August 25, 2002
Ezra Lesson 3

**A New Beginning with God**
_Ezra 3:1-13_  

Harold Ross started The New Yorker magazine years ago in small offices, with little equipment. One day in a restaurant downstairs he met Dorothy Parker, one of the magazine's first writers. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “Why aren't you upstairs working?”

“Somebody was using the pencil,” she explained, “so I came down for some coffee.” (“Bits & Pieces,” [6/84], pp. 23, 24.) From such humble beginnings, The New Yorker has become a famous and widely circulated magazine. Almost everything great had a small beginning. You've got to start somewhere!

Our chapter is about a new beginning with God. To some of the old timers, it didn’t look like much. They were comparing it with the former glory of Solomon’s Temple that they had known, and this one didn’t pass muster. So they wept while the younger men rejoiced. But God used this new beginning to reestablish His people in their worship to Him amidst the rubble of what once had been Jerusalem. Concerning the temple that was begun here, the Lord said, “The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former” (Hag. 2:9). It was to this temple that the Lord Jesus Himself would come and bring the greater glory.

There are times in all of our lives when we need a new beginning with God. Maybe you have failed the Lord terribly through deliberate rebellion and sin. Perhaps you have drifted carelessly into the world and its ways, neglecting the things of God. Now you’re far from Him. A disappointment or trial may have caused you to drift from the close fellowship with God and His people that you once enjoyed. You need a new beginning.

But you wonder if it’s even possible. And if it is, where do you start? The thought of a new beginning is scary, because you don’t want to risk another failure. But you’re not content where you’re at. You’ve come to realize that the idols of Babylon can’t satisfy your soul. You’re so dissatisfied in Babylon that you’re willing to uproot
yourself and make the difficult and perilous journey back to the land of promise. But you get there and discover that the land is just a pile of rubble. How do you begin again with God? Our chapter shows us four things:

1. **New beginnings with God are possible no matter how spiritually low we have gone.**

   The nation of Israel was about as spiritually low as you can go. The northern kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., after a history of idolatry. The southern kingdom of Judah fell in 587 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and dragged the Jews into captivity in Babylon. Fifty years passed when out of the gloom, according to God’s promise through Jeremiah (29:10-14), He stirred up the pagan king Cyrus to issue a decree permitting the Jews to return to the land.

   Almost 50,000 Jews responded. They gave up their lives in Babylon, risked the dangerous and difficult journey across the desert, and now were back in the land. But it wasn’t the land the old timers had once known. It was a land devastated by war, suffering from 50 years of neglect. When in the seventh month (September/October) these Jews went up to Jerusalem (3:1), they came to a city where the walls were torn down and the buildings, including the temple, had been destroyed 50 years before. The hostile people that had moved in viewed these returning Jews with suspicion. There was nothing happening spiritually. And yet God had promised a new beginning in this desolate ghost town (see Jer. 33:10-11).

   Whether it is to His people corporately or to individual believers who have fallen into sin, our God is a God of new beginnings! To the fallen but repentant King David, the prophet said, “The Lord has taken away your sin” (2 Sam. 12:13). To the disobedient and chastised prophet Jonah, vomited out of the great fish, “The word of the Lord came ... the second time” (Jonah 3:1). To the weeping and broken Peter, the risen Savior appeared privately to restore him. Have you failed the Lord miserably? God graciously offers you a new beginning! But, where do you start?

2. **New beginnings with God must focus on the cross of Jesus Christ.**
The first thing that the leaders, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, did when they saw the pile of rubble where the Temple once stood was to rebuild the altar (Ezra 3:2). From verse 6 we learn that they had done this prior to the first day of the seventh month, when the returned remnant gathered in Jerusalem. So when the people got to the devastated city, rising out of the rubble they saw a restored altar. Even though the foundation of the temple had not been laid, the sight of that altar filled them with hope!

