

Place: Lurgan Baptist 23:8:20009

## EXPLORING EZRA

Reading: Ezra 3:1-13

### 3. STARTING AGAIN

A kidnapper abducted an eight year old girl one morning. He drove around the town and surrounding countryside before phoning the family to ask for a ransom. Without trying to collect any ransom money, the abductor inexplicably released the unharmed girl to her home.

*When the offender was finally caught, his fellow citizens were amazed for they had always considered the man to be a model citizen.* Subsequent investigation into his case revealed that the criminals fall into delinquency had not been sudden. There had been a history of a slow build up of adverse circumstances which led to the crime. Someone has said that “ **collapse in the Christian life is seldom a blow out, it is usually a slow leak.**” Is that what it has been with you ? Have you just slowly drifted away from your Christian moorings ? That’s how it was with the Jews in Babylon. For 490 years the land had not rest ( Lev 25:1-4 26:32-35 ) Think of it, 490 years and no sabbatic years, that is, 70 sabbatic years ignored. So what did God do ? He sent them into captivity for seventy years. But now in the providence of God, they have traveled a distance of some 1,000 miles, been on the road for 4 months, and are now back in the land of promise again.

Its interesting that Ezra wrote nothing about the long trip, or what the Jews experienced during those four difficult months. It reminds us of Moses description of Abraham and Sarah’s journey into Canaan, “ *and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan and into the land of Canaan they came.*” ( Gen 12:5 ) Alexander Maclaren says, “ *it’s a strange narrative of a journey, which omits the journey altogether and notes but its beginning and its end. Are these not the main points in every life, its direction and its attainment ?*” Surely the two most important aspects of your life are the beginning of your life and the ending of your life. It is important for us to begin well. That’s why I would urge you to come to Christ when you are young. I was just 9 years of age when God worked in my heart and I trusted the Saviour. My .... don’t come to the end of your life and blow the smoke of a wasted life in the face of Jesus Christ. Come to Christ at the beginning of your life. But is it not important to end well ? Old Vance Havner the great American preacher used to talk about “ **getting home before dark.**”

My .... do you not want to end well ? You see, it’s so possible to end with a saved soul and a ruined testimony. Do you know what our constant prayer should be ? “ *Lord help me, to end well, help me, never to bring shame and dishonour on the lovely name of my Saviour.*” So here they are at the end of the journey, they are back in the land. They has sat by the Tigris and Euphrates and wept when they considered the privileges they had scorned. They had taken the opportunity to return under Zerubbabel, and contributed to the cost of rebuilding. Now they were in Jerusalem the spiritual capital of their

true homeland. Can you imagine the depth of feeling they experienced ? Can you try and enter into the very thoughts that must have coursed through their minds ? As they stood in a ruined city, in a desecrated temple, in the very place where God had chosen to reveal His glory, but now there was a new beginning, a glorious opportunity to start over again. Is that what you need to do ? As a believer, have you lived carelessly, failed miserably, disobeyed continually ? Thank God, you can start again for look at this passage and notice,

### (1) WORSHIP WAS RESTORED

Look if you will at ( 3:2-3 ) The altar was the place of worship. Of Abram we read, “ *And Abram went up out of Egypt .... unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.* ” ( Gen 13:4 ) What was the first thing that Elijah did as he challenged the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel ? The Bible says, “ *And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down.* ” ( 1 Kings 18:30 ) You see, the people had to get back to a right relationship with God through worship and prayer. Of course revival always results in worship. When there is a “ *stirring,* ” of the people of God, the result is they will return to the place of worship. One of the sad things in Ulster is, that so many people whose names are on church rolls, seldom if ever darken the door of those churches. I think of members of this fellowship, who are rarely here to worship the Lord with us. But here were a people who were determined to set their worship and lives on a right footing from the beginning. (1) Notice, there was,

### (a) A PROPRIETY ABOUT THIS WORSHIP:

For this passage tells us “ *they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord.* ” ( 3:3 ) These were the most common offerings for sin. This was an offering that depicted Christ as One who was “ *obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.* ” ( Phil 2:8 ) It speaks of the consecration and devotion of the Lord Jesus. Christ offered Himself without spot to God. He died in the sinners stead and our fellowship with God is based on the sacrifice of the cross. Indeed the altar and the burnt offering answer to the deep cry of man, “ *wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God ?* ” ( Micah 6:6 ) My .... the basis for our worship is Calvary. There is no other altar. Christ has been sacrificed once for all. ( Lev 1:4 ) Our worship is to be built on the basis of the cross. This morning, ours is a table of remembrance rather than an altar.

