**The Altar**

**(Ezra 3:1-6)**

**Yearly Theme: *“Joy is…”***

**Series Title: *“Joy in Returning Home”***

**August 9th, 2020**

***Something to think about:***

The altar (as associated with the Temple in the Old Testament) was a place of sacrifice for a person or for the people. It represented an act of worship to GOD for the purpose of making atonement for the sins of the people. The *altar of GOD (YAHWEH)* is also a place of worship. It’s a place of surrender and submission to God’s will and ways, and a place of atonement for the sins of the people.

The altar of GOD in the book of Ezra (as we will see today) had been destroyed some 70-years earlier by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar’s rule. Now, the Jewish people, under the authority of the Medo-Persian Emperor, Cyrus, have returned to Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding process, and the first thing they build is the altar of GOD.

Let’s pick up the ongoing story…

***Ezra 3:1-6 (NLT),***

***1  In early autumn, when the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled in Jerusalem with a unified purpose. 2  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. 3  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.***

***4  They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed in the Law, sacrificing the number of burnt offerings specified for each day of the festival. 5  They also offered the regular burnt offerings and the offerings required for the new moon celebrations and the annual festivals as prescribed by the LORD. The people also gave voluntary offerings to the LORD. 6  Fifteen days before the Festival of Shelters began, the priests had begun to sacrifice burnt offerings to the LORD. This was even before they had started to lay the foundation of the LORD’s Temple.***

As I mentioned before, the altar was not only a place for sacrifice, but it was a place of worship. It was a place where the people would admit that they were helpless to save themselves, and willingly submit to the reality that only GOD could. However, the one thing required of the people was a change of heart. The truth is, prideful people cannot be saved, only the humble can come into the presence of GOD with the knowledge that only He can save.

**Key Point: *“God can change the heart of His people.”***

When people’s hearts are redirected to GOD who is able to save, the outflow of human response is the act of worship.

With this in mind, how was GOD able to change the heart of His people during Ezra’s day-and-age, and how is He able to change the heart of His people today? Let’s consider two different ways:

* **God’s punishment along with His blessings can lead to realignment with His purposes.**

*Ezra 3:2-3 (NLT), 2  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. 3  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.*

* **Realignment with God’s purposes requires submission to God’s prescriptions.**

*Ezra 3:4-6 (NLT), 4  They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed in the Law, sacrificing the number of burnt offerings specified for each day of the festival. 5  They also offered the regular burnt offerings and the offerings required for the new moon celebrations and the annual festivals as prescribed by the LORD. The people also gave voluntary offerings to the LORD. 6  Fifteen days before the Festival of Shelters began, the priests had begun to sacrifice burnt offerings to the LORD. This was even before they had started to lay the foundation of the LORD’s Temple.*

***Something to take home:***

Where do you make the most sacrifices in life? Who, or what do you worship? Have you allowed the promptings of God through His still small voice to change you and move you in the direction of His will, His ways, and His purposes for your life? Have you willingly submitted your desires, wants, and hopes to the One who desires, wants, and hopes that you will submit to the freedom He has for you?

The operative word in our key point today is “can.” God *can* change the heart of His people. The *can* is contingent upon your willingness to allow Him to change your heart. Are you willing?

**Key Point: *“God can change the heart of His people.”***