, the sacrificial system wasn't a burden; it was actually instituted by God for the good of His people. The altar and the sacrifices to be done on it are a good gift from God that provided His people a way of dealing with their sin. You, just as a fleshly body like we have today, can't come into the contact of something as powerful and majestic and glorious as the sun in the sky. I get sunburned if I just think about the sun. But as our fleshly bodies in our physical state, if we came in contact with something like the sun, friends, would we not be consumed? Friends, has anyone been sunburnt before? Imagine going a kilometer closer to the sun. Friends, would we not be utterly consumed, given our fleshly state?

Church, how much more? How much more are our souls unfit to come into the presence of the most holy, just, and powerful God of the universe? How unfit are our souls, tainted with sin and deserving of His wrath, unable to come into His presence? Friends, you know this: the wages of sin is what? It's death. Because of rebellious hearts, God's justice demands punishment. People violate God's good law, and something has to pay the price. Something has to bear the punishment for that sin. Only then can there be forgiveness, and only then can there be granted access into His presence.

And so, in His kindness, in His kindness, He makes a way. An Israelite brings an animal to the altar, a lamb perhaps; its neck is slit, the blood is poured out, the animal dies as a substitute, and God allows an animal to die in the place of this Israelite. Dying the death that that Israelite should have died, purchasing their freedom, and granting them access into God's presence for worship. Friends, what a gift, what a wonderful, wonderful provision, what grace that God would provide a way back into His presence.

Now, please don't bring an animal next week to sacrifice here; Josh and Tom will be very upset. And they'll be very upset because, actually, the author of the book of Hebrews tells us that the blood of bulls and goats was actually never intended to be the final solution. In fact, he says that it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. And so,

just as the altar was only ever pointing forward to the cross, the sacrificial system, friends, was only ever pointing forward to something beyond itself. It was pointing forward to the greatest sacrifice that was yet to come.

And that sacrifice came 500 years after the time of this story today when a strange man by the Jordan River, seeing Jesus of Nazareth, pointed and looked and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John the Apostle writes in his letter to the seven churches in Revelation, "Then I saw a lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne." And a few verses later, in Revelation 5:12, "Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise." Peter, in his first letter, 1 Peter 1:18-19, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect, were you redeemed." Paul, to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Get rid of the old yeast so that you may be a new unleavened batch, as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." And again, in Romans 3:25, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood—to be received by faith."

Friends, why does the altar matter? Because it points us to the altar of the cross, where Jesus, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed for you and for me, where His blood was spilt to wash us clean from our sin. It's where the debt of sin was paid in full; it's where God's wrath and His anger were satisfied completely, where love and His justice meet perfectly. The cross is the foundation of our hope; it's where our relationship with God is restored. Friends, the cross is where Jesus reconciled us to God so that we might live to worship and to enjoy Him forever.

And so, as we see the Israelites building this altar, offering these sacrifices, keeping these festivals, they really are returning to Yahweh. It's a beautiful picture of God's ancient people returning to worship Him the only way they know how. But if they're going to worship, they're also going to need this second gift: the temple. The temple. Would you turn with me to Ezra 3:6?

Let me read: "On 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 to the Tyrians, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the Sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus, king of Persia."

The temple really was a gift from God to Israel. It was the physical place that God had chosen to make His Spirit dwell. The physical place where

Israel could actually go and meet with Yahweh Himself. First, it was God's fiery presence revealed in Exodus 3 to Moses in the burning bush. Then God dwelt in the tabernacle, leading His people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And then, Solomon, as he builds the physical temple for the first time, you see God's presence move from over the tabernacle, and it settles on the temple in Jerusalem. God's Spirit, His presence, moves and takes up residence in this temple.

