

The Right Response to Wrong Situations

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[0 : 00] Hello. It's nice to see all of your faces. What an unexpected joy is to be able to do this on Zoom. Let me just pray before I say anything more.

Father, thank you that we are still able to gather together in this way. We pray that you'd speak to us tonight, that your gospel would be proclaimed, and that your spirit would move in all of our hearts, that we may leave tonight understanding more of you, of your son, and of your love for us.

In your holy name, Father. Amen. Life is difficult. Things are not what they're meant to have been.

There's separation from family and friends and lots of people that we know. And there seems to be a long slog ahead of us. That sounds like it is talking about our life just now, but really that is actually what's going on with the people in Ezra's time.

The remnant, this group of people we learned about last week in Ezra 1 and 2, have returned to Israel from exile. They were released by King Cyrus of Persia to go and build a temple for their gods.

[1 : 18] And they finally made it home, all 42,360 of them. We finished chapter 2 when they had made it back to their own towns. And so we can picture this scene.

They're all standing on the edge of their villages, surveying what was waiting for them. And what they've seen is most likely rubble. 70 years previous, when the Babylonian Empire took over Israel, they destroyed everything.

If you read the end of 2 Chronicles, we see the absolute destruction that was left for Jerusalem. And it's likely all of the towns and villages of Israel suffered a similar fate. Israel had been attacked and destroyed by Babylon because they had turned away from God.

They rebelled against him for so long that their righteous judgment, and God's righteous judgment, was exile and destruction. And they were led off into exile away from the promised lands that he had led them to centuries before.

But now, in Ezra, the exile is over. Some of the Israelites have returned. But they had a much harder time ahead of them than they possibly imagined.

[2 : 28] I think when they left, when God put it on their heart to go home and build a temple for him, they maybe expected it would be easy, it would be nice, it would be a return home. Maybe they were expecting to return to the land of milk and honey as it was when their ancestors first settled.

Instead, when they arrived back, they were met with a much different picture. And a much more difficult future lay ahead of them. Ruins, rubble and wreckage were likely what they were seeing.

The homes of their parents and grandparents had been pillaged and left. They were empty. This is not the situation they wanted to be in. But tonight, we're going to look at how they respond to that situation.

We're going to see what they immediately do in reaction. And then how they react to the beginning of the job they were setting, the beginning of the temple building. So the first thing we're going to look at, and the first thing we see with the remnant, is that they gather together and put their relationship with God before anything else.

They gather together and put their relationship with God before anything else. So the very first thing the remnant do is return to Jerusalem. They all came together, got into Jerusalem, and they spread out to their hometowns.

[3 : 45] And almost straight away, they seem to return to Israel. Verse 1 tells us that they assemble together as one. They've returned home, seen what was left by the Babylonian army of their home villages.

But rather than stay and build their homes, rebuild their towns, fix what they needed to do, they return and gather as one in Jerusalem. Now that as one is more than just gathering as one group.

That phrase, it means that also they gather as one heart. It means they had a unity of purpose for gathering together. That purpose they share is to rebuild the temple.

But before they start rebuilding the temple, they realize they have to focus on something more important than that. They need to do something more than just building something.

So the first thing the remnant do when they return to Jerusalem is they get the relationship right with God. We see this in the very first thing the remnant do. They gather together and then they're led by Joshua, son of Josedach.

[4 : 51] He's likely the leading priest, maybe the high priest of the remnant returning. And there's Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel. He is of the line of David. He is descendant of the kings.

So he is the leader, the governor of these people. And these two men lead them to, as we see in verse 2, build the altar. The first thing they do, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God, build the altar.

Now, this is quite a strange thing for them to do first. You see, the altar, if you aren't aware, was this giant area in the courts of the temple.

So it was outside of the temple itself. And that was where the priests would offer all the sacrifices and offerings to God. So the fact they were building this thing first, it was outside of the temple, it seems a bit backwards.