Why did they begin with the altar? Because our fundamental need if we want to draw near to God is forgiveness of our sins. God designated the altar so that the one bringing the offering would be “accepted before the Lord” (Lev. 1:3). Concerning the altar, God had said, “I will meet there with the sons of Israel ...” (Exod. 29:43). The sacrificial animals pointed ahead to God’s perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sins, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you have never begun with God, you must begin at the cross, where Jesus the Lamb of God shed His blood to atone for sinners. The Bible says that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22). Your good works can never earn God’s forgiveness. Either you put your trust in the perfect substitute God provided, the Lord Jesus Christ; or you must pay for your own sins with eternal separation from God in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). Faith in Christ’s blood is the only way to begin with God.

If you are a believer, but have strayed from the Lord, the cross is still the place for a new beginning. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Live daily at the foot of the cross.

3. New beginnings with God must focus on obedience to His Word.

How did they know to set up the altar? We read (3:2), “as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.” Why did they observe the Feast of Booths? We read (3:4), “as it is written,” and “according to the ordinance.” They weren’t making this stuff up according to their own preferences. They didn’t take a poll to find out what the people wanted to do. Maybe the old way of worship wasn’t in tune with the modern times! Maybe the younger generation wanted a more contemporary way of meeting with God! Why
not throw out the old and bring in some innovation to liven things up? But they didn’t do that! They went back to the Word of God and they obeyed it.

There is nothing wrong with contemporary music and forms of worship, as long as they do not violate Scripture. Just because it’s old does not mean that it’s good or bad, and the same can be said of the new. Some of the old hymns contain great theology, and the younger generation should learn them and pass them on. Some of the old hymns are shallow and corny and should be forgotten! The same can be said of the newer music: Some songs are solid and edifying; some are theologically shallow and silly.

The standard we need to evaluate everything is, does it line up with Scripture and properly glorify God as He is revealed in His Word? And, does it promote holiness in God’s people, in line with His Word?

When it comes to how we should live as God’s people, we also must go to God’s Word and obey what He commands. God’s moral commandments do not adapt to the changing moral standards of our times. He hasn’t softened His views on premarital sex or homosexuality, in spite of what our modern society feels. God doesn’t say, “Well, if you feel really good about marrying a non-Christian, and you’ve prayed about it, then I guess it’s okay!” His Word plainly declares, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14). And, “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

If you want a new beginning with God, it’s available. Begin at the cross and then walk in obedience to His Word.

4. New beginnings with God must focus on building His house.

Verse 6 implies that while their new beginning of rebuilding the altar was good, something major was still missing: They had not yet laid the foundation for the temple. These verses contain three references to the temple (3:6, 9, 10) and five where it is called the Lord’s house (3:8 [2x], 11, 12 [2x]). The temple or house of the Lord was the place where He dwelled among His people and manifested His glory. His people went there to offer sacrifices for for-
giveness of sins and for thanksgiving for His goodness to them. It was a place of corporate celebration, where all Israel gathered three times a year for the feasts of Passover (March/ April), Pentecost (May/ June), and Tabernacles (or Booths; September/ October). The restored nation could not properly worship God until they rebuilt His house.

The remarkable thing is that we as God’s church are now His temple or house, where He dwells in us and walks among us (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22)! The building where we meet is not God’s house; it is only the place where God’s house gathers for worship. God’s house or temple can meet in private homes or in a park or a barn or a cathedral. But we need to remember that the place isn’t sacred; the people are sacred! When even two or three of God’s people gather in the name of Jesus, He is there in their midst (Matt. 18:20).

The application is that if you need a new beginning with God, don’t try to go it alone. There is a sense, of course, in which any new beginning must be intensely private. You must go to the Lord in private and confess your sins and personally appropriate the shed blood of Christ. You must personally get into God’s Word and begin to obey it in your daily life, starting on the thought level. If you have not started there, you can go to church meetings every day of the week, but you will simply be reinforcing hypocrisy in your life, putting on a good front to others while your private life is in shambles.