We look **back** at what already has been accomplished by the shedding of the precious blood of our Saviour. We look **into** our hearts to ensure there is no sin harbouring. We look **up** to heaven to where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us. We look **forward** to His return, because we take the emblems, the bread and wine, and remember the Saviour until He comes. My .... the only altar we build is a biblical understanding of the cross, which is the foundational theology of our worship. (a)

### (b) AN AUTHORITY ABOUT THIS WORSHIP:

***For while our worship is grounded on the Work of the Cross, our worship is to be guided by the Word of God.*** Did you notice the place these returning captives gave to the Word of God ? In offering burnt offerings they did so, “ *as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.* ” ( 3:2 Ex 27:1-8 ) In observing the feast of Tabernacles it was “ *as it is written.* ” ( Num 29:12-38 ) Then when they laid the foundation of the second temple the accompanying ceremonial was “ *after the ordinance of David King of Israel.* ” ( 3:10 1 Chron 15:16-21 16:4-6 ) In other words, they ordered everything now according to the Word of God. Whatever they may have practiced in Babylon, whatever their traditional rites and customs, all these had been left behind in the scene of their captivity, and now delivered and brought back, nothing could satisfy them short of the Word of God. My .... our worship must be based on the Word of God, adhering to the principles that He has given to us in His precious Word. Do you recall David ? David discovered that God is not only interested in our ***motives***, the Lord is interested in our ***methods***, that is, how we worship Him. ( 2 Sam 6:1 )

We live in a day and age when so many innovations are being brought into the worship of God, and we need to be careful lest we introduce something for which we have no “ *thus saith the Lord.* ” My .... why have you come this .... ? Is to worship the Lord ? To give unto Him, “ *glory and honour and power ?* ” ( Rev 4:11 ) You see, there is an attitude in today’s church that worship is something for us. It is wonderful to sense the presence of God in our times of worship and it warms our hearts. But we ought not to come to the Lord with a “ *what can I get*

*out of this time of worship,* ” attitude. Worship is primarily about giving to God not getting from God, and when we do that then we will sense the nearness of His presence.

(a) (b)

#### ***(c) A REGULARITY ABOUT THIS WORSHIP:***

For they offered “ *burnt offerings morning and evening,* ” ( 3:3 ) and according to ( 3:4 ) “ *daily burnt offerings.* ” In the Old Testament there were five offerings made and seven feasts observed. ***The feast of tabernacles brought joy to the heart of the people. The burnt offering brought joy to the heart of God.*** For these people who were fresh out of Babylon they saw it as a great privilege to engage in corporate worship at the beginning and end of the day. Isn’t sad that many churches that once met twice on the Lord’s Day have decided to cancel their evening services ? Isn’t it tragic that many professing Christians have replaced the Lord’s day with the Lord’s half day ? My .... is it not a sad reflection on the level of our commitment that we give so little of our time to the Lord ? Can you imagine the persecuted church, where meeting together involves risking your liberty and life, spurning such opportunities ?

#### ***(d) A UNITY ABOUT THIS WORSHIP:***

Did you notice the emphasis on unity ? Look at it in the Chapter. In ( 3:1 ) they ***gathered together***, in ( 3:9 ) they ***stood together***, and in ( 3:11 ) they ***worshipped together***. That is how it was. The many were as one. They gathered

together, they stood together, and they worshipped together. Does that not remind you of the early church ? The Bible says “ *And when the day of Pentecost was come they were all with one accord in one place.* ”

( Acts 2:1 ) Indeed the key term in the book of Acts is “ *one accord.* ” You see, we are not just a collection of individuals, we are members together in the body of Christ. Paul says, “ *so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.* ”

( Rom 12:5 ) Do you know how the body of Christ was created ? Paul tells us. He says “ *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we bond or free, and have made all made to drink into one Spirit.* ” ( 1 Cor 12:13 ) You see, the unifying Baptism of the Spirit took place on the Day of Pentecost, and every Christian partakes of that baptism at the point of conversion, and so the people of God are made one body in the Lord, they are one in Christ Jesus.

