

Building Back Better

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 June 2021

Preacher: Tom Muir

[0 : 0 0] So, please turn with me back to Ezra chapter 3. We're going to spend a little while this evening delving into this maybe really quite unfamiliar part of God's Word, but particularly an unfamiliar context. We're going back some years here, aren't we? And the question is always, when we're in this kind of situation, what's going on here? Why is this in the Bible?

And how do we take lessons from it for ourselves here in 21st century Scotland? But I think, actually, that though it may seem quite far removed in many levels, we have quite a similar situation. Maybe not on the same scale that the people, the Israelites who returned to their land did, but in our context, and certainly in their context, they have a need to rebuild after a time of disruption, even of devastation. So, we've had, as I mentioned this morning, and as you all know, a difficult year and a half. Things have been different, things have been stopped, and in your personal life, maybe in your work life, in your school life, and in church life, there's been not only disruption, but there's been stopping and starting, and there's that feeling again of getting things going. How do we do that? How do you get going again as a church? Not just services, but this stuff of life that makes up all the churches outside of here, community, being with one another. It's difficult. There are restrictions. People are wary. So, we've got to navigate all of that again. Now, in Ezra's day, they were, of course, navigating complete upheaval in their corporate and personal lives. They'd been ripped out of the place where they live, carried off miles, dumped down in a foreign culture, and even their worship, their collective sense of being able to gather at the temple and to worship God, though they had neglected that and been wayward many times in their history, the reality of that hit them like a ton of bricks, if I can be so blunt. And so, for those who returned with their leaders, as we find them here in this context, they're again thinking through the issues of getting going again, trying to restart their sense of collective life and society and worship. So, let's take some lessons, parallels, if you like, from the passage that we find ourselves looking at tonight. First thing I want to say is that the priority for them was a shared collective devotion to worship. That never changes, does it, for God's people. You know, that always is what we're called back to. That's always a reminder that we need personally every morning when we wake up and collectively as we gather and as we are church family together. They had a shared priority of worship. And a few things I want to point out from the passage. First of all, if you look at verse 1, read these words. When the seventh month came, the Israelites had settled in their towns. The people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. Now, this is because, as we're going to come on and see, they were gathering to perform particular acts of worship, sacrifices, and festivals. But they gathered as one. Two little words that you could quite easily miss when you're reading through this passage, but they're very significant. And they're significant because that's what's required of God's people. I said in the morning, we were looking at Ephesians, and we've just finished Ephesians in my home church. And one of the big themes that Paul says over and over again to the people in the church is, you are one body united in Jesus. You're different. You even have different ideas about what church should look like, could look like. But you are essentially united in Jesus. And the gathering together as one is significant for these people because, as I alluded to, there were times when they individually had been careless of their responsibilities to worship God and to worship him together. And there were times when they were disunited. There was all kinds of disharmony. You could look back at instances in their history where they were grumbling against God. They certainly didn't have the demeanor that they do here, which is humble, united before God. So that's something I want to come back to. The importance of the unity, the togetherness of the family, the nation, the church family is highly significant. The second thing is in their shared priority of worship, the priority themselves, the priority itself was at the heart to worship God, to make sacrifices to him. It wasn't to have a coffee. Now that's, I like coffee. It's good to gather and have a coffee. Community is a big

part of church, but worship itself, the sacrifices, which of course was contextually appropriate for them, was at the heart of what they set out to do. So if we look immediately down to verse 6, it says, on the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings. You can see examples of this from earlier in the passage. And the significance of this is that they started the sacrifices before the temple superstructure had been rebuilt, was completed. Now that's not because the temple wasn't important. It is. In fact,

I'm going to refer a few times to the book of Haggai because Haggai is in many ways parallel to the events of what is going on here. Haggai was a prophet who came to speak to the people. He was the one who was sent by God to come alongside them and encourage them, to give them words of encouragement or even challenge. And there was a point at which he did say to them, you're not paying enough attention to the rebuilding of the temple. God wants you to rebuild his temple because, of course, the temple was the place in their context where they gathered, where God dwelt, and they offered sacrifices. But it was still possible to sacrifice to God. In other words, to come before him and to confess, to express their humility before him and their need of him before the superstructure was built, the heart of worship, the rhythms of worship, if you like. The leaders here knew that this had to be in place right from the start. Really, really important focus. And to take an immediate parallel, that's the case for us too, isn't it?

