

NOON BIBLE STUDY: EZRA 3

EZRA 3:1-5

THE FIRST THING WE READ ABOUT THE RETURNING EXILES DOING IS WORSHIPPING THE LORD AS PRESCRIBED IN THE LAW OF MOSES. THIS IS A VERY ENCOURAGING SIGN CONSIDERING THE HISTORY OF THE LAST FEW GENERATIONS. WE LEARN THAT THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND MAKE A PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM IN THE 7TH MONTH.

FIRST THING THEY DO IS REBUILT THE ALTAR OF THE LORD, ACCORDING TO THE WAY IT WAS TOLD TO MOSES.

EXODUS 27:1-2 - AND YOU SHALL MAKE THE ALTAR OF ACACIA WOOD, FIVE CUBITS LONG AND FIVE CUBITS WIDE; THE ALTAR SHALL BE SQUARE, AND ITS HEIGHT SHALL BE THREE CUBITS. 2 "YOU SHALL MAKE ITS HORNS ON ITS FOUR CORNERS; ITS HORNS SHALL BE OF ONE PIECE WITH IT, AND YOU SHALL OVERLAY IT WITH BRONZE.

THE ALTAR WAS A CENTRAL AND SYMBOLIC ITEM FOR THE WORSHIP OF THE LORD. IT WAS WHERE THE SACRIFICES WERE MADE. IT WAS WHERE THE SYMBOLIC "AROMA" WOULD RISE TO THE LORD'S PRESENCE. AN ALTAR WAS WHAT ABRAHAM FIRST SET UP WHEN HE ENTERED THE PROMISED LAND (GENESIS 12:7) AND IT WAS TO BE SET UP WHEN THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL FIRST ENTERED AFTER THEIR TIME IN EGYPT (DEUTERONOMY 27:1-8). NOW IT IS THE FIRST THING SET UP AFTER THEIR RETURN FROM BABYLON. IT

HIGHLIGHTS THE PRIORITY OF WORSHIP AND THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF GOD.



DURING THIS FEAST.

THE REBUILT ALTAR WAS NOT JUST USED FOR ONE INAUGURAL SACRIFICE, IT ACTUALLY WILL BECOME AN ALTAR WITH A "CONTINUAL BURNT OFFERING" (V. 5), MEANING THAT THE DAILY AND ONGOING LEVITICAL SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM HAS RESUMED. IN FACT, THE GATHERING OF THE PEOPLE TO JERUSALEM IN THE 7TH MONTH WAS TO CELEBRATE THE "FEAST OF BOOTHS" (V. 4). NUMBERS 29:12-40 OUTLINES A VERY DETAILED LISTING OF THE SACRIFICES THAT WOULD BE MADE

FEAST OF BOOTHS - LEVITICUS 23:34-44

"THE FEAST OF BOOTHS WAS A WEEKLONG FEAST THAT BEGAN ON THE FIFTEENTH DAY OF THE SEVENTH MONTH. SINCE IT CELEBRATES THE PEOPLE'S SALVATION FROM EGYPT, IT WAS FITTING FOR THEM TO CEASE FROM WORK AND TO WORSHIP BEFORE THE LORD." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, LEVITICUS 23:33-36)

IT WAS A FEAST/FESTIVAL ASSOCIATED WITH JOY AND A REMEMBRANCE OF THE LORD'S DELIVERANCE FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT, HIGHLIGHTING THE TRUTH THAT THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WERE "STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS" WAITING FOR A PERMANENT HOME THAT

THE LORD WOULD PROVIDE. HOW FITTING THAT THIS GENERATION BEGINS THEIR TIME BACK IN JERUSALEM WITH SUCH IMAGERY. REMEMBER, YOU DON'T CELEBRATE "FEASTS" IF YOU'RE A SLAVE (IN EGYPT) NOR WOULD YOU IF YOU WERE IN EXILE (IN BABYLON). WHAT A TIME TO REJOICE!

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REBUILDING OF THE ALTAR AND CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST OF BOOTHS IS EVEN MORE HEIGHTENED DUE TO THE FACT THAT THEY WERE "TERRIFIED BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLE OF THE LANDS (V. 3)." BEING AFRAID OF THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND AND STILL SETTING UP A VISIBLE OBJECT OF YAHWEH-WORSHIP INDICATES THAT THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE COUNTING ON HIS PRESENCE WITH THEM FOR THEIR ENDEAVORS. IF YOU'RE TERRIFIED BUT NOT TRUSTING, YOU DON'T SET UP THE ALTAR. IF YOU'RE TERRIFIED BUT TRUSTING, YOU KNOW THE ALTAR *MUST* BE REBUILT!

