

Wurlitzer Music company began by importing string, woodwind, and brass instruments from Germany.

- Its success caused them to branch out and make organs and pianos, jukeboxes.
- Eventually, Wurlitzer was **bought by Baldwin Piano** company and its distinctiveness disappeared.

Wurlitzer's corporate headquarters and manufacturing was in my hometown.

- During graduate school I worked as a security guard for the shuttered corporate headquarters.

It was a massive, sprawling building complex all on one level. Every room was 100% vacant. Except for one. In the middle of this huge room was a Yamaha Electronic Keyboard that had been taken all apart – piece by piece. It was like the weapon that had killed Wurlitzer.

That electronic keyboard was the future. By the time Wurlitzer switched to electronics, its name was associated with vintage products. How did the once vibrant and entrepreneurial company fail?

They lost sight of their priorities and vision.

Welcome to CIC. We want you to succeed in this life and for eternity.

**Scripture** gives us the same warning: when we lose sight of God-given priorities, we drift.

- Ezra shows us how **God brings His people back**—*not just* to the land, but to the right priorities.

It is so easy to get our priorities wrong. **Remember Esau** who sold his birthright for a meal?

- He probably thought, 'I'm hungry now. What good is a blessing if I die of starvation.'
- It was **foolish to choose a temporary meal over eternal blessings**.

We are to 'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Mt 6:33 NIV).'

Godly priorities point us toward God; whole-hearted worship keeps us there—even in a changing world

## Priorities

*Ezra 1-3*



Ezra's **story reminds us** that God stirs hearts.

- Cyrus, the priests, the people—**none of this happens** *without God moving first.*
- But like us: **the people still had to choose God's will.**

### 1. The Persian Exodus.

'In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, *the Lord fulfilled* the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. *He stirred the heart* of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1 NLT).'

He might be the king, but God's unseen hand moves the heart. 'This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven ... has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. <sup>3</sup> *Any of you who are his people* may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple ... <sup>4</sup> Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2-4 NLT)."'

Wow. This pagan king is not only letting the people go back to Jerusalem, but he is encouraging them to build a Temple. Again, the key point is ...

- 'The Lord fulfilled the prophecy.'
- 'He stirred the heart of Cyrus.'

God stirs the hearts of people to do His will.

Just like Israel plundered the Egyptians before they left Egypt, here their neighbors assisted with offerings.

'Then God *stirred the hearts* of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. <sup>6</sup> And all their neighbors assisted by giving them articles of silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock. They gave them many valuable gifts in addition to all the voluntary offerings (Ezra 1:5-6 NLT).'

Here is the first takeaway from today's message.

Today's Takeaways:

1. We choose whether to follow God's will. Some stayed behind, not wanting to leave their comfort. *Do you want to do God's will?*

The Assyrians and Babylonians **carried the idols of the gods** they defeated back to Babylon.

- But there was **no idol of Yahweh in Jewish** worship, so Nebuchadnezzar carried all the basins, burners, bowls, and other items to Babylon.
- Cyrus wanted to placate the gods of all the nations whom the Assyrians & Babylonians had conquered, so he **returns all the articles** taken from Solomon's Temple.

What happens next is about priorities.

## 2. Priorities.

Imagine arriving in Judah in early summer. No crops were planted. Homes abandoned. Supplies limited.

- Everything in you would say, 'We need shelter and food first.'
- But Ezra tells us the people did something surprising: **they built an altar before they built their homes**. That's priorities.

They **arrived** in late June or early July.

- They have **never seen** this place before.
- It was **too late to plant** crops.
- They only have **what they could carry** or put on a small cart. *Now what?*

Obviously, we would look for **shelter, food**, and where to put the grand piano.

- There are **abandoned homes** because of the deportation.
- They need **repairs** because it has been 70 years.
- They find some **uncultivated crops growing wild** that should sustain us this year. *Now what?*

Long before Jesus said, 'Seek first his kingdom (Mt 6:33 NIV)' Moses received the ten commandments. The first of which states: 'You shall have no other gods before me (Ex 20:3 NLT).'

- Our **number one priority** is to keep God first and guard against any other little gods from taking His place – money, power, influence, beauty.

While I was in graduate school, working as a security guard did not meet all our financial needs. So, I started to look for ministry positions.

On my way home from school one day, I swung a little church to leave a resume. The basement door was open and some old men were working. I could not find a pen, but I did find a red crayon. I jotted a note in crayon and left it with my resume. I did not want to go there.

Meanwhile, the pastor of a mega-church hired me.

- It checked all the boxes: a livable salary, exciting work, and opportunity.
- But it **did not set right in my spirit**, because *God called me to graduate school*.
- The **night before** I was to be introduced at the megachurch, I called the pastor and told him I could not take the position because of God's plan for my life.
- He was mad.

We wound up at the home mission's church, and I made less than I did as a security guard. BUT, because my priorities were right, God met every need. It was the right decision. Paul and Karla became good friends. We saw God do incredible things those six or seven years.

Priorities matter. They shape your future. Do not let the tyranny of the urgent cause you to miss God's will.

Today's Takeaways:

2. We choose whether to follow God's will.
3. Do not let the urgent push out the important.

Jesus taught us to **take the lowest seat** *not* the seat of honor (Lk 18:7-11). Let your gifts and talents make room for you.

Key verses on priorities:

- 'Seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33).'
- 'Where your treasure is, your heart will be also (Lk 12:34).'
- 'You shall have no other god before me (Ex 20:3).'
- 'Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and might (Dt 6:5).'
- "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" ... <sup>39</sup> And ... "Love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 22:37, 39 NIV)."'
- 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Col 3:2 NIV).'