[6 : 50] We've all been through a time where you couldn't be here physically. You had to be at home on your laptops or your phones. It was difficult to get to the place of worship. But even when we're allowed to come here and to gather, again, as I alluded to earlier, there are other things that we would maybe normally do in congregational life that we can't do. But I think what's really important, all through Scripture, here in this passage, and true for us today, is the heart of worship, which is your heart toward God in humble dependence. These people offered sacrifices. We look back to the sacrifice of Jesus, the one who gave his life for us, is the fundamental starting point that you can personally start each day with. So the great blessing for the Christian is it has been a really disrupted year, but even though, even if things change again and you couldn't come here, we couldn't gather, you can come before the throne of grace and express your thankfulness to God for all that he has given you. You can pray and he will always hear you. He is always attentive to your voice as you call to him.

The rhythm of worship, the heart of worship, is a priority for the Christian. And so we're to be engaged at that level all the time. Come what may. There have been many different churches down through the ages and in different cultures and countries and contexts where worship is disrupted. Some churches, people fear to meet, fear of their lives, and yet the possibility of reaching God, if you like, is a constant. He always hears our prayers. We have assurance of the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

But thirdly, in this initial point where we're just looking at the shared priority, the focus here of worship, let's just spend a little bit longer asking, well, what is the actual focus? What did it look like for them to worship God? Because, again, it's very distinct and contextual, but we can learn from it. What we find is when we look at verse 2 and verse 4, let me take you to these verses particularly. In verse 2, we read these words, Joshua, son of Josedach and his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel 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. So we've touched on this. This is their desire to get the heart of worship, to get the right rhythms of worship, and to make sacrifices as they've been instructed to do. And even though I said this could take place before the temple superstructure was built, there is a kind of propriety here. They're trying to do things right because notice that they're building the altar on the place where it had stood in the temple before it was destroyed.

So they're seeking to do things as they should be done in accordance with the directives that have been given to them. So again, we offer worship to God appropriately and in accordance with how he wants us to worship him. But then they go on and do something which you may feel is very, very far removed from our own experience. They have a week-long festival, a very particular festival that they celebrate. And it would have been sometime, if you think about their situation, again, the sense of distance that they may have felt from these traditions which were so important to them. They've not been able to do this for so long, decades. Well, here we have in verse 4, in accordance with what is written, then they celebrated the feast of tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. So again, you may feel, I don't know, you may feel when we get

to a passage like this, what's this got to do with me? A feast of tabernacles?

[10:51] I don't even know what that means. Well, let's just think for a moment about the significance of this, what happened, what was going on. If you were to go back to a book like Leviticus, Leviticus chapter 23, here you get all the instructions for how God wanted these people to worship him. He gave them very detailed instructions, including different festivals, different sacrifices, an order for how things should be done. And included in that is this feast that we find here, the Feast of Tabernacles. And the point of the Feast of Tabernacles was for the people really to celebrate, to give thanks. They were to gather the first fruits, the crops, the things that had grown for them. And as, of course, they harvested these things, they would remember the provision of God, the fact that behind everything that they got in life and all the provision that they had in life wasn't just their own ability, their own prowess, as an agricultural nation, but God and his blessing and his presence. So they were to gather in some of the first fruits and celebrate and give thanks. They were good at celebrating at the appropriate times. We should be too. We should be people who are joyful and thankful for what God has given us. But the detail is that they had to live in a tent for the week. That's what they had to do. They were told to camp out, Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Tents. And if you want to know why they had to do that, there's something about God's people in the Old Testament where memory is really, really important. And I think it should be for us as well.