SO THERE THE PEOPLE ARE, LIVING IN BOOTHS AROUND JERUSALEM, A CITY WITH NO WALL AND WITH ONLY AN ALTAR IN THE CENTER, BUT THEY ARE HOME AGAIN. AND AS THE FESTIVAL ENDS, THE WORK BEGINS.

EZRA 3:6-9 - TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

WE JUST READ OF THE ALTARS BEING REBUILT IN JERUSALEM, BUT THESE WERE ALTARS ALONE, FOR THE THE HOUSE OF THE LORD HAD NOT BEEN BUILT. IT IS AT THIS TIME (VERSE 6) THAT THE TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS. THE PEOPLE HIRE MASONS AND CARPENTERS AND PURCHASE (PREMIUM) WOOD AND SUPPLIES FROM TYRE & SIDON. THE ORIGINAL TEMPLE MATERIALS WERE ALSO BROUGHT FROM THESE COUNTRIES. IT'S NO COINCIDENCE THAT THE SAME MATERIALS ARE PURCHASED AND SIMILAR CRAFTSMEN ARE ENLISTED.

THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN A TREMENDOUS UNDERTAKING. THE FIRST TEMPLE WAS BUILT DURING THE GREAT ERA OF KING SOLOMON, WITH BLUEPRINTS AND PREPARATIONS PROVIDED BY KING DAVID. IN THIS CASE, THE PEOPLE ARE LED BY GOVERNOR ZERUBBABEL AND HIGH PRIEST JESHUA. CYRUS, THE KING OF PERSIA IS THE ONE WHO COMMISSIONED THE REBUILD AND IS FINANCIALLY BACKING THE PROJECT.

ALSO, LET'S REMEMBER THAT THE PEOPLE WERE "TERRIFIED" TO BUILD THE *ALTAR* (V. 3). BEYOND THE PHYSICAL CHALLENGES, THERE MUST HAVE BEEN AN EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL STRAIN. FOR 70 YEARS THE LAND WAS VACANT AND OTHER PEOPLE OCCUPIED THE REGION. AND NOW THE ISRAELITES ARE BACK TO TAKE THEIR LAND? HOW DO YOU THINK THAT MADE THE SURROUNDING CITIZENS FEEL? WE KNOW GOD'S HAND IS ORCHESTRATING THE RETURN, BUT AS WE KNOW IN OUR OWN LIVES, EVEN WHEN GOD IS CALLING YOU TO SOMETHING, IT DOES NOT IMPLY THE EVERYONE AROUND YOU IS GOING TO HAPPILY GO ALONG FOR THE RIDE. AND THIS IS WHERE WE MEET OUR FIRST POST-EXILE PROPHET HAGGAI.

HAGGAI 1:1-15

THE PROPHETIC WORD GIVES US INSIGHT INTO WHY THE PEOPLE BEGAN BUILDING THE TEMPLE AGAIN (STARTING WITH THE TEMPLE FOUNDATION). THEY BELIEVED IT WAS THE WILL OF THE LORD TO REBUILD, AND THUS THEY CAN AND SHOULD PROCEED, REGARDLESS OF THE OUTSIDE PRESSURE FROM THE NATIONS THAT WERE "TERRIFYING THEM".

IN FACT, THEIR LACK OF BUILDING THE TEMPLE AT THIS POINT WAS AFFECTING THEIR DAY TO DAY LIFE. HERE'S WHAT HAGGAI'S PROPHECY SHOWS US. BECAUSE THE PEOPLE WEREN'T HONORING GOD BUT SETTling THEMSELVES INTO "NORMAL" LIFE, THEY WERE NOT BEING BLESSED. GOD RAISES UP HAGGAI AND ESSENTIALLY SAYS "THE REASON WHY YOU AREN'T PROSPERING IS BECAUSE YOU'RE PRIORITIZING YOUR HOMES AND NOT MY HOUSE."

BUT THE PEOPLE RESPOND BY "OBEYING" AND "SHOWING REVERENCE FOR THE LORD (HAG 1:12)". IN TURN, GOD "STIRRED UP THE SPIRIT" OF ZERUBBABEL AND JESHUA AND THE REMNANT TO BEGIN THE WORK (V. 14). TERRIFIED NO MORE, THE NATION RALLIES AROUND THE GREAT TRUTH THE LORD SPOKE THROUGH HAGGAI: "I AM WITH YOU". WHAT ELSE WOULD THEY NEED?!

EZRA 3:10-13 - FOUNDATIONAL WORK FINISHED

THE FIRST AND IMPORTANT STAGE OF WORK IS COMPLETE AND THE NATION GATHERS TO CELEBRATE. THEY SING SONGS OF PRAISE. THERE SEEMS TO BE A GREAT CELEBRATORY SPIRIT MARKED BY SHOUTS OF JOY. WHAT A MOMENT! THE REMNANT WHO RESIDED IN BABYLON JUST A FEW SHORT YEARS AGO NOW STANDS IN JERUSALEM WITH THE FOUNDATION OF THE LORD'S HOUSE LAID! "HE IS GOOD, FOR HIS LOVINGKINDNESS ENDURES" INDEED (V. 11)! PRAISE THE LORD.