But once you’ve begun anew in private, you very much need to be built together with others who have a commitment to know God. Without that commitment to other believers, the world, the flesh, and the devil will overwhelm you. But, you may wonder, how do we build God’s house? Our text reveals at least five factors:

A. Building God’s house requires the courage to stand together against this hostile world.

They rebuilt the altar because, “they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands” (3:3). These words imply “that the threatening situation had brought home to them their need of help, and therefore of that access to God which was promised at the altar” (Derek Kidner, Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
Some may have focused on building a strong and well-armed militia. But these men knew that help from man is in vain if the Lord is not in His rightful place. If they put God first by rebuilding His altar, then He would protect them from the enemies who weren’t happy about their return. God wants a people for His name. If we will seek first His kingdom and righteousness, He will take care of our basic needs.

Courage does not mean a lack of fear, but rather the gumption to stand firm in threatening circumstances because your trust is in the Lord. Courageous Christians will admit, “I could lose my friends or my job or perhaps even my life, and yes, that is a scary thought. But I will not compromise my commitment to Jesus Christ to preserve any of those things, which are all going to perish soon anyway. Then I will stand before God.” So we fear God more than we fear anything in this evil world. (Luke 12:4-5.) You may have to have that kind of courage alone. But it’s easier to take that sort of stand with other believers who support you with encouragement and prayer.

B. Building God’s house requires giving our resources.

These people had just returned to the land, which meant giving up their source of income in Babylon and making a four-month trek to a land that had no crops waiting to be harvested and no jobs or economy. Surely most of them were not wealthy after 50-70 years in captivity. But when they saw that the house of God was a pile of rubble, they gave money, food, drink, and oil for the labor and materials to rebuild the temple (3:7).

Building God’s house requires money. Your willingness to give and the proportion that you give are perhaps the best indicators that Jesus is Lord of your heart. If statistics mean anything, the modern evangelical church is not living under the lordship of Christ. This week I received a letter with these statistics:

(a) In churches whose sole stewardship method is receiving offerings, and people base their decisions on a dollar amount, without writing it on paper and turning it in annually, attendees give an average of 1.5 percent of their incomes.
(b) In churches that ask people to annually write on a card and turn in a dollar amount based on a budget goal, parishioners give an average of 2.9 percent of their incomes.

(c) In churches that ask people to annually write on a card and turn in a dollar amount based on a percentage of their income, attendees give an average of 4.6 percent of their incomes.

Among all denominations, 63 percent of pastors give at least 10 percent of their before-taxes income. Yet, one out of three does not tell their congregations, thereby missing a great influence opportunity. (From Steve LeBar, citing Leith Anderson, Leadership That Works.)

Our church fits the first description as far as stewardship method. I hope that we do not match the 1.5 percent! I fit the one out of three pastors who is reluctant to tell the church how much we give. But if it encourages anyone to be more faithful, I will share that the Lord has enabled us for many years now to give more than 20 percent of our pre-tax income to His work. If you want a new beginning with the Lord, start with financial faithfulness. Jesus said that if we are faithful with the “little thing” of money, God will entrust true riches to us (Luke 16:10-13).

C. Building God’s house requires working in unity under godly leadership.

Israel came “together as one man to Jerusalem” (3:1). The various leaders “stood united” (3:9) with one another to oversee the workers who were rebuilding the temple. Unity was essential because of the enemy outside that would shortly threaten and shut down the work. The leaders wisely delegated the work so that it did not fall on just a few. Any significant work for God is the work of many members working together in harmony, under godly leaders.

When the enemy wants to stop such a work, often he disrupts the unity. When that happens (as has happened here in the past few months), there are several dangers. Leaders can be tempted to compromise important truth for the sake of preserving unity, but this always leads to greater disaster down the line because it undermines God’s Word. Leaders also can react in the flesh by lash-
ing out in anger or personal counter-attacks, thus tarnishing their qualifications as spiritual leaders.