Often in the Old Testament, God's people personally, but also collectively, were encouraged to remember what God had done for them. And one of the very vivid ways that they were to do this is this particular context, the Feast of Tabernacles. Because when they came out of their homes and they went out, maybe outside the city walls, all the families together, and they set up camp and your family's tent was over there and your friend's tent was over there. There was tents everywhere and there were families living in these tents. What it reminded them of, if not at a personal level because they were too young, then certainly at a collective level, was the way in which God had led them as a people out of captivity when they were in Egypt. And he had freed them, he'd liberated them, he'd made promises to them, he'd promised them a land, he told them to follow him. And their experience, for so much of that, was living in tents, was of being deprived of some of the comforts that we maybe take for granted. And the essence of their experience, in many ways, was of not having everything that we would like to have, and of being dependent on God. You remember that around these times they received provision from God, literally that fell from heaven, the manna and the quail. They were only allowed to take it each day at a time, all the time emphasizing to them their total dependence on God.

God was teaching them, he was trying to train them, I am the one who has given birth to you, I am the one who knows you, I am the one who loves you, I am the one who will provide for you, I will lead you into a good place where you can worship me in peace and safety, but you must trust me, you must obey me. And so this festival, in many ways, they played out this collective memory where they lived in these tents, they offered these particular sacrifices, reminding them again and again of their history, but the way in which God's hand was woven into their own lives and the significance and importance that that had for them. Now, you and I are no different. We don't live in tents, I presume you don't live in a tent, and we don't really have a similar sort of thing. We don't have a week in the year, I don't think you do, where Bon Accord uproots and goes and takes over a big field and everybody camps out. But we have the requirement, don't we, to remember that everything we are, in the same way as Ezra and his people, everything we are, is because of God. The regeneration that takes place in us, the way in which God puts us back together again as people, gives us a new purpose, a hope, again, as we saw this morning, is because of what he has done for us. His provision in the

Lord Jesus Christ, his grace and his accompaniment on our journey. So the shared priority of these people, you can see it wasn't just a ritual. I mean, it could become a ritual, and that's always the danger for us, isn't it? That what we do, whether you yourself, if you're at home reading your devotions, praying, coming to church, we can go through the motions. I think we've all felt like that at different times. And what we need is God's help by his Spirit to revive us and refresh us, so that the things that we do, pointing us back to God himself, remind us of our need and our dependency.

[16:02] Remember Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that the essential quality for a disciple is humility and meekness and meekness and all of these things. These are the people who will inherit the kingdom. And on the basis of this is our worship. On the basis of this is our joy, because

though we essentially before God have nothing, he is the one who fills us and blesses us and makes us a people.

So the heart of worship then is not the pursuit of comfort or preference. It's not having things all the way we want them. We are a pilgrim people in many ways, and the priority for his people at all times is worship, to see God for who he is, to worship him accordingly, and to call others to do the same. But the second thing I want to look at, we've seen the shared focus they had, the renewal of the focus and the rhythm of worship, is I want to look now at the body at work. Now that's a New Testament image that we can apply to the church. Again, it's one that you find often in Paul's letters, but we find it here. And again, we're learning lessons. We're seeing parallels between a passage like this in the Old Testament, and how you and I should think about ourselves collectively as we get going again as a church these days. Two things in particular to point out here. First of all, in verse 7.