But in Ezekiel, after years and years of disobedience and idolatry, calling to repentance and no repentance, calling to holiness and no holiness, Ezekiel prophesies in Ezekiel 11:23, he sees this presence of Yahweh lift up from the temple in Jerusalem and move to the east. And shortly after, Jerusalem falls. Where is God? Is there hope for Israel? Well, when Israel comes back and they build this altar and they offer sacrifices and they go to lay this foundation, friends, they aren't just building; they aren't just doing a building project. No, they're laying a foundation in hope and longing and expectation that the Lord would return, that the Lord's presence would return. And so they build. They begin the massive construction project of rebuilding God's house.

But after laying the foundation of the temple, everyone gathers together to celebrate. The slab's been laid; everyone gathers together, and what do we hear? We hear an outcry of mixed emotions. Do you see that in Ezra 3:10-13? See, on one hand, the Israelites shout for joy about the progress that's been made; all of the young people, hooray, we're making progress, the Lord is sure to return. But on the other hand, friends, all of the older people, the priests, the Levites, the heads of fathers' houses, those in their 80s and 90s, most likely, who were old enough to remember King Solomon's temple that stood in this very spot before it was destroyed, before the captivity. Friends, they knew that this new temple wasn't the same. And so, while all the others are rejoicing, these old men, they're weeping and they're crying. Despite the good intentions, despite the community working together to rebuild God's dwelling place, this new temple could never measure up to the glory and the wonder and the splendor of King Solomon's temple all those years ago.

Look at it there in 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." The text doesn't say why. But friends, perhaps it's because they knew that ultimately the presence of Yahweh had not returned. The foundation has been laid, but the presence of Yahweh is nowhere to be seen.

And so, where did Yahweh's presence go? Where did Yahweh's presence end up settling? Has He abandoned His people? Has He left His peo-

ple forever? No. See, we need to understand that just as the altar and the sacrificial system pointed forward to Jesus and to His cross, likewise, this temple was only ever pointing forward to something beyond itself. It's pointing forward to the greatest moment when God's presence would not be confined by walls, not be found in a building, but amongst His people. It's pointing forward to what the Prophet Joel prophesied about, how Yahweh would one day pour out His Spirit on all flesh. It was pointing forward to a day when, after the resurrection of our Lord, when the Spirit of God would appear in fire above the heads of each of His disciples in the upper room. It was pointing forward to a day, friends, like this morning, when His people would gather and, filled each one of them with that very presence, that very own temple presence of God expressed in His Spirit in each of His people. It was pointing forward to a day like this morning.

Church, the temple was pointing forward to you, the personal presence of God found in every believer. That temple presence that was once found in one location, in a back room in a temple in Jerusalem, now indwells each and every follower of Jesus as we sit here this morning. What was once the burning bush, the tabernacle, and the temple presence has now become God's personal presence in each and every one who puts their faith and trust in Jesus. Friends, He sent the Holy Spirit, and so now we, as God's temple, our bodies, church, our bodies are where His Spirit resides. Do you see that?

Friends, what does this mean for us? Well, I posed the question at the start: What did God put you on this planet for? And well, first of all, first and foremost, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, friends, I'm so glad you're here. Friend, you need, you were made to worship, first and foremost, and the way you can do that, the only way you can do that, is to have God's Spirit take up residence in your body. So friend, trust in Jesus, turn to Him, repent of your sins, and be counted among those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. Only then can you actually fulfill what you have been made for: to worship Him and to enjoy Him forever.

And church, if you are a Christian here this morning, filled with the Holy Spirit, you were made to worship as well. So let me give us two implications to consider about our worship this morning. Number one: keep Jesus as the cornerstone. Friends, Ephesians 2:20 speaks about being built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. When you start a building project—I'm not a builder; you'll have to talk to someone like Sam about this, you can confirm with him afterwards—but I've heard that when you start a building project, the cornerstone of the building is the most crucial starting point. The cornerstone determines the positioning and the alignment of the entire structure that is going to be built. The cornerstone is the key foundation for every-

thing else. All of the other stones that are to come are built off and aligned by the cornerstone. That's why Peter says that we are living stones, rejected by man, chosen by God, but we are being built into a spiritual house, a temple holy in the Lord. We are being built into a temple, connected, guided, and aligned by Jesus, the cornerstone.

