

Worship at the Altar
Ezra 3:1-6; Leviticus 23:23-44

Take a whole week off – are you kidding me? This was the seventh month of the year of the exiles' return from Babylon, which corresponds to September or October on our calendar. Now, we don't know exactly what month they started their journey, but even if it had been on January 1, a group that size driving all that livestock couldn't have made it from Babylon to Judea much before the end of March. That doesn't leave much time for clearing long-neglected fields, for pruning or replanting orchards and vineyards, much less for sowing and reaping. Crops grow at their own pace, after all. So, was it really a good idea to take a whole week off for a harvest festival that first year? Chances are they didn't have much of a harvest to celebrate.

And what about living in tents for a week? All of the exiles had already been doing that for however many months it had taken to make the journey from Babylon. And given all the work that needed to be done in their fields and vineyards and orchards, many of them had probably put off building their own houses until their crops were in. In other words, they were probably still living in tents on their farms, so what sense did it make for them to do some more camping in Jerusalem?

Oh, and was it really a good idea to come to Jerusalem? Verse 3 says that the people were afraid of those who had already been living in the country before their return, and the following chapters make it clear that these fears were in fact well founded. Jerusalem wasn't exactly a safe place for a large gathering – it would be years before the walls were rebuilt – so did it really make sense for the people to gather where bandits or marauders could rob them all at the same time?

And then there was the problem of all the animal sacrifices they were supposed to offer during the different festivals of the seventh month. Numbers chapter 29 says they were to offer one bull, one ram, seven lambs, and a goat on the Feast of Trumpets, the first day of the month. They were to repeat all these offerings on the Day of Atonement, the tenth day of the month. But that was just warming up. During the Feast of Tabernacles, starting on the fifteenth day of the same month, they were to offer two rams, fourteen lambs and a goat each day for seven days. But they were also to offer 13 bulls on the first day, 12 bulls on the second day, 11 bulls on the third day, and so on down to seven bulls on the seventh day. Then on the eighth and final day, they were to repeat the same offerings they had made on the first day of the month for the Feast of Trumpets: One bull, one ram, seven lambs, and a goat. That's a lot of livestock for folks that were just getting started again. Did it really make sense to kill all those animals?

No, from a purely practical perspective, they probably didn't have the time or the money for all these festivals. It wasn't safe for them to gather in Jerusalem, and it didn't make any sense for them to camp out when they were already living in tents. So, what sense did any of this make?

I think we can understand the way they felt. In fact, you might tell yourself the same sorts of things on many Sunday mornings. Oh, none of us are concerned about the safety of coming to worship, but there are plenty of other Christians around the world who are. And when we look at our calendars, don't all of us have plenty of good reasons to do something else with our weekends? And when we look at our budgets, can't we all find lots of other things to do with our money instead of putting it in the offering plate?

So, strapped as they were, why did they spend so much time and money on worship? Why did they all gather as one man to celebrate the fall festivals? I hope for the same reasons that we do, no matter how little sense it may make in the eyes of the world.

In the first place, and perhaps most obviously, they worshipped God because they were grateful. No, in the eyes of the world, they probably didn't have very much for which they should give thanks. No, they didn't have much comfort or safety. They didn't have much wealth or sophistication. They didn't even have political independence – they were still subjects of the Persian King Cyrus.

But that pagan king had let them come back to Judea, to the land from which their ancestors were exiled. And that pagan king had let them resume the worship of their God. And so, in effect, they chose worship of God over all that stuff that the world thinks is so important – money, comfort, safety, sophistication. And why did they think that worship was so important? Because they knew that God, not Cyrus, was the true source of all their blessings, the Giver of everything they had. They knew that God, not Cyrus, had brought them back from exile, and they trusted God, not Cyrus, to provide all the time and money they needed. So they left everything that the world valued back in Babylon so they could go to Judea and worship God. And once they got to Judea, they all stopped all the important things they were doing in order to worship God. In short, worship was the most important thing to them because God was the most important Person to them.

Is that our attitude as we come to worship today? Are we really convinced that it is God Who is the author of all our material blessings, or do we give the credit to our own wisdom or skill for what we have? Do we really consider every moment, every day of life to be a gift from God, or do we imagine that our time is our own, to use as we please? Do we really believe that reading and meditating on God's Word and expressing our love and our devotion to Him is more important than anything else on our agendas this week? Or would we rather be doing something else right now? Just how important is God to us? How much do we value our relationship with Him?

But why do we think that what we do in here is the way God wants us to spend time with Him? Well, why did the returning exiles worship God the way they did? Why did they set up that bronze altar on its bases, its foundations, rebuilding it in exactly the same place it had been before the Temple was destroyed? Why did they offer all those animal sacrifices, killing and burning up all that perfectly good meat? And why did they keep the Feast of the Tabernacles, living in shanties made of branches for a week? Where did they get the idea that God wanted them to worship Him in such nonsensical ways?

They did all those things because of what we read in verses 2 and 4 – because it was written in the Law of Moses. They worshipped God in this way because that's the way He had told them to. They expressed their love for God in this way because they knew it would be acceptable and pleasing to Him.

Now, we understand this concept instinctively where it comes to human relationships. I know my stepdad loves cordial cherries and hates broccoli. So, when I went to Valdosta this past week, which one do you think I took as a gift? True love, in whatever sort of relationship it is expressed, is supremely self-forgetful – it always focuses on the wants and needs of the beloved. So for any action to be an expression of love, it must by definition be something the beloved wants or needs, regardless of the cost to the giver.

So, if all that's true, then if we value our relationship with God enough to want to express our love for Him, shouldn't we want our worship to include the things that God has told us that He wants? Shouldn't we seek His face in prayer? Shouldn't we sing His praise? Shouldn't we study His Word, learning how He wants us to live our lives? And shouldn't we put God's Word into practice, not just knowing His will, but obeying Him, living according to His perfect law of love?

That all makes sense, But why did God want His Old Testament people to love Him in such a strange way? Why did the Law of Moses require all those animals to die, for their blood to be shed on such a regular basis? And why did the people of God have to travel all the way from Babylon to Judea to worship in this way? Why did God want those sacrifices to be made in just one place, in Jerusalem?

We know, don't we? For we know that all the worship in the Old Testament had to be so carefully prescribed because it pointed in one way or another to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. We know, for example, that even though Jesus is the Divine Son of God, He would come to pitch His tent among us, to take on human flesh and to share in our life. So, they lived in tents for a week not only to thank God for bringing them through the Exodus experience, but also to celebrate the fact that God would come to dwell among them in such an intimate way one day.

Just so, they were told that only the blood of sacrifices could take away their sins. But we know Jesus is the perfect sacrifice Who would be offered up once for the sins of all His people. And we know that He would offer that sacrifice in Jerusalem, the place to which all His people had returned from exile, and the place in which they would worship God in the way God instructed them.

So, although we don't worship God in the same way they did, we worship the same forgiving, merciful, bountiful God that they worshipped. So, shouldn't we just as grateful for the time, talents, and treasure God has given us? And if we are, then how can we withhold from God anything that we have? Shouldn't we be just as grateful for the way He has delivered us, not from political exile, but from bondage to sin and death? And if we are, then how can we keep from praising Him for His love and mercy? And since God insisted that all His Old Testament people worship Him in a way that pointed forward to Christ, shouldn't our worship be just as Christ-centered? Shouldn't we rejoice in our forgiveness, relying on the sacrifice Jesus has made for us? Shouldn't we seek His face ever more consistently as we read His Word and go to Him in prayer? And shouldn't we go out of our way to make it clear that He is more important to us than anything else?