They come to the point where they are going to start rebuilding the temple, and the first thing we read in this instance is, then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and they gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre. So they bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa as authorized by Cyrus, king of Persia. The first thing we notice here is that they were prepared to give sacrificially. Now, is that a given? Is that obvious? Well, it certainly makes demands on us, doesn't it? It's the case that God resources us. Everything that we have comes from God, and God calls us, similarly, for whatever is needed, for whatever locally is appropriate, and is whatever is within our means to give back to him. All that we have is from him. The people here gave money to the masons and carpenters so that they could go off and do the work they needed to do, because the spiritual outcome was important to them. They wanted a place, again, where they could gather and make sacrifices and worship the Lord. So they were prepared to put, if I can again phrase it quite crudely, put their money where their mouths were. Now, again, let me just refer you to Haggai. Haggai comes along at a particular time where the work is flagging, and the people faced opposition. It wasn't easy for them. Again, you might feel akin to them in that sense here. And they had to negotiate all kinds of different circumstances with people who are trying to stop the work. And so you can maybe understand that at times they downed tools. Maybe sometimes they thought, well, now's not a great time. Let's just wait a little bit, and the conditions will be better in five years. But that wasn't God's timescale. And so Haggai was sent to them to challenge them in this instance. And he comes along and challenges them, particularly because, if I can just, well, in Haggai chapter 1, and verse 3, he says to them immediately, the words of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai, is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin? So you can see that it was a temptation for them to seek, shall we say, comfort, even stability. Now, in some ways, there's nothing wrong with that. You know, God doesn't say we have to live with bare bones. If you have extra, if you have a comfortable home, you're not doing wrong. But the priority, the thing that God wanted them to focus on first here was the rebuilding of the temple, was putting themselves back together again as a nation who worshipped him. If you remember why, because God's people were to be the light amongst the nations. That was one of the big focal points that they were to have, was that as they worshipped God and lived out lives of humility and obedience to him, the surrounding nations saw the wisdom of God at work in his church, in his people, saw the wisdom of God. They were like a testimony. And so, here at least, they're challenged and they respond. They give money to the masons and carpenters. But the thing I want to focus on more so is the way in which they shared the work themselves. They acted as a unit. They acted as a body. If we go down to verse 8, in the second month of the second year, after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, Joshua, son of Josedach, and the rest of the people, the priests and the Levites, and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work.

[21 : 20] They appointed Levites. Now, in that sentence, I've just read the categories, if you like, three or four different categories of people. You've got those who were leaders, the leaders of the people, those who God tasked in that moment with, if we can apply it, leading the church. You've got, described all of the people. You've got the priests. You've got the Levites, who were appointed as overseers of others who were doing, I don't know what kind of work, maybe more manual work, but there are different people at different levels tasked with different strategic outcomes. Much of the book of Ezra, and certainly into Nehemiah, if you know that book, is very practical. It's very detailed. It describes a bunch of people rolling up their sleeves, getting their hands dirty, and

serving God collectively, and they did face opposition.

They had people around about them at different times, in circumstances that we would find really quite unpleasant. People use all kinds of ways to try and dismantle what they were doing. Threatening behavior, very clever behavior, where people tried to manipulate them into stopping. They tried to use the levers of power to throw spanners in the works. And yet, the people are called, as we saw at the start, as they assembled as one in Jerusalem. They were called to move forward, to kind of get themselves going again as a nation, begin the process of worshiping, prioritize God together. They all had different gifts, different gifts of strategy, oversight, spiritual aspect, practical aspect, but they had to work together. And it's no different with you and I.

It's the same thing that God calls his church to, even now. Again, if you're going to go into the letters of Paul, you would find the body imagery emphasized often. Paul's saying it just doesn't work where the church, if a component of the church says, I'm just not going to work today, because that throws out of kilter the rest of the body. Let me take one particular phrase. I'm very fond of this phrase at the moment. I've read it a lot. In the book of Philippians, I'm just going to read you one line. Paul is writing to a different church in Philippi, and he says to them in chapter one and in verse 27, these words, whatever happens, and Paul knew that all kinds of things could happen in the life of a believer and in the life of a church, whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. And then whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel. The phrase is elsewhere translated, contending together. I love that phrase.