Church, does this sound like your life this morning? Would you characterize and describe your life primarily as being a stone connected, interlocked with your brothers and sisters here at church, aligned and built up and guided and governed by Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone? Is your life aligned to the spiritual house and the gathering of God's people by His very own Spirit? He enables this. Friends, this is what the Christian life looks like. We, as living stones, together as a community of God's people, being built up and established by Christ. What a beautiful picture. What a wonderful community that God has called us into. But is your life aligned? Does your life reflect that? He died and He rose that He might secure that. Friends, this is what you were made for.

If others were to look at your life and to describe the decisions that you make, the priorities that you set, the time that you spend, the relationships that you invest in, would they see Jesus as the cornerstone in your life, as one of many stones interlocked with brothers and sisters, being built into a spiritual house, a temple where His Spirit dwells?

Implication number two for us this morning: Friends, we need to examine ourselves. You need to examine yourself this morning. Nadab and Abihu, two Israelite priests, offered unauthorized incense in the temple. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died. Uzzah reached out his hand to take hold of the ark because the ox stumbled. And you know what happened? Not giving right reverence to the presence of the Lord, he was struck down in front of the altar and died. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, three priests, were swallowed up by the earth, and 250 of their followers were consumed by fire that came out from the Lord's presence. Why? Because they defiled the presence of the Lord and acted wickedly in His sight. Ananias and Sapphira lied to God, and they were struck dead. Church, sin has no place in His temple. Sin has no place in Yahweh's temple.

So we need to examine ourselves. The way you speak, it matters. The way you conduct yourself at work, it matters. The way you treat your parents when you're frustrated, the way you treat your kids when you're angry, the media that we consume, friends, it all matters. As a temple of the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God dwelling in us, how you live, how we speak, what we consume, it really does matter. Paul uses exactly this logic in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 to the church in Corinth: "Do you not know that your

body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies." This isn't moralism, by the way; please don't miss this. This isn't moralism; this isn't "be a good person because God wants you to be a good person." No, no. God's Spirit, His glorious presence, has taken up residence in your body, so don't defile it. Glorify God in your body, friends. Live a holy and blameless life as an act of continual worship to His praise and His glory. Friend, that is what you were made for. That is exactly what you were made for.

And so, church, we do need this morning, don't we, to check ourselves, to review ourselves, to review our lives. We need to examine our lives and to put sin to death. Will you examine yourself this morning? As a temple of God, purchased and washed clean by the blood of Jesus, sin has no place in our bodies. Do you identify? Do you cut out? Will you put to death the deeds of the body, the deeds of the flesh, everything that we've just heard about in Galatians? God's grace, friends, by God's grace alone, you can do it. By His grace, with forgiveness extended, empowered by His Spirit, friend, you will see progress in holiness. Slow, maybe—two steps forward, one step back—but lasting, lasting progress in holiness.

You were made to worship, to enjoy Him forever, and that starts now, as we put to death the deeds of the flesh, as we live holy lives to His glory. Friends, our lives, our conduct, our speech, our relationships are meant to be marked and should be marked by purity and holiness. A life lived in this way is exactly what you were made for.

Let me leave you with this final image that Paul uses after his entire exposition of the Gospel, after his entire exposition of the Christian life and all of its truths, in all of its fullness, throughout the book of Romans. He gets to chapter 12, and he says this: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Church, you were made to worship, so present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Amen. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the wonderful, wonderful gift of the altar and the cross, where Jesus died and made a way for us into Your presence. We thank You for making our bodies temples of Your very own Spirit. Please, Father, would You help us to keep Jesus as the cornerstone, to examine ourselves daily, to rejoice in the access we have to You. Father, You have made us to worship and to enjoy You forever. Please help us to do just that as we go out from here today. And it's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.