

Longing for More

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[0 : 00] let's ask the God who is good, whose love and dears forever, for his help. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much again that you are a God who never changes and you are a God who always wants to speak to us, to give us life, to help us to know how to live for you, to show us grace, to tell us what is true.

So Lord, will you please give us ears to hear today, eyes to see, will you give us hearts to believe, will you give us lives that will obey your word today. All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now I want to begin by getting you to think a little about how the pandemic years have impacted church life. Remember those times? It all started with a major disruption, didn't it? There we were going to church Sunday after Sunday, out of habit, thinking very little about it, when boom, suddenly we couldn't anymore. Suddenly we were all stuck at home, unable to see one another, unable to sing together, unable to take the Lord's Supper, and having to learn to remember, to unmute ourselves on this unfamiliar new thing called Zoom.

There was a major disruption. And that was how it was for the people of God back then as well. There they were, happily going to the temple to offer sacrifices, happily preparing for the various festivals, happy with the rhythms of their lives, when boom, here comes Babylon, taking away your temple, taking away your king, and in fact taking away you, to go to a totally unfamiliar land, where all the people of God, things that you used to do together, can no longer take place.

[1 : 56] And with disruption, comes discouragement. As the months crawled by, we wondered whether God was going to do anything, whether there was going to be change, what the future would hold.

And so it was for the people of God back then as well. Don't forget, the land they were evicted from wasn't just prime real estate.

It gave them their very identity. It was who they are. It was the place which God promised their ancestor, Abraham, to give to his children and their children for their blessing and flourishing. It was a place that was secured for them by God through Moses and Joshua as he redeemed them out of slavery. But it was also a place they had lost because of their foolishness in rejecting God and turning to other gods.

And it was the place they longed for. You can hear some of that longing in Psalm 137. By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

[3 : 13] They sang Zion being not just any place, but the place where God dwelt. And they went on to sing. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

There was discouragement all around. But here's the interesting thing. For us today, what happened next?

Well, sadly, for many Christians, this is what happened. After experiencing disruption and discouragement, many Christians decided on detachment.

Our mindset began to fundamentally change. Slowly, we began thinking, oh, wait a minute, I guess I don't need church. After all, I can sing by myself, I can read the Bible by myself, pray by myself, listen to a YouTube sermon by myself, and actually, sometimes, that's easier without the inconvenience of having to care about others.

I am still Christian, but church isn't all that important. And so, even post-pandemic, many people began to do what sociologists call de-churching.

[4 : 32] Maybe someone stops attending their Bible study group, then they stop serving, then they appear less and less on Sunday. And often, they'll say things like, oh, you know, I just need a break.

I'm not necessarily dropping out because I have some huge theological disagreement with the pastor, or I hate someone, or anything like that. I'll just have a rest. Then I'll come back.

But they don't. And quietly, without much fanfare, they begin detaching themselves from being physically present with others at church.

Like it or not, both here in Malaysia and globally, that's what has been happening. But today, the book of Ezra is here to tell us that 3D pattern of disruption, discouragement, and detachment is not inevitable.

It is not irreversible. You see, back then, that 3D pattern was also in operation. As God's people began to settle in Babylon, some of them began to get comfortable.

[5 : 50] They got used to life there. And so when King Cyrus offered them a chance to return to their land, some said, no thanks, we like it here.

they had detached themselves from Jerusalem and they no longer longed for the temple and what it stood for. But do you remember what happened back in Ezra chapter 1?

Turn back to Ezra 1 verse 5 if you've forgotten. God moved the hearts of some people. He fanned into flame their love, whether they were priests or Levites or just everyday folk.

And as their hearts were rekindled, they said, let's go home. Now, why does going back to Jerusalem matter? After all, they could read scripture and pray in Babylon.

that wasn't impossible. But the people who came back knew Jerusalem was the site of the temple. And they knew that the temple was where God dwelt in a unique way.

[7 : 03] Now, God is present everywhere, of course. He can't be confined to a building. But in the Old Testament, God designed the physical temple to be where you meet with him and worship him.

It was an outpost of heaven, if you like. And by going home to rebuild the temple, the people were saying they longed to meet God, that he was their true home.