Workers can use the occasion to vent their frustration against the leaders because of personal issues that they feel have not been properly addressed. Workers also can form factions based on friendships and other emotional issues, rather than submitting to the God-ordained leaders. Gossip and false rumors can quickly spread through the body because people listen to those who are disgruntled and do not go directly to the source to ascertain the truth. All in all, Satan has a heyday and many of the Lord’s people end up wounded. So we must be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, while striving to attain to the unity of the faith that comes with spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:3, 13).

D. Building God’s house requires a renewed emphasis on corporate worship.

Much could be said here, but I must limit myself. Note first that both personal and corporate worship focus on God and affirm by faith His goodness and covenant love (3:11). Worship requires skillful musicians (3:10), but if the focus is on them, you’re into entertainment, not worship. Worship praises the Lord, saying, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.”

Remember, these people had just come through 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Many had lost loved ones, as well as possessions and homes, when Jerusalem fell. If they had been focused on themselves, they would have complained and impugned the goodness of God. But by faith they knew that the Lord had afflicted them out of His goodness (Ps. 119:67, 71). So now they could sing of His goodness and covenant love toward His people.

Second, notice that these people expressed their emotions in their praises. They shouted for joy and it was a loud shout (3:12-13). Some of us non-charismatics are a bit too restrained in our worship. Certainly there is the danger of emotion pumped up by sentimental tunes sung over and over until they produce the desired state of ecstasy. That is wrong. But if our focus is on our great, faithful, loving, covenant-keeping God and the truth of His Word, it should affect our emotions! How can we not be moved when we think on His abundant grace? Finally,
E. Building God’s house requires a spirit of cooperation and understanding between the old and the young.

The young people were thrilled as they saw the foundation of the temple laid. All they had ever known was Babylon and its temples for idols. Here they were, back in the land of promise, in the city of God’s choosing, and the foundation for the Lord’s house was laid! They had never seen anything like it!

But the old timers had seen something far greater: Solomon’s Temple in all its golden glory. For them, this puny foundation amidst the rubble and broken down walls of Jerusalem was pitiful. So while the young men shouted for joy, the old men wept in grief. You couldn’t tell who was laughing and who was crying, except that the division pretty much fell along age lines.

There were two dangers, as there always are in these matters. The old guys could have discouraged the younger men from this new beginning. That would have been tragic. They had to start somewhere, and even though this new beginning didn’t match the former glory, it was a start, and it was where God was now working. The other danger was that the young guys could have ignored the wisdom and experience of the old guys, in which case they would have made more mistakes and repeated the failures of the past. The older folks needed the enthusiasm, energy, and joy of the younger folks, and the younger folks needed the wisdom, maturity, and experience of the older folks.

There are churches made up of a few old folks clinging to their favorite old hymns and their King James Bibles. They can’t understand why the younger folks don’t join them, and they’re dwindling in numbers. Other churches are made up mostly of young people who have cast off the traditions of the older folks. Often they are exciting, growing churches that have almost no resemblance to churches of the past. But they’re in danger of casting off centuries of Christian heritage and of making some serious mistakes that could be avoided if they would learn from the older generation. We need all ages in God’s church, and we all should learn from one another.

**Conclusion**

Do you need a new beginning with God?
New beginnings with God are always possible and must focus on the cross, on obedience to God’s Word, and on building His house.

Wherever you’re at, God’s door is open. He invites you to a new beginning with Himself.

Discussion Questions

1. How can a person keep a new beginning with God from fizzling out? What sustains it over the long haul?
2. How can we determine which aspects of worship are merely cultural and which are biblically essential?
3. How can we determine which commands in the Bible are absolute and which are culturally relative? (Gender roles, head coverings for women, modest clothing, etc.)
4. Jonathan Edwards argued that true religion consists largely in “holy affections” (emotions). Is this so? How can we know whether our emotions are holy or just due to our personalities?
5. What can the older believers learn from the young (and vice versa)? To what extent should one side cater to the other?

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