

The centrality of sacrifice in rebuilding

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[0 : 00] All right. I'm going to read from God's Word now from Ezra, chapter 3. And I'm going to read the first six verses. So this is Ezra, chapter 3, starting at verse 1.

It's titled, The People Rebuild the Temple and the Rebuilding of the Altar. This is from the New International Version. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem.

Then Jeshua, son of Josedach, and his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel, son of Sheltiel, 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.

Despite their fear of the people around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both morning and evening sacrifices.

Then, in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the new moon sacrifices, and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred feasts of the Lord, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the Lord.

[1 : 29] On the first day of the seventh month, they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid.

And then we turn over to Romans, chapter 12, and reading verses 1 and 2. This is our sort of motto verse for the year.

You'll recognize it, I think. So this is Romans, chapter 12, verse 1 and 2. Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will. So I'd just like to pray for Pete before he comes to speak to us.

[2 : 31] But yeah, come on, Pete. That'd be great. Just a reminder that I've been doing the ministry training course over the last year, and one of the things Matt Searle says is always watch out when you see a word like but in a passage.

It's significant. So maybe Pete will pick up on that, but I don't know. But look out for the buts. Yeah, let's pray for Pete. Lord, we thank you for Pete. We thank you for his love for you and his ministry. We thank you for his excited, yeah, when he comes to look at your word and to study it, Lord. We thank you for the gifting that you've given him. And we pray, Holy Spirit, you would just come now and fill him anew as he brings your word to us this evening.

Give him freedom to share what you've laid on his heart, Lord, and that together we would go from this place in a better place to serve and honor you in these days. Lord, we recognize that we could do great things, but without you, little is of value.

But Lord, with you, all things are possible. And we just pray for Pete now, that you would just bless and encourage him and help us to concentrate and to listen to what you're saying to us now. In Jesus' name.

[3 : 36] Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you, Anthony, for your prayers.

It's lovely to be back sharing again in worship with you. And thank you for the privilege of being able to share from God's word and some lovely truths in scripture before us this evening.

There was a man who said, some people have asked the secret of our long marriage. And I explained, we take time to go to a restaurant twice a week and arrange a little candlelit dinner with soft music and a slow walk home.

She goes Tuesdays, I go Fridays. A man who had a ritual, but he wasn't really in a loving relationship.

True worship of God comes from being in a living relationship with him through the Lord Jesus. As Christians, we need to live in community, growing and encouraging each other together, worshipping God together.

[5 : 01] We see in the life of the early church, in Acts chapter 2, a people alive, growing and honouring the Lord. And this happened on a daily basis in the temple, in each other's homes.

There was a sense of awe of the presence of God, of him being at work. People saw God changing lives. And sometimes, perhaps, in our situations, we lose that sense of wonder of being in the holy presence of God.

Sometimes we might say the phrase ourselves or hear others say, well, I didn't get anything out of that service today. Perhaps as we come into the presence of Almighty God, our question should be, what can I give in worship?

What can I bring? How can I honour God with all of my heart, with all of my soul, and with all of my mind? Indeed, throughout the whole of Scripture, wherever God's people were spiritually alive, where there was an anticipation, an expectation that God was at work, worship that was real and inspired by God's presence was always at the centre.

As we consider, through the account in Ezra, the return of the Israelites from exile in Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the temple, what is one of their first recorded acts as a people together?

[6 : 41] They worshipped. If we could have the first slide, Gary, thank you. They worshipped. They worshipped with each other, united. They gathered as one nation in Jerusalem, verse 1.

They worshipped being guided by Scripture. The priests rebuilt the altar and made sacrifices morning and evening, obeying the law given to them by Moses.

They worshipped in faith. In spite of fear of attack from their enemies around them, they worshipped in faith. Then the next slide.

Thank you, Gary. They worshipped by remembering. They celebrated the feast of the tabernacles, remembering their escape from Egypt, thanking God for his faithfulness.

They worshipped by planning for the future. They instigated ongoing procedures for worship. But most importantly, verse 6, they worshipped by making it a priority.

[7 : 48] They did all this before even the foundations of the temple had been laid. You see, they recognised that anything they did began with worship in the presence of God.

He had to come first. And it's what we are doing as a fellowship today. On the first day of the week, before anything else happens, we are deliberately putting God first.