For the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. Now, that was certainly relevant in Ezra's day, because many opposed them. And I think it's relevant today. I think you may well feel, many people who are Christians feel opposition, maybe not overt in the same way that we can see some parts of the church where people are physically threatened, but certainly the pressure to simply not be a Christian, because their ideas are out of touch. They're no longer relevant for our society, and so it's easier to not own Jesus than it is to own his name. And that's why that phrase, contending together, striving together, is so important for you, for me, back home in my congregation.

[25 : 08] As you anticipate moving forward, as you anticipate new ministry, and all of that, as you anticipate coming out of lockdown, and all of the different things that you have to give thought to, contending together with your different gifts, your different temperaments, your different ideas. Sure, there's a confusion that happens there, but it must be in the spirit of unity that has been forged by Jesus Christ, who calls each member of his body into his family and tasks them with a job, with a role, which is a privilege and a blessing. Whatever it is, whatever corner of the world you inhabit, God has given you that place to serve. So there is here the shared, renewed priority of worship.

There is a sense of the body at work. And the last thing I want to pick out are the expectations that people have. I think there's a very human end to this passage. I find it intriguing. What happens is we have joy and sorrow. So you'll see that as we come through the chapter, and as they lay the foundations of the temple of the Lord, there is progress, clear progress. They can see where there was nothing but rubble, there is now a clear foundation that has been laying. And because of this, there is praise.

And the praise is a renewed song of praise. It's a renewal of a very old song. Back in the book of 2 Chronicles, where the first temple is laid, there's a big celebration where Solomon's temple is established and the people are overjoyed, and there's a real sense of occasion and praise and gladness. In 2 Corinthians 5, and in verse 13, we read these words. I can just read them to you. The trumpeters, the musicians, they joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord, accompanied by trumpets and cymbals and other instruments. The singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang, he is good, his love endures forever. Which is exactly the song that we find sung here. As they get going, as they start to rebuild, as they start to refocus as a people before God, they sing this song. Verse 11, with praise and thanksgiving, they sang to the Lord, he is good, his love toward Israel endures forever. Now, that's a really important song.

It's one line, but see what they say in it. These are people, remember, who had just been brutalized, if you like, by their experience. They'd been ripped up, displaced, even worship was all out of kilter.

[28 : 00] If you go back to a book like Lamentations, Lamentations is all about the sorrow of these people, the grief, the sense of guilt even, that they had not listened to God, and now they were so