Or think of it from the opposite point of view. If they had chosen not to go home to rebuild the temple, they were essentially saying, God's relational presence was just an optional extra.

They would be saying, oh God, it is a bonus to know you, but it's okay if I don't. I don't long for you. But they do go home.

And so Ezra is really a book about how disruption and discouragement doesn't have to lead to detachment.

[8 : 18] On the contrary, it is about how even disruption and discouragement doesn't stop God's people from renewing their devotion.

It is a book that encourages us in these post-pandemic times never to stop longing for God and his kingdom. And when we get to Ezra chapter 3, we begin to get a glimpse of what that devotion looks like.

Last week in Ezra 3 verse 1 to 6, we saw that they were in a hurry to rebuild the altar. They wanted to get that done before anything else. Why?

Because it was through the altar they could offer burnt offerings. In other words, it was through the altar that they could re-establish their relationship with the Lord.

And here's the thing about burnt offerings. All of it is to be given to God. With some of the other offerings, part of it is allowed to be held back, to be eaten by the priests or the worshippers.

[9 : 27] But not this one. You don't hold back. You give it up. And that was a sign of their devotion. And in fact, Ezra 3 verse 3 tells us that their devotion was such that they prioritised getting the altar ready even when they felt fear from the opposition they were facing.

And we'll hear more about that next week. But that brings us to our passage this morning. I know I've taken longer than usual to get to this point, but I just wanted to properly set the scene of what is happening before we turn to this morning's passage.

But now that's what we're going to do, so if you've closed your Bibles, now's the time to open them again. And here is what Ezra 3 verse 7 to 13 wants to show us today.

It wants to paint for us a fuller picture of what it looks like when God's people have their hearts renewed.

And as it does so, it wants to ask us, is that us today? Are we that kind of people? How do we know? Well, today's passage says, well, here are three signs to look out for.

[10 : 50] So, first sign we will build God's house. We will build God's house. You know, for all this talk in Ezra about going back to rebuild God's temple, so far we haven't actually seen it happen.

And this is our fourth sermon in Ezra already. But finally, verse 8, after the rebuilding of the altar, we see the work finally start.

But okay, you say, I'm glad for them, but what does this construction site in the ancient Middle East got to do with me today? Good question.

And to answer that, I want you to come with me on a short journey through the Bible. I want you to look at how God builds temples. And I want to point out one particular feature.

here. So let's begin first of all with the tabernacle in Exodus. Now that is the first temple prototype. And one of the things we realize is if we look at the blueprints of how to build that tabernacle, a lot of the stuff in there is overlaid with gold.

[12:06] You know, there are gold hooks for the curtains and so on. Maybe we should get some for the back of the hall there. But where did that gold come from?

Exodus 12 tells us it came from the general Egyptian population who willingly gave their gold to the Israelites as they left.

So it's Gentile gold. Keep that in mind. And now let's go to the next temple, which is the first temple, Solomon's temple.

What about it? Well, 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles tell us King David made sure in 1 Chronicles 26 verse 27 for example to dedicate some of the plunder from his Gentile enemies for the temple so that his son Solomon would have all the gold and silver and precious stones he needed to get the temple up and running.

And Solomon himself source material and man from Tyre and Sidon Gentile nations.

[13:22] Once again it is Gentiles who provide the material. And now come back with me to today's passage. Look at Ezra 3 verse 7. Where is the material coming from?

Once again it is Sidon and Tyre the same Gentile nations. And who is paying to get these saddle locks on a ship?

Pay for all the fees at the port? For all the transportation charges? A Gentile king. So here is something interesting.

We learn not just in Ezra 3 verse 7 but throughout the Old Testament that Gentiles build God's house. Okay but why does this matter to us today?

Well let's keep reading our Bibles. You see in the New Testament in the New Covenant era we learn God is still building his temple but he is no longer building a physical structure and he is not building it with gold or silver or saddle locks either.

[14:37] So what is he building and what does he build it with? 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 5 tells us you also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So here is what God is building today. It is us his people that's his temple today. It's the church made up of people.

And then notice we are the gentile material he is building his church with. We are the plunder Jesus has won. Satan took us captive but God has defeated the enemy and now he puts us together side by side as living stones to be the place where his spirit now dwells.