My .... we are not running around to create a false unity like the ecumenical movement, the unity already exists. But all who are thus united are asked to work toward its maintenance. ( Eph 4:3 ) That’s something we are not very good at it is it ? I heard about two sisters who were always fighting and quarreling you know how is it with children ? Well, after one such bout of squabbling their mother broke them up and said, “ *you are sisters, you ought to love one another.* ” There was an unusual silence for a few moments, and then one of them responded, “ *I know she’s my sister but do I really have to love her, can’t I just like her ?* ” Do you feel exactly the same way ? I mean how have you come to worship this .... ? Have we

come unitedly, harmoniously ? Or could it be that you have come with an unforgiving spirit, a bitter attitude, a long standing grievance in your heart ? My .... When we will learn that it is in the place of unity that the Lord commands the blessing even life for evermore.

( Ps 133:3 ) (1)

## (2) WORK WAS RESUMED

You see, *worship was always lead us to work.* There is not a dichotomy between worship and work. Some people put all of the focus on worship and they never get around to working. Others put all the focus on working and they never get around to worshipping. It’s the Mary and Martha syndrome all over again. Do you recall that Lord Jesus came to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany ? And before long the two sisters were preparing a tasty meal. Things were well under way when Mary seeing no need for further service “ *sat at Jesus’ feet and heard his Word.* ” ( Lk 10:39 ) Poor Martha her mind is on the kitchen. She’s distracted, pulled in different directions. I can imagine that she had potatoes on the rings and steaks in the oven. *Can’t you imagine her running around the kitchen trying to do several things at the same time ?*

Then she came to Christ in a huff. “ *Lord dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve thee alone ? bid her therefore that she help me.* ” ( Lk 10:40 ) I just wonder did the Lord smile. He certainly said, “ *Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful and Mary hath chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her.* ” ( Lk 10:41-42 )

Do you see what Christ was saying ? He was saying that worship has to come before work. Indeed your work will never be effective, unless your worship is effective. You see, when you worship the Lord, then you'll want to work for the Lord. Now notice here,

**(a) THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE WORK:**

What work were they going to do ? They were going to lay the foundation of the temple. It says in ( 3:6 ) “ *But the foundation of the temple was not yet laid,*” then look at ( 3:10 ) “ *And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord.*” So between ( 3:6 ) and ( 3:10 ) there is some work going on. What is it ? It is the laying of the foundation of that temple. ***Now I don't know much about building, but I know that foundations are very important.*** The foundation of a structure determines the size of the structure. It determines the shape of the structure. It determines the strength of the structure. Even I understand that if you want to go up, and up, and up, you need first to go down, and down, and down. Foundations are very important. That's why the Psalmist says “ *if the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do ?*” ( Ps 11:3 ) There's only one answer, lay the foundations again. Is this not what spiritual revival is all about ? Getting back to the foundations of the Christian life and making sure they are solid, the Word of God, Christ, prayer, obedience, holiness. My .... foundations are extremely important.

We need to ensure that we have a solid foundation for this church. We need to ensure that it's founded on the

Incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus. ( 1 Cor 3:11 ) Founded on the shed blood of the Saviour. Founded on the Written Word. ( Eph 2:20 ) Do you recall the Saviour's promise ? “ *I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” ( Matt 16:18 ) The house of God in that day was material, the house of God today is spiritual. But isn't it comforting to know that the future of the church does not depend on important people, fancy gimmicks, or slick programs. What Christ has commenced, He will continue and consummate. But He chooses to use people, that's why we read here not only about (a) but about,

**(b) THE COMMITMENT OF THE WORKMEN:**

For the workmen had their work to do and so had the priests and the Levites, as well as all the people. ( 3:8-9 ) You see, when the building of the Temple got under way there was a division of labour, and a commitment to see the job done. “ **Facing a task unfinished,**” is that not where we are today ? How thankful we are for those who have gifts and talents to bring into the service of the Lord, but then the Holy Spirit has not left one single believer without some gift to enable or her to serve God. He has “ *divided to everyone severally according to His will.*” ( 1 Cor 12:11 ) But the real question is seldom one of gift or even of opportunity, but rather one of faithfulness and commitment. Do you recall the question that was put to Naaman “ *if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing wouldest thou not have done it ?*” ( 2 Kings 5:13 ) It seems that many empty handed Christians are waiting for the Lord to give them “ *some great thing,*” to do.

