

## **“One Foundation” (Ezra 3)(10.4.20)**

Ezra 3:1–13 (NIV84)

**3** When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Then Jeshua son of Jozadak 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. <sup>3</sup> Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. <sup>4</sup> Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.

<sup>8</sup> In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work, appointing Levites twenty years of age and older to supervise the building of the house of the Lord. <sup>9</sup> Jeshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah) and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers—all Levites—joined together in supervising those working on the house of God.

<sup>10</sup> When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. <sup>11</sup> With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord:

“He is good;  
his love to Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. <sup>12</sup> But 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. <sup>13</sup> No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

### **The word of God for the people of God.**

Title: **“One Foundation”**

LET US PRAY.

INTRODUCTION:

As we enter our church building, on the left is an historic marker. It is a large stone and on it is this engraving: “This stone marks the site of the FRIENDS’ MEETING HOUSE; the first public house of worship in Atlantic County. Built – 1744/Used until 1855. The Methodists purchased the property and built the sanctuary in 1869.

You can see that there is a parallel here with our account in Ezra of them rebuilding the Temple. They stopped to worship after they laid the new foundation over the old foundation. Likewise, the Methodists built on the same footprint of the Quakers.

Today, this first Sunday of October 2020, we are laying another kind of foundation upon what has already existed here for 276 years. We are layering on new ways to worship together. Yes, we are still worshipping inside in our pews. But, we are joined together with those worshipping outside the building. They may be in our parking lot. They may be on the Internet using Zoom or joining us on Facebook Live

streaming. People can also share the experience after-the-fact via our website, on Facebook, or on the radio airwaves.

In my preparation this week, I had an epiphany of sorts. When I think about Meeting houses, whether they be for Quakers or any other buildings used for worship, I have been missing a most significant truth. My focus has always been on the human element in the context of meeting; people meeting with other people to worship. How about recognizing that the most important element is coming here to “meet with God?”

Now, I certainly do expect to meet with God during worship. I normally pray for experiencing God the Holy Spirit during the Welcome Prayer. And especially on Communion Sundays, like today, we celebrate the mystery of human and divine connection. So, what I am saying is that the fact that the church building is a Meeting Place for God and God’s people has now consciously been established in my perspective.

In what other ways does this scripture show a commonality in context between Ezra’s day and our day? What lessons can we learn and apply? As we answer those questions, we will discern how they point to the One true Foundation for Meeting with our God.

BODY:

We have been out of our building for six months, but the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed for 70 years. The people had been in exile ever since King Nebuchadnezzar had forcibly moved them to Babylon. Their identity as a nation was crushed. They no longer occupied The Promised Land that the LORD had given them. Their way of worshiping had dramatically changed. Their living environment was new geographically, economically, culturally and in language. Yes, change is hard.

Here is a quote from an article that came out on September 30<sup>th</sup>, “How the Pandemic Has Changed Church”: “Here we are—worldwide—in the ninth month of a pandemic. Economies have been shaken, social structures have been re-arranged, and worship gatherings have all been impacted deeply. The pandemic has changed church. Most of 2021 will still require changes in the way we have always done church. We should face it: we’re never going back to the old normal. The technological question facing churches is now, what will be the *new* normal? What technological necessities are part of doing church?”

We have an interesting dynamic presented in our text that directly relates to this very day. How do we define how important are our worship spaces? There is no doubt in our text that rebuilding the House of the Lord, the Temple, is extremely important. The people focused on God’s House before their own homes. And yet, they worshiped God before even the foundation was laid.

They start by building the altar of the God of Israel. Yes, even though they feared the peoples around them, they prepared a place of sacrifice to their God. An altar is normally a raised up place that is used as a place of sacrifice. It can be the sacrifice of animals or the burning of incense to God. In this rebuilding process, the altar came first. They worship by confessing their sin and making sacrifices according to the guidance in the Law of Moses. This would include daily sacrifices and all the occasions detailed in the scripture.

Let me begin my pointing you to Jesus. The whole book of Hebrews argues convincingly of the superiority of Christ in all things and this includes all the ways of the Temple sacrificial system. The author of Hebrews 10:10–14 (NIV84) tell us,

<sup>10</sup>And by [the Father’s] will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**.

<sup>11</sup>Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup>But when **this** priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>13</sup>Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, <sup>14</sup>because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

And, the Holy Spirit testifies<sup>18</sup> there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

In our Christian worship, our altar is normally a raised area. We place the pulpit there for the ministry of the word. The music makers are often there to lead worship. The baptismal font is often there as is the Lord's Table for our celebration of our sacraments. AND, normally there is a cross to remind us of the final sacrifice made by the Perfect Lamb of God, our Savior, Lord Jesus the Christ.

The dynamic tension is that worship should occur whether or not there is a designated building; yet, at the same time, God makes it clear that His House should be built. The prophet Ezekiel shares a vision he had during the exile: Ezekiel 43:6-7 (NIV84)

<sup>6</sup> While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. <sup>7</sup> He said: "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever."

The opening verses of the Book of Ezra say that the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation. First he acknowledges that it was the LORD, the God of heaven that established his kingdom. The proclamation decreed that the Jerusalem Temple was to be rebuilt. Therefore, the logical conclusion is the rebuilding of the Temple is a movement of God.