And so God is building his temple with you and me. We are the stuff God builds his house with. You and I if you like are the expensive gold or the saddle locks.

We are the valuable materials God is using to construct his house. And just like the temple in Ezra's time, the church is a building work that is still in progress.

[16:12] It is not done yet. Ephesians 2 verse 21 to 22 says this, In him, that is Christ, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit. So notice God says right now we are still rising to become a temple.

We are still being built together to become a dwelling. It is not done. We still have to keep being built up. And notice how it happens.

It is as we are joined together. think of it this way. What is a brick on its own?

It's just a brick. But joined together, a brick is part of a building. And so it is as we come together, one brick or stone on top of one another, that we become part of God's temple.

[17:26] we are being fit together within the hole to be God's dwelling place. Now, how wonderful is that? But that also means if we say we are Christians, but we also say I don't want anything to do with being part of God's people, then we cannot claim to be a part of God's temple.

We are just a brick. You see, true devotion doesn't just look like doing quiet times on your own. It doesn't just look like singing on your own.

Such devotion might be well intentioned, but it is deficient. True devotion means today we will keep building God's house.

God's purpose from the very beginning has always been to place us into a local church to grow, to be built, and to build alongside others.

And if we opt out of that work, we are fooling ourselves if we think that God blesses that. No, God is grieved by that.

[18 : 44] He wants to build, but we've not made ourselves available. people. And we can see that even in this very passage as well.

Look at Ezra 3 verse 8. Notice who is involved in the work of building. There is Zerubbabel, the political leader, Joshua the priest, and the rest of the people.

So basically that's everyone. It's all hands on deck. You would notice this even in the age requirement for the Levites. Verse 8 again, just like in the days of David, the Levites had to be 20 years and older.

But this was not a restrictive rule. You see, back in the days of Moses, you actually needed to be slightly older. And so here, by choosing to follow David rather than Moses, the people were actually being more inclusive because now basically even the younger Levites who were around could participate.

And notice verse 9, these Levites all joined together. They were, as Philippians 2 verse 2 puts it, one in spirit and of one mind.

[20 : 08] And that is what true devotion looks like. It's about joining together to build God's house. church is not sure, sometimes we might feel like church isn't worth the bother.

As Eugene Peterson once said, everyone has problems with the church because there's sin in the church. But as he goes on to say, there's sin in the local bank too.

There's sin in the grocery store. And really, there's no other place to be a Christian except the church. His point? Yes, church is imperfect.

Yes, church is flawed. But that's no surprise because wherever there's people, there's sin. But God says even when we, the living stones, are rough and spiky and unbalanced, he still wants to build with such imperfect material.

This is the one and only building project God is interested in. So let's join together with him. As Hebrews 10 verse 24 to 25 says, and let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

[21 : 40] So if that is true, then this morning I want to ask you some questions. And I would like you to answer them not to me, but to God.

Am I as engaged in the work of building the church as I should be? Am I allowing God to turn me, his raw material, so that I can be a living stone that helps his temple rise up to be a skyscraper that calls attention, that brings glory to the Lord.

Now I understand of course that different individuals have different circumstances and are in different seasons. The priests, the Levites, and the rest of the people don't all do the same thing in the same way with the same kind of intensity.

But it is still worth asking, am I truly making the effort to join together with my brothers and sisters in Christ to relate to them well?

Or am I just using my busyness at work with my colleagues and clients or at home with my kids and grandkids as an excuse? So ponder these questions before God remembering that you are in his presence and as you answer remember that this is the God who sees your heart.

[23 : 19] So firstly true devotion looks like building God's house. But what else would it involve?

Our passage gives us another answer. Secondly we will praise God's goodness. Praise God's goodness. Now as we build, we build with care.

In verses 8 and 9 you would notice the emphasis on supervision. And although I don't have time to dwell on this now, if you look at verses 7 and 8 and compare the process and the timing of how they built this temple with how Solomon's temple was originally built in places like 2 Chronicles 2, for example, you would notice that there is a deliberate attempt to build just as Solomon did.

So they are building with care. And building takes time. The work was slow and unspectacular. Nothing much has happened yet so far.