Godly priorities point us toward God; whole-hearted worship keeps us there—even in a changing world

That is what Jeshua the priest did.

### 3. Worship.

'Then Jeshua son of Jehozadak joined his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his family in rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel. They wanted to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, as instructed in the Law of Moses, the man of God.<sup>3</sup> Even though the people were afraid of the local residents, they rebuilt the altar at its old site. Then they began to sacrifice burnt offerings on the altar to the Lord each morning and evening (Ezra 3:2-3 NLT).'

Worship was their **first act of obedience**. For seventy years they had *not* been able to worship with animal sacrifices or celebrate festivals. Jeshua resumes worship that fall.

**The land was very different** than before the exile.

- Only the poorest of the poor remained in Judah (Jer 39:10).
- The land was only about 30% of what it was before.

It would have been so easy to say, 'let's rebuild our homes and farmland. We must eat.'

But Jeshua said, 'Let's build an altar and worship God.'

**The people were a lot different** than before the exile, too.

- The wealthy, educated, and most working people were deported.
- Exile had changed them drastically.

Key changes while in Persia. Because there was no Temple, or sacrifices, or festivals.

- Emphasized the Sabbath, prayer, and confession.<sup>1</sup>
- Emphasized the Torah and small gatherings. This was the likely start of the synagogue system we see today.
- Rejected idolatry. In Persia, there were about 50 temples, and 180 open-air shrines, 1,500 daises for other gods. It repulsed believer of Almighty God. In other words, 'what the prophets could not achieve by their preaching, the trauma of the Babylonian exile accomplished.'<sup>2</sup>

Those **whom God called to return** were a more holy people; committed to living holy lives in a pagan world - **whole hearted** in their worship.

That is why they were **afraid of those** around them.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, 'Ezra and Nehemiah', in Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., 4 1 Chronicles-Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 344.

<sup>2</sup> Yamauchi, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 345.

- **Politically**, they were surrounded: Samaritans were to the north, Idumaeans were to the south, Phoenicians were to the west, and there were geographic boundaries to the east.
- **Spiritually**, they did not want to **mix with people who compromised** their faith with the old Canaanite religion, or who embraced the Persian gods.

Today's Takeaways:

1. We choose whether to follow God's will.
2. Do not let the urgent push out the important.
3. Worship God first – before anything else.

Like Ruth, they chose loyalty over security; loyalty to God over getting along with those who would want them to compromise.

Restoring sacrifices and festivals was a great start, but they were sent to build the Temple.

#### 4. Temple.

'The construction of the Temple of God began in midspring, during the second year after they arrived in Jerusalem. The work force was made up of everyone who had returned from exile, including Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jehozadak and his fellow priests, and all the Levites (Ezra 3:8 NLT).'

This will come to be **known as** the Second Temple, or Zerubbabel's Temple. This was remodeled into Herod's Temple of Jesus' time.

- You will hear in the coming weeks how **construction of this Temple** came to a halt and the prophet Haggai had to rouse them into resuming the construction.

But at this point in the story, they celebrate laying the foundation. 'The priests put on their robes and took their places to blow their trumpets. And the Levites, descendants of Asaph, clashed their cymbals to praise the Lord, just as King David had prescribed. <sup>11</sup> With praise and thanks, they sang this song to the Lord: "He is so good! His faithful love for Israel endures forever!" Then all the people gave a great shout, praising the Lord because the foundation of the Lord's Temple had been laid (Ezra 3:10-11 NLT).'

They are doing God's will. They made worship their first priority.

They are not being sidetracked by their neighbors or by their own need.

Godly priorities point us toward God; whole-hearted worship keeps us there—even in a changing world

Worshipping God is our highest priority, but how we worship can change.

## 5. Change.

‘But many of the older priests, Levites, and other leaders who had seen the first Temple wept aloud when they saw the new Temple’s foundation. The others, however, were shouting for joy. <sup>13</sup>The joyful shouting and weeping mingled together in a loud noise that could be heard far in the distance (Ezra 3:12-13 NLT).’

Some wept over the small foundation. Others shouted for joy. Their worship had changed—and would keep changing. But the heart of worship never changes: **God first.**

For example, their **worship changed in Persia.**

- They could **not practice animal sacrifice** in Persia. So, they focused on the Law and meeting in smaller groups.
- Their worship would **change again when the Romans** destroyed significant parts of the Temple in 70 A.D.
- They would **focus on Torah** reading and keeping the Law.

The same is true for us – worship styles change. They change with culture and technology – because those cultural things are irrelevant. Do not get distracted by new forms of worship.

- We no longer sing antiphonally.
- Gregorian chants are no longer on the top ten lists.
- Pipe organs only have a handful of lovers.

When we started our church in Tokyo, it was painful. We did not know the songs, what the words meant, and the music was bad. In time, we worshipped God in Japanese.

Today’s Takeaways:

1. We choose whether to follow God’s will.
2. Do not let the urgent push out the important.
3. Worship God first – before anything else.
4. Styles change; worship doesn’t.

The prophet **Zechariah** said we to those who mourned the small foundations: ‘who dares despise the day of small things (Zech 4:10 NIV)?’

Friends, let us not get distracted by worship styles – it’s a small thing. Let us keep our compass pointed toward Jesus.

**Haggai**, another post-exile prophet said, 'The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory (Hag 2:9 NLT)!'

If we keep worship of God as a priority we are promised 'an eternal weight of glory (2Co 4:17 NIV).'

Jesus said, 'A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23-24 NIV).'

Ezra has just showed us **how to keep God first**—by choosing His will, worshiping Him before anything else, and refusing to let changing circumstances pull our hearts off course.

**Pray.**