We are saying, Lord, this week, who we are, what we will do, the concerns that we will face as individuals, as families, and as a fellowship, all come under your provision, your love, and your care for us.

You see, for God's people, worship is a way of life. As we see in the life of the Israelites, worship does not just occur in a single day.

It is not just on Sundays for us. It is a commitment to honour God as we serve him with our lives day by day. Spending time in worship is all part of saying, God, you have first place in my life, and that needs to take place on a daily basis.

[9 : 11] With all that we have and are, we are to put God first. As the Apostle Paul declares in those words we heard from Romans chapter 12, therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. We worship God with our whole being, with who we are in our everyday lives.

Ruth Graham, wife of the brilliant, well-known evangelist Billy Graham, she used to have a plaque above her kitchen sink that read, divine service rendered here three times daily.

In the workplace, in the shop, in our homes, in the cinema, in a cafe, on the bus, in a train, as we go about our daily lives, Jesus knows us and is with us, and he is in a deep, personal relationship with us.

And wherever we are, day by day, we live lives in his presence. And we therefore worship God by giving our best to him in all these circumstances.

[10 : 35] As we honour God in everyday life, everything becomes a living sacrifice of praise and adoration. The trouble with living sacrifices is that we want to keep crawling off the altar, don't we?

worship means living a God-centred life, not a me-centred life. So often, in our churches, we get into arguments over styles of worship, what we do in our services.

But at the end of the day, these boil down to personal preferences. Remember, hymns in churches were not officially approved by the Church of England until 1820. And worship can occur regardless of the mood or circumstances because these do not change the character of God.

So in all situations, we need to ask, how best can I honour God? Does what come out of my mouth honour him? Does the way in which I conduct myself at work, in my neighbourhood, in my relationships, honour God?

When we serve others, is it to get something back or to bless others with the love of God? Do people see that Jesus makes a difference to our lives?

[11:57] Rick Warren has written, work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence. Some time ago, I came across the story of a runner who cheated in a marathon.

After 20 miles, he'd had enough. I can understand that. I've run a few half marathons an extremely long time ago and the thought of going for 26 miles just fills me with horror.

So I can understand this a little bit. He'd had enough after 20 miles. So he caught a bus to near the finishing line, hid behind a tree, waited for the runners to begin to appear and then ran home in third place.

He was found out and disqualified. Someone not prepared to give everything to finish the race. He did not give of his best.

Does God have the best in all that we do and say? You see, from the story of Isaiah, we can see that worship begins in the presence of God.

[13:11] Isaiah's call to ministry began with an overwhelming picture of God's majesty and holiness and power. And the language used in these first eight verses of Isaiah to describe the glory of God says that he is far bigger and awesome than we could ever understand.

Scientists love to discover how the world is put together. Perhaps often trying to disprove that there is a creator God behind our existence on earth. But I think the more that scientists discover about the world and the universe and the incredible way in which the human body works, I think, continues to point towards how marvellous God is.

And in fact, we sang a song this morning, didn't we, I think, that says it all. God's love is deeper than the deepest ocean. God's love is wider than the widest sea.

God's love is higher than the highest mountain. Deeper, wider, higher is God's love to me.

Everything we do and say begins in the presence of God.

We seek to honour him because he is worth it. Do you give time in your daily routine just to dwell in the presence of almighty God?

[14:37] The line in the hymn says, take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord. And the discipline of that can be difficult, particularly when we are tired, when we're worn out, when we're not able to think straight.

But that's why we have each other. It's why times of prayer and fellowship are so important. We can use prayer to encourage each other all the time.

When you're talking with someone on the telephone, finish with prayer, thanking, praising God together. Modern technologies, we've had to get used to it the last 18 months, haven't we?

Zoom. It enables us to be together, supporting, encouraging, worship, praying together. As you travel to work, in your car, or on a bus, put on a praise tape.

Play David Suchet, reading the Bible. Don't be careful, he's got a wonderful voice. And I do find when I listen to him, I start to drift off. Maybe listen to a station such as UCB radio that plays some wonderful praise songs and the word of God.

[15:47] Begin the day in God's presence, putting him first in your life. And then we see worship produces a personal response. At a Baptist church meeting, there was heated discussion about changing the name from Puddlington Baptist Church to Puddlington Christian Fellowship.