displaced and all over the place in their experience and in everything that they were going through. And again, if I can just give you one more example. In Psalm 137, this is the experience of somebody writing in the middle of exile, experiencing that sense of dislocation. By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplar trees, we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs. Our tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said to us, sing one of the songs of Zion, how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? That is a time of sorrow, probably a time where they never anticipated again singing songs of joy as they rebuilt the foundations of the temple, as we find them doing here. And so in many ways, this is an unlikely, but a really joyous occasion for them. They're delighted, they're happy, they can see progress, they feel like they're coming together again. And yet, in amongst the happiness of many, we find the deep sorrow of others. Now, isn't that so very human? And isn't that so very often our experience? We have a mixed reaction to circumstances based on who we are, based on our memory and our experience that's gone before us. So we find, as we get through again, towards the end of the chapter, verse 12, 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. Why were they so sad? Well, I think many of them who had seen the former glory of Solomon's temple. They just felt down. They just felt underwhelmed. This wasn't like it used to be. It wasn't as big. They didn't have the same sense of the scale of the building, of the people. Remember, it was only a remnant who went back and who started on this work. They must have felt fragile. Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like things, you remember a time when there were more people in church, when more people in your street worshipped God, where you didn't feel so kind of tense about naming Jesus, and you wish it was like that again, and you lament the circumstances that we live in now? Well, that's exactly what's going on here. Some of these folk who knew the blessing that they had experienced are filled with sorrow. They may be underwhelmed. They maybe even feel a sense of grief at the fact that they or their forefathers had rebelled against God, and everything that had happened as a result of this. So, in some ways, we're just left with this. There is both rejoicing, and there is great, great weeping, and there's just a big noise, and people couldn't actually distinguish. They heard the noise, but they couldn't distinguish the weeping from the joy. What do we do with a passage like this? How do you understand this? Well, it's very human. It expresses in many ways how we may feel, but I think what's best to do is to ask a few questions of this. What's the response to this? Final, very brief parallel to Haggai. Haggai again comes across similar circumstances when he prophesies to the people a few years later, and he says in the second chapter, and I won't go there, but let me just relate to you what he says. He asks the question, he says, how does this temple seem to you now? Of course, the answer is some of the people are saying, well, not very much. We're really quite disappointed. We thought things would be better than this. We thought God would give us more power. There would be more evidence of him with us. Haggai says, how does it seem to you now? But yet what he does is he says, don't dwell on the past, and I'm paraphrasing. He says, move forward and work, for your God is with you. God has something for you to do now. That was what was. Sure, we lament what has happened, and we learned from the past, but God wants his people to take stock of where they are, see the opportunities and the gifts that they've been given, that they can employ themselves in, and remember that he is with them every step of the way. He is with his people to accomplish his purposes. Of course, the people here in Ezra's day, this is a step, isn't it? It's just one step. It's one part of the story of God's work amongst his people, building his nation, and now building his church. And we may live in times, who knows, in a year from now, of great revival, or we may still feel a bit discouraged. We may still be remembering a time when the balconies were full, but I think God is always calling us in a, if you like, in a sanctified way to live in the moment, to take stock of where we are now, what's in front of us, who's your neighbor, where's your church at? And what is he calling us to do in light of the fact that he is building his church as he was in the days of Ezra, so he is in our day today. And he simply calls us to take stock and to trust him and to apply ourselves. When we think back over the three points I've just brought out, that means that what we do personally and collectively, you need to remind one another of these things. We make sure, first of all, that our hearts are tuned to worship on a daily basis, that God is the first affection of our hearts. We are prepared to roll our sleeves up. You are a team. You are a body. You are a family.

You are a united fellowship in Jesus. And he has something for all of you to share as you work out building his church by his grace and by his power. And we're called, in this final point, to live in the moment, recognizing the opportunities that are in front of us, remembering that there has never been a time in human history where it has not been possible for God to work in great power. God, we saw this morning, God is the mighty one who raised his son, who will raise us again, and who can absolutely turn our society upside down again and turn many hearts to the Lord Jesus, who we would never have expected. But that is his power. And we pray that that would be his will. So what is God calling you to right now? How can you, with all restrictions, with all the things that feel like they impede us, how is he calling you to come to him, first of all?

[35 : 20] How is he calling you to come alongside somebody else? Where is he calling you to contribute or to serve? Are you living in the past? Are you consumed by what used to be so much so that you can't see the opportunities that exist for God's church today? Our prayer is that God will give us his vision for who we are, for his church, and for what lies all around us all the time, and what he may do in this city. And as we think about that, let me pray in finishing.

We do pray again with thanks for your word. We thank you for the breadth of experiences that we find in it, all the different circumstances. We know the honesty of your words, where we read often of people who got things wrong, who weren't listening, who were trying to listen, who were afraid. And yet, woven all through that, Lord, is your hand, your presence, your purposes, and your power. And so we do pray, Lord, that you would help us to be able to apply these thoughts tonight, help us to see where we can follow you, serve you. And we pray that though things feel at a low ebb, the gospel of Jesus would make great strides here. We pray that a society that is hurting and hurting itself by turning away from you would be brought back again to the wonder of the Lord God, who should be worshipped, and who is the only one who can restore us truly.

So we submit ourselves before you tonight, and we pray that you would lead us and guide us. In Jesus' name, amen.