But look at what happens in Ezra 3, verse 10. 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 symbols, took their places to praise the Lord as prescribed by David, king of Israel.

[24 : 55] Now think about it. On first impression, don't you think that this is a little bit over the top? I mean, they've got all the priests all out in nice fancy clothes.

They've got the trumpets and the symbols out, so it feels like some national day parade. They even give a great shout of praise at the end of verse 11. So it feels like some grand moment.

But peer a bit closer and wait a minute, all they have done so far is to lay the foundation of the temple of the Lord. It's not as if the temple is complete.

Imagine that a famous landmark of ours, say the Astana or something, is torn down. So we're going to build a new Astana. And we just lay the foundation.

And already we call on rain or black pink to come and perform at some gala concert and then we declare a public holiday. Isn't that a bit shock and leery? Is that what's happening here?

[26 : 04] But God is actually teaching us something different in these verses. God is saying we can give thanks even for the small things, even for just the laying of a foundation.

We can praise him even when things are merely slow and steady rather than amazing and spectacular. You see, why do Christians not read Ezra all that much?

Well, because it doesn't seem like a very exciting book. I believe I am correct when I say that not a single miracle happens in the book of Ezra.

It's just about building, writing letters, and travel plans. But put ourselves in their shoes.

As the people returned, they might have wondered if God was still for them. And if God wasn't, they couldn't really complain.

[27 : 13] By their sin, they had long forfeited any right to expect God to stay committed to them. In fact, they probably never expected to even see the temple being rebuilt again. I mean, why would a Persian king ever let them embark on such a project, right?

Much less pay for it. But now, here they are. And sure, it's just one small step. It's just a foundation. But God says, don't despise the day of small beginnings. Because from another perspective, it is not just another foundation.

temptation. It is a demonstration of God's goodness and compassion. For God is fulfilling what he said he would do.

For example, in Jeremiah 33, let me read it on the screen. Verse 10, this is what the Lord says. He says, this is what the Lord says. It is a desolate waste without people or animals.

[28 : 14] Yet, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither people nor animals, they will be heard once more. the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thanks offering to the house of the Lord, saying, give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good, his love and dears forever.

You see, it's often in small moments like this that we see God's goodness the clearest. We see it when we see a friend slowly but surely begin to fight against an ungodly habit.

There is nothing dramatic or spectacular about it, but a godly foundation is being built. We see it when over a number of years we realize that Bible study members' prayers have very slowly begun to become less self-centered and more God-centered.

Again, it's almost unnoticeable. but a godly foundation is being built. And by God's grace, sometimes we see it in church.

I don't know if you can remember what our church was like seven years ago, but I can. I remember a youth group in terminal decline. I remember almost nobody opening their Bibles when I preach.

[29 : 48] In fact, I remember a complaint that this new pastor was too Bible-focused. But thank God, those things are largely no longer true.

A godly foundation is being built. And I know we still have a long, long, long, long way to go. The work of building is far from done.

But God reminded me this week through these verses to praise and thank him. God is to God to do it. And for all of us, the truth is, often our lives look more like Ezra than Elijah.

There is no fire from heaven. There is just slow and steady perseverance. But God says, remember my goodness even in those moments.

I never change, so I'm always good whether I'm doing something spectacular or something small. So celebrate the small wins.

[30 : 54] Were you able to be patient with another brother or sister in Christ today? Were you able to WhatsApp one line of encouragement to someone in need? Then notice, Jesus was present in those moments.

In fact, it is small things like that rather than an occasional loud revival meeting on which an entire lifetime of Christ-likeness is built.

So praise God when there is progress like that. that's what is really important. So true devotion is building God's house and praising God's goodness.

Is there anything else? Yes, there is. Thirdly, we will long for God's fullness. Long for God's fullness. You see, joy is not the only emotion we find in these verses. Look at verse 12. 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.

[32 : 19] Amidst this chorus of praise, we hear weeping. We hear a lament. We hear yearning. Why? Now, the text doesn't explicitly tell us so we have to read between the lines a little bit.

But I want to suggest there are probably two reasons why. One negative and one positive. So firstly, the negative.