Their job was to build the building of the temple. So you'd want to start with that. It's kind of like the remnant got back to Jerusalem and decided to landscape the garden before they've even built the house.

[5 : 54] It seems just a bit out of order. So why was it so important to the remnant that they would build the altar first? Well, what the remnant realized is they needed to fix their relationship with God.

And the way the remnant did that was by offering sacrifices. In the first six verses, there are nine mentions of different sacrifices and offerings and different things, festivals they had to do according to the law.

These sacrifices were what they needed to do, especially the burnt offerings were needed to make atonement for the sin of the remnant. Atonement is a fancy way of saying that these sacrifices were needed to remove the guilt of their sin in the eyes of God.

So they'd done bad things. In God's eyes, they were sinful and they needed something to remove that sin. And that's what these burnt offerings did. And so the remnant built the altar and immediately offered these sacrifices exactly as it was written in the law of Moses.

There's a big deal about that in these verses. The remnant understood that their ancestors or even some of these people themselves had been sent into exile because they weren't in right relationship with God.

[7 : 10] So they needed to deal with that before anything else. And it's worth noting just how important it was to these people that they did that first. They were in the rubbles of Jerusalem.

There was no protection. Do you see in verse three? Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation. Now, we know the walls of Jerusalem were gone, completely destroyed.

And they had not built them yet. No, they built the altar first. If you want to see how the building of the walls goes, wait till we get to Nehemiah. But what they do, despite the constant threat and the constant fear of the people around them in the lands, they don't start by building protections.

They don't start by arming themselves. They start by building the altar. They start by working on their relationship with God. That is what matters. It's not setting the right blueprints so the building goes well.

It's not getting the right materials so it looks pretty. And it's not employing the right craftsmen so they can actually build it. That all comes later and is necessary. But what matters to the remnants in this time of danger and uncertainty is that they need to get themselves right with God and put God first.

[8 : 27] Don't we feel all of those things today? We are in a situation that none of us want to be in. We're in a situation of uncertainty. Nothing is as it's meant to be.

2021 was meant to be when things get good again. And here we are 10 days in and that hasn't happened. How did you all react when last week the announcement was made that we were going back into an extremely strict national lockdown?

My first reaction, and I'm sure lots of you here did a similar thing, was to start worrying, stressing, trying to make plans so that things I had in my head would continue to be able to happen according to the rules.

Maybe your first step was like, the kids aren't going to be at school. I need to plan my homeschool lessons. Maybe you realized you couldn't get into the office, so the first thing you did was decide to plan the optimum work from home station.

You got yourself a nice screen and you mouse and your keyboard. You needed to work really well from home. Or maybe the first thing you did was order all of the PPE you could get your hands on. If things are getting worse, I want to be protected.

[9 : 40] Now, all of these things are really important. I'm not saying they don't need done. But what is important is that they come later. When we see what the remnant we're facing, the danger, the uncertainty, and we see how they respond, doesn't that challenge us in these responses?

Our first thought in bad situations should not be, I need to do something. I need to plan something. It needs to be to put our relationship with God first.

Thankfully, today, in 2021 in Glasgow, we don't have to build an altar and we don't have to offer sacrifices to do this. Thanks to Jesus Christ, we are made right with God, with his sacrifice.

Hebrews chapter 10 verse 10 says, We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. His sacrifice is the atonement we needed.

He's taken away all of our guilt and shame and made us holy. We can live every day knowing we are made right with God, thanks to Christ. We don't have to offer burnt offerings like the remnants.

[10 : 51] So what do we do? If that's how the remnant put their relationship first, how do we do that? I've been really challenged by this in the past week, especially on how I prioritize prayer.

I often don't think of doing that until late, like the evening. So say after the announcement, I didn't pray straight away. I didn't think that's what I need to do. It was maybe when I got to bed and I was like, now's the right time to do that.

Instead of trying to figure out what I'm going to do myself, it would have been a much more sensible thing to put God first.