Yes, God can be worshiped without a building; yet, the Lord desires a "meeting place" for us to gather WITH Him. The Most High does not live in houses made by men. Heaven is God's throne and the earth is His footstool. In today's context, we are being continually reminded that the church is not a building, the church is the Body of Christ. This is ABSOLUTELY TRUE, but it is not the whole truth.

The early church, as depicted in the Book of Acts, is descriptive not prescriptive. The people of The Way met in homes or other quiet places because they were a persecuted people. We have records of them meeting underground in the catacombs of Rome. When Christianity was recognized by the Roman authorities, churches began to be built. For over 1600 years now, church building, meeting houses, of all types have been erected.

Yes, we should be meeting together in small groups in our homes. At the same time, we should maintain 16 centuries of tradition by meeting in houses of worship. It is not either or, but both. This was upheld and promoted by John Wesley and the other founding members of the Methodist Movement.

Remember that on Pentecost, the disciples were meeting and praying together in the Upper Room.

Then the first sermon preached was outdoors to a crowd of thousands. Let us resist the temptation to put limits and create artificial barriers on how we worship.

After Cyrus's proclamation throughout all his realm, you might think that all of the Jewish exiles would have responded positively. Didn't they think? "Hey, here is our chance to go back home. We can reclaim our Land. We can rebuild our homes, the Temple, and the city of Jerusalem. We can reclaim our heritage and our identity as a people." But, only a minority responded.

In my Warren Wiersbe Study Bible, he makes this observation under the heading of "Homecoming:" "Oddly enough, only some of God's children have the courage to return home, the ones whose spirits God stirred to rebuild the house of the LORD. We are told they numbered about 42,360 people plus servants and singers...clearly only a portion of a multitude in exile. Called by God, they were willing to risk the danger. The cost of homecoming will be a common theme in Jesus' later parables and teaching. God makes it possible, just as God changed Cyrus's heart. But the Spirit is what moves people to stake everything on the LORD."

"Erected on the same location and celebrated with the same songs, the foundation for this second temple symbolizes continuity in faith and heritage with the first temple community, even if this community is now a mixed group, most of whom know nothing of the old monarchy. As individuals, families, and congregations evolve, growth entails finding meaningful ways to integrate the present with the past, to connect new members with those who have a long record of faithfulness, and to honor history while embracing change."

The altar was constructed and sacrifices were made. Now, it was time for the construction to continue. The people gave money. The people gave of themselves. They made the House of God a priority over their personal interests. They worked on it personally and the foundation of the temple of the LORD was completed.

It was time to celebrate in worship again. The priests put on their special clothes for leading worship. Musical instruments were used to praise the LORD. This also connects them with their traditions established by King David. They sang the Psalms, which were their songs. WE are still doing this 2500 years later.

Let us do this now. I will say, "God is good," and then hit the cymbal. Then you will respond, "His love to Israel endures forever." {do it.}

Israel was God's Chosen People. As followers of Jesus, Paul tells us we have been grafted into the vine of Israel. Therefore, we are part of The Chosen People. This time, when I hit the cymbal, I want you to say, "His love to Emmaus endures forever." {do it.}

Again. {repeat.}

The people are praising God. There is joyful shouting and there is mournful weeping. Some are looking forward with expectations. Others are looking back with regret. No, this new Temple would not have the stature or the external beauty of the one built by King Solomon. It is impossible for things to stay exactly the same. There may have also been regret over The Chosen People's sin that caused the destruction of that first temple.

Hundreds of years later, the Messiah came. He came unto his own, but they rejected Him. Prior to Jesus' transfiguration, Jesus said that He would build His Church. After His crucifixion and resurrection, the Second Temple was destroyed by Roman forces.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3:10–11 (NIV84)

<sup>10</sup> By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than **the one** already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

A minute ago, we recited a call and response that comes from the beginning of Psalm 118. In the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse of that psalm we see a foreshadowing of Jesus:

"The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone."

The prophet Isaiah puts it this way: Isaiah 28:16

So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed."

You should not be surprised that our Sovereign God had a plan all along. He cannot be thwarted. Our Lord was in control in history; is in control today in our lives; and, is bringing his plan of redeeming all creation to fruition. In what ways are we contributing to building on Jesus' foundation?

CONCLUSION:

We have been instructed in Hebrews 10:25 (NIV84): Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Our obedience is demonstrated by our gathering today. A new foundation for worship has been laid. We are inside. We are outside. We are on Zoom and Facebook Live. Later we will be on our website and on the radio airwaves. And yet some of our brothers and sisters are not being obedient.

Wiersbe again: "As Wesley notes, "the mixture of sorrow and joy **here**, is a representation of this world. In heaven all are singing and none are sighing; in hell all are wailing, and none rejoicing; but here on earth we can scarce discern the shouts of joy from the noise of the weeping. Let us learn to rejoice with them that rejoice and weep with them that weep.""

As we sang in our opening hymn:

The church's one foundation  
is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
she is his new creation  
by water and the Word.  
From heaven he came and sought her  
to be his holy bride;  
with his own blood he bought her,  
and for her life he died.

Yet she [the church] on earth hath union  
with God the Three in One,  
and mystic sweet communion  
with those whose rest is won.  
O happy ones and holy!  
Lord, give us grace that we  
like them, the meek and lowly,  
on high may dwell with thee.

For those that have isolated themselves, I call on you to reach out to them and encourage them. We meet together to meet our God. Let us now prepare ourselves to celebrate Holy Communion.  
Amen and amen. Let us pray.