You see, verse 12 tells us that those who wept were some of the older folk who had seen the former temple. and perhaps for some of them, they couldn't help but have a fondness for the good old days.

There was a sense of nostalgia for the golden age of Solomon. And so, they wept because right now what was happening didn't resemble that golden age.

Certainly, if you were to read further in Ezra and also in the book of Haggai, there does seem to be something of that attitude hanging about in the air. And so, that is a warning for us.

[33 : 29] God wants us to know that longing is part of the Christian life as we'll soon see. But the danger comes when we long for the wrong thing.

Sometimes, what we long for is not so much for God to renew us, but simply for things to be as they used to be. We keep saying, oh, I remember what God did 30 years ago and we miss out on what God might be doing amongst us today.

What God is doing today might be small and invisible. He's just laying foundations. But if we have eyes to see, we will praise his goodness even for the small things.

But, if we are choked by nostalgia, then sometimes that blinds us and robs us of joy. Now, nostalgia can sometimes even become idolatry because nostalgia idolises the past.

It puts our past church experiences in the place of God. It says, if we just recreate the past, we will be safe from whatever problems we face today.

[34 : 44] It convinces your heart to so live in the past that the present never lives up to your expectations and so turns you into a critic and a nitpicker.

Now, let me be clear. We are not saying that we shouldn't learn from the past or celebrate the past or preserve traditions that are good and biblical.

Well, that would be foolish too. But, if we are not careful, looking to the past could cause us to downplay God's goodness in the present.

So, that's the negative. But, is there a positive reason? Yes, I think so. You see, don't forget what I said at the beginning. What was the temple all about?

It's an outpost of heaven. It's where you encounter God's presence. presence. And, when the first temple was built, the glory of the Lord descended as the Ark of the Covenant was placed for the first time in the Holy of Holies.

[35 : 53] That's the most inner court of the temple. But, in this new temple, there is no Ark. It's been lost. And, God's glory never comes on this particular temple in this way.

not even when it is complete. And, perhaps some, maybe even many, of these older folk knew that. And, so they shed tears. They knew that what they saw in front of them was not all that God had promised. They long rightly for more.

And, that is where we are presently too, isn't it? You know, when we see Christ's earthly ministry, we do indeed see glory. We see glory as he dies on the cross and pays once for all for our sin.

We see glory as he rises again to defeat death and establish his kingdom. But, we understand there is more we haven't received yet.

[37 : 05] We have yet to see Jesus face to face in all his glory. We ourselves are still a long way from being glorified. We are still in the days of small beginnings.

And, we rightly shed tears because we know we are not as we should be. We still sin. We still hurt God.

We still offend others. we look at the church and we feel the tension between the ideal and the actual. We want to see glorious beauty, but all we see is a garden full of weeds.

But, let's not look away from the contradictions and the conflicts that are so often woven into the very existence of the visible church.

It's that as we look, let that fill us with the right kind of longing. A longing for the fullness of God's glory to come. A longing for the day when God's temple, built on Christ as the cornerstone, will be complete.

[38 : 18] A longing for the day when God will fully dwell with his people. That's what true devotion looks like. True devotion is shown as we remain dissatisfied with this fallen world, as we remain dissatisfied with the sin that is inside us, and we long for the world to come, for the day of glory when sin is no more.

So let me ask you, do you have such longings? Do you look expectantly to the future, or only nostalgically to the past? Or do they long for God's fullness?

goodness. And here is the good news, we can be certain that longing will one day be satisfied.

Jesus has said so. But until that day, we build God's house, we praise God's goodness, and we entrust ourselves to a saviour who with his tender hands wants to make us into a temple fit for the king of kings.

Let's pray. Father, this is your word, and we pray that this morning you have indeed worked in our hearts to hear your word today.

Remind us that we are your living stones, we are your living temple, and you long to build us, and you long to help us to build one another up.

[39 : 57] So help us get onto your building project, and even when the work is sometimes slow, sometimes it's invisible, sometimes it doesn't look like anything is happening, but Father, help us to build faithfully, and as we do so, praise your goodness whenever we see good foundations being laid, and help us to keep longing for more, longing for the day when your temple is complete, and in fact, we no longer need a physical temple, for the Lord Jesus is with us.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.