HOWEVER, THIS SPECIAL MOMENT IS ALSO BITTERSWEET AS THOSE WHO REMEMBER THE FORMER GLORY OF THE TEMPLE HAD HEAVY HEARTS. THIS IS A GREAT DAY - LET'S NOT UNDERESTIMATE THAT TRUTH. AS THE OLDER GENERATION'S RESPONSE INDICATES - THIS IS NOT EVEN CLOSE TO THE COMPARABLE DAY OF SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. THE REMNANT REJOICES THAT THEY WERE ABLE TO FINISH *THE FOUNDATION*. THE IMPLICATION IS THAT IT WASN'T A GUARANTEE THEY WOULD SEE *THAT* DAY. THE TEMPLE ITSELF STILL HAS A LONG WAY TO GO.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

THIS MOMENT IS VERY SYMBOLIC OF THE PLACE WHERE WE LIVE TODAY. WE REJOICE IN THE FACT THAT WE HAVE BEEN RESCUED FROM SIN AND DEATH THROUGH THE CROSS, BUT WE SEE THE BROKENNESS IN THE WORLD AROUND US STILL. WE CELEBRATE WHAT GOD IS DOING, BUT WE LONG FOR WHAT HE WILL DO IN THE AGE TO COME. THE OLDER GENERATION KNEW WHAT THE TEMPLE USED TO BE LIKE, WHAT GOD DID IN THE DAYS OF DAVID & SOLOMON. HERE THEY STOOD REBUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE (BECAUSE THE OLD ONE HAD BEEN DESTROYED) WHILE THE CITY AROUND THEM IS STILL BROKEN. AND THE NEW GENERATION REJOICES TO THE FACT THAT THE OPPORTUNITY TO REBUILD THE HOUSE OF THE LORD, A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN TEACH THEIR CHILDREN THE WAYS OF THE LORD. WE SHOULD NOT BE SORROWFUL AS IF THE LORD IS NOT WITH US TODAY, BUT WE SHOULD NOT BE CONTENT AS IF THIS LIFE WITH GOD IS ALL THERE IS - THE BEST DAYS OF THIS LIFE ARE ONLY A SHADOW OF THE FULL LIFE GOD INTENDS IN THE GLORIOUS DAYS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD. AND SO WE LIVE DAYS FILLED WITH THAT INTERESTING TENSION OF JOY AND SORROW, SATISFACTION AND LONGING.

OUR LIVES AS CHRISTIANS OUGHT TO FOLLOW THE PROGRESSION OF EZRA 3.

WE ARE RESCUED FROM AN EVIL DOMINION, SET FREE TO RETURN TO OUR HOME TO WORSHIP THE LORD, NO LONGER IN BONDAGE. AND UPON ARRIVAL TO THIS NEW STATE, THIS NEW MINDSET, THIS NEW LIFE - WE SHOULD WORSHIP AND THANK THE LORD OUR RESCUER. WE SHOULD SET UP THE ALTAR AND PLACE UPON IT OUR (LIVING) SACRIFICE. WE SHOULDN'T USE OUR FREEDOM AS AN OCCASION TO LIVE FOR OURSELVES, FOR AS HAGGAI CALLED TO ISRAEL, SO THE SPIRIT CALLS TO THE CHURCH - WHY BUILD OUR HOMES WHILE THE LORD'S HOUSE REMAINS IN RUINS. IN FACT, OUR NEGLECT OF THE THINGS OF THE LORD MAY BE WHY WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE VARIOUS SITUATIONS WE ARE IN. IF WE PRIORITIZE/SEEK FIRST GOD'S KINGDOM, HE WILL PROVIDE FOR WHAT WE NEED. IN ADDITION WE SHOULD DEVOTE OUR LIVES TO "BUILDING" EACH OTHER UP AND ENCOURAGING EACH OTHER TO STAY FAITHFUL UNTIL THE END. FOR THE LORD HAS ALSO PROMISED TO "BE WITH US..." AT LAST, THE LORD WORKS TO FILL IN THE DETAILS AND DIRECT OUR STEPS, FOR THE FOUNDATION WE ARE BUILDING UPON IS NOT ONE OF BRICK, MORTAR AND WOOD BUT OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE WORK HE HAS ALREADY DONE, AND THE COMPLETION OF THAT PROJECT WILL BE ACCOMPANIED BY GREAT REJOICING IN THAT DAY TO COME. AND ON THAT DAY, BE SURE THAT THERE WILL BE NO SORROW IN ANYONE'S HEART.