Eventually, one man stood up and declared, I've been a Baptist for over 50 years and nobody's going to start calling me a Christian. A man resisting change.

But like Isaiah, we cannot rest in the presence of God without it affecting our lives. George Beverly Shea has sung, there's the wonder of sunset and evening, the wonder as sunrise I see.

But the wonder of wonders that thrills my soul is the wonder that God loves me. And then there was a story of a mother who saw a thunderstorm forming in mid-afternoon. and she was worried about her seven-year-old daughter who would be walking home from school. Deciding to meet her, the mother saw her walking nonchalantly along, stopping to smile whenever the lightning flashed.

[17:11] Seeing her mother, the little girl ran to her, explaining happily, all the way home, God has been taking my picture. Someone responding with faith, learning to rest in the presence of God.

And as he experienced the holy presence of God, Isaiah recognised he was not worthy to be there. He recognised his personal selfishness, but then we see the marvellous grace of God cleansing Isaiah and restoring him.

Fire is the symbol of God and the cold touching his lips is a description of an encounter with the very person of God. We live in the age of celebrities and influencers.

People trying to get information, pictures out there on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, whatever the platform is at the time. Stars of media are treated just like national heroes.

If only we could catch a glimpse of them on the red carpet or, yeah, get a selfie with them. It fills people with wonder and awe and excitement, doesn't it?

[18:27] And yet for us, as children of the living God, that should be our wonder, that we can encounter his presence day by day.

God wants us to be in relationship with him. You see, he's built a bridge to you and to me. We deserved his wrath for our sin, but Jesus took that upon himself, dying on the cross in our place. And as we trust Jesus as Lord, allowing him to lead and direct our lives, God cleanses us. Jesus brings us back, purified, into the holy presence of God, restored and forgiven.

Wonderful, wonderful promise in 1 John 1 verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Maybe this evening you've never come to that place of faith and trust in Jesus. Let him be Lord. You will never be disappointed in him.

[19:44] And as he experienced God's forgiveness, Isaiah responded with faith and with trust. He said, here I am, send me, even if it meant having to give a difficult message.

You see, worship sends us out. When we have truly met with God, when we have truly experienced him in worship, it is an experience that is impossible to keep to ourselves.

Just a few moments ago I was talking about meeting celebrities. A number of years ago my late mother Ray, many of you will have known, got in on the act of this a few years ago.

For a birthday she took the whole family to see the panto at the pantomime at the Swan with Craig Revel Hallwood starring.

One of our nieces had a small part in that pantomime as well. And like a true groupie she queued up afterwards with some of our nieces to have her picture, to have a selfie taken with him.

[20:53] And I think there's a picture there, isn't it, Gary? There's a couple of my sisters and some nieces and me mum sitting next to Craig Revel Hall. He's a lovely man actually, he must have been exhausted, but he gave that time to spend with people talking to them.

And she dined out on the story for ages. She couldn't stop talking about it. It was a brilliant family event. If we could go back to the last slide.

Thank you, Gary. And many others of you will have perhaps been in that situation where you've met someone well known and your family just heard you talking about that for quite a while.

The challenge to us is do we share the gospel in the same way? When we meet with God we cannot live unchanged lives.

And like Isaiah, our service will be a natural overflowing of God's presence and joy into all that we do. The glory of God is not to be kept within the four walls of this building but to be shared in our lives with others.

[22:03] That they too might pause and wonder and experience the cleansing power of God's love. That they too might know the love of Jesus setting them free.

There's a line in a song that says you are writing a gospel a chapter each day by the deeds that you do by the words that you say.

Men read what you write whether faithless or true. Say what is the gospel according to you?

Worship is a way of life. Worship begins in the presence of God. Worship produces a personal response and worship sends us out.

Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God.

[23 : 11] This is your true and proper worship. Let's pray. just be still in the holy presence of God for a moment.

This evening will you look to Jesus and allow him to be Lord of your life. Just a few moments we're going to be sharing around the communion table together putting Jesus at the very centre of our worship.

Day by day may he be at the centre of our lives. Lord may a song of joy be in our hearts even if the sky is dark and life is hard and hope thin on the ground and in that song that sacrifice may hearts be warmed eyes lifted high and faith restored in one who knows and cares and loves enough to die and rise again for us.

Father in Jesus name we ask this. Amen.