However, Scripture teaches that it is by being faithful in that which is least that we are entrusted with some larger service. ( Matt 25:21 ) My .... does the fervour of these Old Testament saints put us to shame ? Are you still enthusiastic about the Lord's work ? Or are you saying, " *I have given enough, I've done my bit.*" I'm reminded of David Livingstone, the pioneer missionary to Africa, who walked over 29,000 miles. His wife died early in their ministry and he faced stiff opposition from his Scottish brethren. However, the words in his diary ought to challenge us " ***Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me. Sever me from any tie, but the tie that binds me to your service and heart.***" How does that leave you ? It leaves me feeling ashamed. So (1) (2) and finally,

### (3) WITNESS WAS RECORDED

For when the foundation was laid, " *the people shouted with a loud shout and the noise was heard afar off.*" ( 3:13 ) You see,

#### (a) ***There was CELEBRATION: They Sang:***

Following the example of David, when he brought up the Ark to Jerusalem ( 1 Chron 16:4 ) and Solomon when he dedicated the Temple ( 2 Chron 7:1-3 ) the priests and Levites sang praise to the Lord, and the people responded with a great shout that was heard afar off. Their singing was reminiscent of ( Ps 136 ) " *Because He is good, for His mercy endureth forever.*" ( 3:11 ) Did you know that the Psalms was the hymnbook of the Jewish people ? And

in that book you will find an appropriate Psalm for every experience of your life. In fact, David wrote the Psalms out of the experiences that he had with God along the way. My .... go through the Psalms and learn to sing the praises of God through the experiences of your life. Indeed Paul says " *Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.*" ( Eph 5:19 ) Now you may not sing well, but it will be well when you sing, because you will be " *making melody in your heart to the Lord.*" You see, we listen to the voice but God listens to the heart, and He wants every heart singing praise to Him. (a)

#### (b) ***There was LAMENTATION: They Sighed:***

Look if you will at ( 3:12 ) Now why were they weeping ? Because they had seen the original temple before it was destroyed ( 586 BC ) over fifty years before and the new edifice was nothing in comparison. ( Haggai 2:3 ) These godly old men longed for "***the good old days,***" but it was the sins of their generation that had caused the fall of the fall of the kingdom to begin with. These are people who are looking in the wrong direction. The tendency of the young is to look to the future, the tendency of the old is to look to the past. My .... we can learn from the past, but we are not live in the past. If you're not very careful you'll get yourself caught up talking about the "***good ole days.***" Like the little girl listening to her Granny reading the great stories of the Bible and saying, " ***Wasn't God exciting then, Granny ?***" My .... are you tempted to think that God is no longer exciting, that all His great deeds are in the past ? Are you like these old timers here ?

Somebody says, “ *Isn’t this a beautiful foundation we are laying for the temple ?* ” One old timer speaks up and says “ *Sure, but you ought to have been around when we built Solomon’s Temple. This ain’t nothing compared to that.* ” “ *I remember when,* ” “ *I remember when Pastor Mullan was here, why there were souls saved each Sunday night. I remember when the Bible Class was packed to capacity. I remember when the prayer meeting was jammed.* ” “ *I remember when .....* ” I heard about a man who wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper. He said, “ ***Your paper is not as good as it used to be.*** ” The editor wrote under it, “ ***Our paper never was as good as it used to be.*** ” Sometimes the older folk can discourage the young by their constant talk about the way it used to be. “ *Oh, you think this is good, you should have back in W. P. Nicholson’s days. We had it back there.* ” My .... I have got news for you. God is just as real in 2009 as He was in 1920 and 1950. Old saints can either be a help or hindrance to the young. Young believers can either be a burden or blessing to the old. You see, we need one another as we go forward in the work of the Lord.

Dr. Jerry Vines says, “ ***if you have all old, they’ll bind you up, if you have all young, they’ll burn you up. What you need is young and old and they’ll build you up.*** ” My .... its takes all of us to do God’s work together. We certainly can’t ignore the past, but the past must be a rudder to guide us not an anchor to hold us back. God’s people are a family, not a family album, they’re a garden, not a graveyard covered with monuments to past successes. We ought to be singing constantly,

**I’m pressing on the upward way  
New heights I’m gaining every day  
Still praying as I onward bound  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground**

**(c) There was PROCLAMATION: They Shouted:**

“ *For the people shouted with a loud voice and the noise was heard afar off.* ” ( 3:13 ) It’s a bit like Paul and Silas in the prison praying, praising, and preaching and the Bible says, “ *and the prisoners heard them.* ” ( Acts 16:25 ) Revival is something God does **in** His people, evangelism is something God does **through** His people, and inevitably when revival comes, evangelism occurs and souls are saved.

(1) (2) (3) **Starting Again.** Is that what you need to do ? Do you see that burnt offering ? It not only speaks of the total consecration of Christ, its speak of the total commitment of Christians. There’s an old hymn that begins like this, “ **Is your all on the Altar of Sacrifice laid ?** ” Well is it ? Are you totally sold out to Him ?