

Pursuing God: The Priority of Worship

Ezra 3

MPS Worship centers God's people on Jesus to serve His mission that produces more glory through worship.

OBJ Every person should prioritize worship for more glory because of five characteristic outcomes.

INTRO The last two years have produced many debates about, for and within the church. So much so that it may be impossible to say which one was most important. But one of the biggest debates that continues is the value of gathering in-person for worship. Our passage today considers, "When you begin the process of rebuilding your life, where does one begin?" and leads us to consider the priority of worship.

READ Ezra 3:1-2

When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. ²Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, 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. ³They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, ⁵and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. ⁶From 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

When the exiles return, their first work is to restore worship as the center of all of life. Worship was their priority to accomplish the mission of God's glory as their ultimate goal. **Worship must hold the priority of mission because it is the ultimate purpose of mission.**

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OBJ **Five Characteristic Outcomes** demonstrate why we must prioritize worship.

Ezra 3:1-2 Once returned, the exiles came to the seventh month and gathered in Jerusalem. Getting settled takes time, and likely were not settled yet. The Seventh month refers to their annual worship calendar when they celebrated the Feast of Booths. Life was uncertain because they were unsettled. But they didn't wait until their lives were settled and comfortable to get to religion. The exiles prioritized faithfulness in worship from the beginning because God said it was important.

1. **When worship gets prioritized, it unites God's people under Jesus' Lordship. 3:1-2**

The exiles "gathered as one man to Jerusalem. ²...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 didn't offer excuses as to why God would be okay with them taking some time off, nor why God would understand if they made some exceptions to how they worshiped. **The exiles prioritized their worship according to God's command as written in the Law, and this united them under His rule.**

Worship according to God's Word centers our whole lives on Jesus. We worship the One who is worthy by adhering to His Word, not making casual reference to it; by proclaiming the whole counsel of God's Word, not by using it to support our creativities or preferences; by declaring the good news of all that God has done for us in our sinful state, not by dismissing or deleting the parts we don't like so we can justify, coddle, and feel better about ourselves. When by faith we align our lives in worship to God's Word, our lives are transformed through the finished work of Jesus Christ and the active power of Holy Spirit. And the more we are made like Jesus Christ, the more aligned in unity we are with one another. Christians don't gather because we are all alike. We unite because we are all becoming more like Jesus through worship. **Unity flows out of Jesus-centered worship when each one of us are becoming more like Him.**



Ezra 3:3-6a When the Israelites return they find new people living in their city and the surrounding areas. Life was different, and these people are not friendly to their mission or their values. One driving motivation that fueled their worship was fear. Fear drives us either in 'what we pursue' or 'what we work to avoid'. Commentator Marvin Breneman reminds, "As God's people have discovered repeatedly, united worship is a necessary means of dealing with difficult or dangerous situations."¹ Worship has a powerful, practical use that helps in our daily life.

2. When worship gets prioritized, it conquers our fears that threatens faithfulness to mission. 3:3-6a

The Feast of Booths was not a good hour of worship, but a season that culminated the whole year. And this year was filled with many threats all around. Countering fears that are regularly present will never be conquered by momentary escapism. [The constant presence of fear must be confronted by a regular, sustained practice of the priority of worship in one's life.](#)

Life was uncertain for the exiles because threats surrounded them. Ezra shows "an example of a believing community living in a hostile environment."² There was a growing animosity between the people living in Judah and the returning exiles. Until the fears of this world are consumed by our faithfulness in worship, they will continually distract, deter and potentially drive us away from faithfulness and service to God. Worship anchored their lives because their first act of worship was not in direct response to their situation, but to God's faithfulness. [The most potent way to trust God in any situation is to worship Him first for how He's always been faithful. Worship fueled by the promise of God's faithfulness always defeats fear by destroying its threat.](#)

Fear is our response to any threat. When we try to maintain the life we want to pursue, fear rules because beyond us is a threat. When we pursue God and the life He gives, fear is conquered. When your hope rests in that which cannot be taken from you, you have no reason to fear. "Fear not"^{Isa43.5} is God's first message when He appears in scripture. "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power, love and self-control."^{2Tim1.7} Fear takes root in the heart that cannot conquer it. [The only way to conquer fear is to absolve it in One whose promise is far greater than the threat made.](#)

Ezra 3:6 As they worshiped on the rebuilt altar, their fears subsided to clarify their mission. They began to see clearly the work of rebuilding of the Temple that was before them.

