

Exiles: A Worshipping Community of Peculiar Saints

Ezra 3

The Book of Ezra is about rebuilding and renewal, rebuilding a city and renewing a people. In chapters one and two we see how Israel was released from exile and resourced to rebuild an entire city. They left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem—how—with the help of the pagans. Persian king Cyrus ordered Israel's release, and called upon the peoples of Babylon to help finance Israel's return to reconstruct their city. A stream of families, cattle, craftsmen, artists, priests, gold, silver, and cultural goods made its way across modern day Iran to Jerusalem [map]. They partnered with the pagans, rebuilt with fellow citizens who worshiped foreign gods. They did not reject or ridicule their neighbors; they worked alongside them. In chapters 1-2 we distinctly see Israel *rebuilding with the world, as citizens*—*public servants who seek the good of the city*, whether it's Babylon or Jerusalem. But in chapter two we begin to see that Israel is not purely a community of citizens; they are also **exiles**—*peculiar saints who worship the one, true God*. In chapter three, the exilic nature of the Israelites comes into focus. This morning we want to examine what it meant for Israel to be an exile, a peculiar saint. Big Question: "What is an exile?" How do we live as exiles?

Worship as Cultural Exiles

Perhaps you are confused by our use of the term exile? Why are we referring to Israel as exiles, *when they just returned from exile*? Shouldn't we just call them citizens, since they've returned to their holy city, to their land? I mean, I thought they were free not banished, residents not refugees? Well, they are still in exile and they aren't. They aren't in exile *geographically*. They are no longer removed from their Land. The people have returned to Israel, to Jerusalem. However, they *are in exile in a cultural sense*. As cultural exiles they are a peculiar people. Although they were back in their land, they are surrounded by peoples who behaved and believed very differently from them. They stuck out. How? One way they stuck out was their refusal to **intermarry** with other races. In fact, it was because of intermarriage with other ethnicities that they were expelled from their land. Now why would they make this a sticking point, a peculiar difference? Because if they intermarried with other peoples they ran the risk of apostasy. Intermarrying with other peoples meant the introduction of foreign gods into the life and culture of Israel. This wasn't permissible because God had chosen them to be a "light to the nations" not "like the other nations" (Isa 49:3). This cultural exile separated them from others. It was particularly true of the priests, who in chapter two were not allowed to serve unless they could clearly trace their Jewish ancestry (2:62-63). In chapter three we see the appearance of this phrase "the people of the lands" (3:3; 4:4), which referred to the surrounding non-Jews (Samaritans, etc). The Israelites were to be set apart culturally. It is worth noting that this cultural exile was not an attempt to put down other cultures. Rather, it was an act of worship. Their peculiarity was tethered to their worship. In 3:1 we read of Israel's return to the Land: "*When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.*" We are told that all the children of Israel gathered as one man, which means they were gathered as a community with a common purpose. What purpose? The purpose of worship. It was the seventh month, which marked a season of worship through festivals and religious rituals—the Feast of Booths, a holy day (Num 29:1), and

sacrifices. The leader of the renewal movement, the high priest Jeshua, and the leader of the rebuilding effort, Zerubbabel, together set out to build an altar upon which to give offerings on behalf of Israel to God. And they performed sacrifices morning and evening. Can you imagine? Thousands of people gathering outdoors, in the dust and sweat, heat pouring down and music going up. A gathering of cultural exiles in festival after festival, day and night, morning and evening. Talk about devotion. Man, this sounds like Austin City Limits or SXSW doesn't it? If we are willing to do it for day after day during SX or ACL, then surely we can do it Sunday to Sunday. And what would it look like to extend our worship into an entire way of living, not just festivals but daily decisions. That's what Israel did. The reason they were so peculiar was because they obeyed a unique set of laws. So they were peculiar because of customs—not intermarrying—but these customs were out of **obedience to God's Law**. It wasn't just a moral code, like Hammurabi's Code, it was obedience to YHWH their covenant God. They were peculiar because they obeyed and worship one God, not many gods. Cultural exiles. In chapter 3 we're told that the reason they built the altar for offerings was because it was "written in the Law of Moses the man of God" (3:2) and they kept the Feast of Booths "as it was written". They were an obedient, set apart, holy people. A community of worshipping cultural exiles. They were peculiar because they followed God's law, lived in covenant relationship with him, compelled to worship their rescuing, redeeming, Creator God. Their first corporate act was an act of worship, peculiar saints living in cultural exile out of devotion to God. They didn't intermarry and they did obey God's Word. Where is God calling you to obedience? Are you peculiar? Are you weird enough to work less, serve more, have family devotions, fast from technology, read your Bible, pray to Jesus, be holy? Israel stuck out in a good way. Do we? Or do we just blend in with everyone else, all citizen and no saint. Be weird as an act of worship. Be obedient. Be holy. Be a Cultural Exile.

