

BaptistWay Bible Series for March 8: Worship is more than place

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How important to God is the place we worship? How important is it to us? A casual survey of recent stories in the Baptist Standard show that place can play an important role in the worship of God, yet real worship can take place anywhere.

In a Jan. 10 article on Baptist historical beginnings, historian Bill Leonard said Baptist founder John Smyth served as pastor of a Puritan Separatist congregation in England that fled to Amsterdam to avoid persecution, worshipping in a bake house owned by Mennonites.

In a "2nd Opinion" column, former missionary to India Robbi Frankovich told of working in urban slums among an indigenous Indian people known as the Banjara Gypsies. "The one Christian family in their midst," she said, "invited us to worship on Sunday on a mat in front of their hut. Out of these small steps of friendship and God's amazing love, wonderful things happened over the years."

And, just prior to President Barack Obama's inauguration, Religion News Service reporter Adelle Banks wondered if the Obama family would worship in a predominantly African-American church in Washington, seeking to return to a congregational style he says "transformed him from a skeptic to a believer."

Christian believers corporately worship in church sanctuaries around the world, but as believers, we also know our ever-present and always holy God can and should be worshipped anywhere and at any time, if we will only

seek communion with him.

Christ alluded to this kind of everyplace worship by every believer when he told the Samaritan woman at the well that “an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem shall you worship the FatherBut an hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be his worshippers” (John 4:21, 23 NASB).

But for the post-exile Jews of Ezra’s time, the temple was the national place of worship of Yahweh and it was the temple that must be rebuilt first. Its importance was paramount to Israel as a people chosen by God and ruled by him. As Solomon declared when he announced he would build the temple, it would be “great; for greater is our God than all the gods” (2 Chronicles 3:5 NASB).

Let’s catch up from last week’s lesson: We studied Ezra 1, which detailed how God worked through King Cyrus of Persia to fulfill prophecy that the Jews would be returned to Judah following their defeat and exile at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Cyrus, in a decree, challenged all of his subjects to aid the Jews’ return to Jerusalem to “rebuild the house of the Lord” (Ezra 1:2).

Our focal passages take place seven months after Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to their promised land. The intervening events of chapter 2 detail a census of the families that have returned from captivity, along with the number of servants, livestock and wealth. Now that the people have been counted, they are preparing to rebuild the Temple by building its foundation, the altar.

Take action for worship to happen

And as we look at our focal passages this week, we will see the importance

of worship calls us to a.) take actions that will encourage worship and to b.) provide opportunities to do so.

In chapter 3's opening verses, we find the work beginning. It's been 50 years since worship through sacrifice has been observed in Jerusalem, and it's evident they are ready to begin. Two action-taking worship leaders, Jeshua, a priest, and his priestly brothers, along with Zerubbabel and his brothers, "arose" and built the altar to offer burnt sacrifices.

Burnt sacrifices were offered in atonement for sin (Leviticus 9:7). It is no coincidence that burnt offerings were to be offered first. It was the Jews' sin that had led to God allowing them to be defeated and enslaved, and an act of atonement was called for. In addition, Tishri, the seventh month of the calendar, was the month when the Feasts of Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles were celebrated (Leviticus 23).

Jeshua and Zerubbabel supervised the setting of the altar. Ezra also mentions that the people were "terrified because of the peoples of the lands" (v. 3), which may have lent them their urgency to rebuild the altar.

So they began continual offerings, even though the surrounding temple had not been built, nor had its foundation even been laid. Why not wait on the walls to come up to begin worship. Perhaps the need to atone for sin was so great, they felt it must be done first before the temple could be built. Perhaps they needed to clean the slate with God before building his temple.

Using the authority given them by Cyrus, they began to import materials for building of the Temple. In verse 10, we come to the laying of the foundation and a commemoration ceremony of the start of the building. And some ceremony it is. Complete with musical instruments and singing, the nation praises God for his love.

Loud worship

Then the people shout as the foundation is set. Not just indiscriminate yelling, the Bible records it as a “great shout” (v. 11) that evokes a tremendous joy for God’s blessings.

Accompanying this amazing noise, though, is the sound of weeping, especially from the older men who had seen the foundation laid for the first temple. Perhaps it was weeping with joy over the opportunity to restore Israel’s future again. Perhaps it was an immense sorrow for the sin that had led to the destruction of the first temple. It was probably both. Second chances should never be treated lightly.

Verse 13 tells us the sound of weeping became indistinguishable from the shouts of joy, but that both combined so that they both could be heard from “far away.”

What a picture of true worship. Could this kind of worship experience occur today? Of course. We have all of the elements: Our God still reigns and has offered us life eternal, reason to shout so loud we can be heard from “far away.” And because of the sin in our lives and those who are lost and separated from the Lord, there is a world’s worth of grief for us to weep over.

Can we, too, experience this amazing picture of worship? If we will take actions that will encourage worship in our personal lives and the lives of others and provide ourselves and others opportunities to do so, absolutely.

Questions to explore

- *To what lengths will you go to worship God and provide opportunity for others to do so?*
- Describe your most memorable worship experience. What did you experience?

- How do your worship experiences differ:
 - In corporate worship at church
 - In a small group of believers, such as in Bible study
 - When you personally worship?
- How are they similar?
- What leads you to joyous worship? Have you worshipped in grief?
- Read Exodus 3:1-5. What does it have to say about places of worship?