3. When worship gets prioritized, it clarifies focus for mission. 3:6

The more you praise God, the more the gospel of Jesus Christ permeates your heart and the Holy Spirit renews your mind, the clearer you 'see' His mission. Clarity reveals what to say "yes" to, and what to say "NO" to in this world. We leave the realm of "Can I" or "Do I want to" to enter "God has said. He is leading.". "Yes" to God means identifying what He sets in front of you. And often, 'yes' only gets discerned once we've said "No" to what we know is not from Him. [Worship may not give you the final answer to all questions, decisions, or situations, but in worship God always clarifies that next step for us to trust and obey.](#)

God works this way because more than an answer, solution, decision, or even direction, He draws us close for communion. And from our communion with Him to see and discern all things by His glory. Worship is faithful, daily living to love God supremely that makes clear and plain what God wants to do through your life. As our worship extends into daily life, God speaks through the 'everyday moments' of life as we walk and live by the Spirit. [Worship brings clarity to daily life as we walk by faith in communion with and obedience to God, that in turn strengthens our focus on serving His mission.](#)

Ezra 3:7-9 The exiles realized there was more work to do, so they set the wheels in motion to get it done. They went to work ordering the goods, delegating the tasks, and serving to see the foundation of the Temple rebuilt.

¹ Mervin Breneman, [Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther](#), electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 89.

² Mervin Breneman, [Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther](#), electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 92.



4. When worship gets prioritized, it fuels missional labor. 3:7-9

Once the mission gets clarified, motivation arises. Nothing fuels motivation to serve God like beholding what He has called you to. A clear mission has a way of motivating one to serve the mission. A potent formula for mission includes, WHY we do all we do + WHAT we are to be doing + WHO is going to do it + HOW it needs to be done. 2 Corinthians 5 helps.

- WHY: God has called and compelled us in love to share and serve the gospel for the glory of Jesus' name. [.14-15]
- WHAT: God has commanded us to live so consecrated to Jesus that we call all peoples by our whole lives to be reconciled to Him; to *lead people to be real Christ-followers in life...together.* (.16)
- WHO: God has made us new and given US the message and ministry of reconciliation through Christ (.17-18)
- HOW: to declare that God has done this FOR us in Christ Jesus, forgiving and cleansing us from sin. (.19-20)

Coming through a season that seems like it's held more frustration than motivation, I am more convinced of God's leading among us and never been clearer about the mission, vision and future of LPC. [The priority of our worship fuels our mission through the priority of our community as we carry out ministry to one another.](#)

READ Ezra 3:10-13

¹⁰And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

As the exiles went to work to serve the Lord's mission, they began to respond to the One who was leading them in the work. Ezra 3:10-13 captures both a highlight of celebration and a depth of sorrow. The people break out in praise and thanksgiving to God, singing David's song of praise.^{1Chronicles16;Psalm105} Their shouts and praise were as one voice because the foundation had been laid. But Ezra records that what sounded like one voice was mixed. The older generation wept while the younger generation shouted aloud for joy "so that the people could not distinguish the sound, ...and the sound was heard far away."^{3:13} The older generation were grieved because they had seen the glory of Solomon's Temple and knew what they were beholding did not compare in its presence. But the younger generation had never seen what was there before. They were overjoyed by what had been accomplished. But most important is that the mix of responses was indiscernible to the people, hearing all the voices together as one served as the exiles' testimony.

5. When worship gets prioritized, mission culminates in greater glory as testimony to the Lord. 3:10-13

The response of the exiles to the initial work was one of spontaneous worship! As one commentator states, "True faith praises God even before the answer has materialized."³ But within the worship laid a spectrum of responses. The younger exiles were exuberant by how much they had accomplished; the older by how small the work compared to former glory. The younger screamed with glee, the older equally as loud with weeping. Both generations had compelling reasons for their response, neither more justified than the other. But as the text says, both responses joined as one voice for the people who heard them. The mixed responses rose as one voice to testify of the Lord's work among the people of the world.