Worship as Spiritual Exiles

That's cultural exile. What about this spiritual exile? Well, 3:6 tells us "*From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.*" Building the altar was just the beginning. They needed a foundation, temple structure, and then the rest of the city infrastructure. In other words, they were worshipping through sacrifice but needed to continue to worship through rebuilding the temple and its foundation. The temple was the center of Jewish worship and culture. It was where the presence of God dwelt. Centuries earlier the glory departed from the temple, a result of their breaking of covenant with him, of not being peculiar and faithful worshipping community. Now they were returning to the land, so naturally they wanted to rebuild the temple and have the glory of God return to the temple. The presence of God among them. So they did. They appointed supervisors, workers, and builders and rebuilt the foundation. But when they completed the foundation there was a mixed response: "*And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid*" (3:11-12). Some shouted for joy while others wept in grief. Trumpets and tears, worshipping and wailing. Why this mixed response? After all, Israel had returned to the land, rebuilt the altar and rebuilt the foundation. They were living obediently. Notice who weeps and

who worships. *But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid*" (3:11-12). The older men, the priests, those who were acquainted with the former foundation and temple, the first house of the Lord, wept. Why? Because it was a far cry from the beauty and magnificence of the first temple. Think about those stories your grandparents told you. "If you could have seen our city then, it was a real community." The former glory does not compare to the newer glory. New and improved is not always improved, though it might be new. The new foundation did not compare with the old foundation. So what's the big deal; it's still a temple. Is this artistic snobbery? Geriatric nostalgia? Well, according to Jeremiah and many other prophets, it was prophesied that Israel would return from exile, bringing cultural tribute, and beautify the house of the Lord. On this Day, the Day of the Lord, YHWH would be their King and Israel would be given a new heart and the Spirit of God to enable them to obey his commands, to never break covenant again, never to be bereft of his glory again (Jer 31; Isa 60-61). In other words, if the temple was not magnificent then this was not that promised Day of the Lord. Some of these men made the connection. The glory was not coming back, at least not now. They were still in exile. A spiritual exile. The Great Day of the Lord was still in the distance. Their hearts still shackled by sin. What would they do? Maybe you are in a similar place. When you look back you see better days, days when you were more promising, more peculiar, more obedient, more holy. Days when you thought you had it all figured out or didn't care if people thought you were weird for loving Jesus. They seem so far away. Your life is a mess. Somehow you've been entangled. You're rebuilding with the world but not without it, you're always a citizen but never an exile. You feel—exiled, distant from the Lord. Your heart imprisoned by indifference, a cold cell of lifeless platitudes and incarcerated better days. What do we do? Where do we hope? Spiritual exile. Can we worship...again? *"But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that he might enlighten our dull eyes (hearts) and grant us a little reviving in our bondage."* (Ezra 9:8) There is hope. There is grace. And there is worship, even in spiritual exile. The hope is *redemptive*; it is redemption. The burnt offerings that were offered morning and evening, morning and evening as a sacrifice for sin, need not be offered any more. Jesus is our great Burnt Offering, our Final Sacrifice (Heb 10:1-18). The burnt offering, unlike all other offerings, was entirely consumed with fire. This total burning reminds us of the complete *destruction* we were due, but Christ was our substitute. He was burned, destroyed for us. The Burnt Offering also symbolizes complete *devotion* to God. Not merely a partial sacrifice but an entire sacrifice to make us into true worshippers, peculiar saints wholly devoted to God. In his death, Jesus gave us his life. So Live! He was burned so we might blaze for him. So Blaze! He was destroyed so that we may be spared. Jesus died to forgive and renew our cold, indifferent, idolatrous hearts. He is the final burnt offering. Our hope is redemptive. We can worship when in exile. God is not standing over you wagging his angry finger; he is standing in front of you with open arms, and the way into his heart-warming, faith-renewing embrace is through Jesus. Let go of your spiritual nostalgia and turn to receive gospel renewal. Stop looking backwards, at your failures and your successes, and look upwards and see him standing there, the one who put an end to all our sin. Austin City Life let us gather as one man, a worshipping community of peculiar saints wholly devoted to Jesus our Sacrifice and our Savior. As a people called out of spiritual exile and into cultural exile, a worshipping and peculiar people.

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