ILLUS The "generation gap" within the church is not something to be avoided but to be pursued and cultivated. If you've ever been in a church absent of the younger generation tearing through everywhere, it is a miserable silence accompanied by the stench of looming death. If you've ever been in a church with no older generation, it feels like you are riding in the Pikes Peak Road Rally at 120mph in a car driven by a four-year-old. What may begin as fun quickly turns to threaten.

³ Mervin Breneman, [Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther](#), electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 95.



There is great wisdom and counsel for us to not be “infected” by the generation gap ideology today. Scholar Dean Ulrich highlights the familiar tension when he says, “Ezra 3:12 contrasts the joy of the younger with the sorrow of the older generation.” He concludes, “This verse teaches that the generations need each other. In Ezra 3, the young men had the vigor to build a temple, but they needed the wisdom, symbolized by the grey hair, of the seasoned citizens.” Then he states, “Ezra 3 draws attention to the so-called generation gap and thereby demonstrates that God’s people of all ages need one another’s contributions. No one has all of the answers or all of the ability.”⁴ *May our prayer be, “Lord, lead us to be a church of every generation, full of the one in which we live looking toward the one that has not yet been born.”*

This generational tension can easily produce another potential problem, despising “what is” because it doesn’t compare to “what was”. To this the prophet Haggai reminds us as he did Zerubbabel and the exiles; work, for the Lord is working.

READ Haggai 2:3–5, 9

*‘Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? ⁴Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, ⁵according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. ⁹The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.’” **Haggai 2:3-5, 9***

Haggai exhorts, do not despise the day of small beginnings nor small advancements. Do not think this generation is correcting all the wrongs of the last, and do not think this generation could never be greater than the last.

ILLUS I remember the early days of LifePoint Church. Some of you remember turning dirt for our North facility expansion in 2018. I videoed the dynamite explosions when we began to excavate 14’ of rock and dirt from this land in mid-2009. I have pictures of work days when we cut trees and cleared brush from the front of the property. I also have pictures of the tiles we jackhammered and sheetrock we demolished to remodel our first facility. I have pictures of baptisms in swimming pools, outdoor and indoor, and in feed troughs on the land. And I am overjoyed by the baptisms we have seen today. I am thankful for all the Lord has greatly blessed us to see. Each one testifies to the Lord’s great provision in leading us as a church.

APPL The Generational gap and Generational tension causes me to ask two questions.

1. Will we MAKE “space” for every generation? Will we MAKE “space” those who rejoice alongside weep, to love those who are diff than us, and who struggle w/ diffntly than we do? That “space” WILL demand an intentional decision 2 operate by faith n every generation.
1. Will we follow God 2 call every gen 2 ‘die to self’ & live 4 Christ? Will we hallow days of old, or honor God in the day we live? Will we forsake our history, or hold to unchanging Word of God in an ever-changing culture? Will we serve today so that if Jesus tarries, our grandchildren’s grandchildren will have a faithful, gospel preaching, gospel-sending church in which to commune with God and build community with one another? A church that “dies to self” to pursue God is the ONLY way to remain faithful.

APPL We may not be turning physical dirt right now, but we are breaking up fallow ground. So many hearts have been subtly hardened toward the Lord, His church, and spiritual faithfulness by neglect and absence in the last two years. Where the church became a void, other things have filled the time, schedule, and energy. Haggai’s word speak to us today. We are to “Work, for the Lord is with us. He is still fulfilling His covenant in this world. Holy Spirit is among us, and we have a mission from the Lord to which we are to give ourselves. And those of us who know the faithfulness of God are not to relish in days gone by. But by wisdom and counsel, we must raise up this generation to know and trust the Lord’s faithfulness in pursuing Him, trusting Him, and serving His mission. The real power of worship reminds us, “With all we have seen God do, how can we NOT trust Him for all He is calling us to?”

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⁴ Dean R. Ulrich. Now And Not Yet: Theology and Mission in Ezra-Nehemiah. New Studies in Biblical Theology Book 57. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021) 77-78.



CLOSE We culminate through the work where we begin IN the work, our worship. The reason we worship is to fuel mission. And the purpose of missional impact brings us together in worship. And in worship God calls to His people. God is calling each of us to pursue Him in greater ways. **Are you listening to His call in your life to pursue Him?**