He is bigger than it all. And I can give everything I worry about over to him. We can all do that. There is nothing too big or too worrying for him. And that'll do us all a lot better than worrying or stressing.

Another way, which is one the remnant closely followed as we read in this chapter, is by focusing on what was written. Twice we see that they followed scripture closely and it's called out in the text.

[12 : 02] But the whole passage, if you were to dig into deeper in New Chronicles, you'd see the whole passage is the remnant closely, closely following what has happened before.

And it's the same today. By focusing on what God says to us, by dwelling on what has been written for us, we put him before everything else. Now, neither of these things are new.

I'm sure nobody on this call tonight was like, whoa, prayer and reading the Bible, that's important. I didn't know that. What I want to remind you of is just how important it is that we put those things first.

There's no secret way to grow in a relationship with God, or there's no secret way to put him right. It's doing the everyday things we know of and making the priority the most important thing.

Now, when we face an unexpected, difficult situation, I think it can feel a bit unnatural in the beginning to stop before doing anything else and praying, or to stop and pick up the Bible and read God's word to see what he says to us in it.

[13 : 11] Some might say it's a bit like if you're building a house, stopping to decorate the garden. But that's exactly what Ezra has shown us that the remnant did. They did what didn't make sense.

They stopped and took the time to put God first. And that is what we need to be doing as well. The most important thing for us today is not our planning.

It's not the preparation we can do. It isn't what we do any of the time. The most important thing for us is our relationship with God. So stop, breathe, take some time to ensure that you are in right standing with him.

You're praying to him. You've repented of your sins. And ensure that you're doing all you can for him, despite the situation we face. We need to put our relationship with God first.

The second thing we see in the remnant, the second thing we can focus on with the remnant in this passage, is that the remnant respond to the situation with the feelings they're actually feeling.

[14 : 19] So they build the altar and they sort their relationship with God. They give the sacrifices and that's a continuous thing for them. And then they begin working in the temple. They begin doing what they were told to do.

So they source materials. They organize the manpower. That's what verses seven to nine is all about. Just before they lay the foundations, they get everything they need. And then when that's all done, there's a great celebration.

When you put down that first stone, that cornerstone, there's a huge celebration. The building work has begun. Finally, the temple of God is being made once more. The priests and the Levites find their instruments.

They put on fancy outfits and they make joyful music to the Lord. They sing loudly together and they give thanks for all that is happening. And they shout out, he is good. His love towards Israel endures forever.

And that's how you'd expect the chapter to end, except it doesn't. Something's off. Something's not quite right for these people, this remnant. Not only is there great praise being poured out, but there's great mourning and sadness too.

[15 : 27] Verse 23, look at that with me now. It tells us that the older members of the remnants, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.

Because these older men had seen what the temple used to be, even the foundations of the second temple were causing them to weep and mourn.

The foundations alone made it clear to these men that this was not going to be the same as the first temple. Why was that the case?

I think it's because these men understood that God was not going to be present in this temple. Ezekiel had told them that whilst in exile, the prophet Ezekiel, that was written in exile.

And we read about the glory of God departing the temple. It was missing. And these older men understood that was going to be the case. And so that left them mourning for what had been.

[16 : 38] Now, this sadness leaves a strange taste in our mouth. It's a weirdly strange and negative ending to what is a positive chapter. And I think what's important here is to realize that these emotions are not incompatible with one another.

It was a great thing that the second temple was being built. It was a wonderful thing that the foundations had been laid. But it was a terrible thing to realize what was going to be different between the second temple and the first.

It would have been awful for these men to realize that God's presence would not have been in this new temple. The remnant we're facing are now, but not as it was, duality.

What it means is that some of them were celebrating because, great, this temple is being built now. And the rest of them were saying, they were mourning because they're seeing it. It's not what it was. It's not as good as what it was.

Both of the feelings of joy and grief were real. And the remnant responded rightly by allowing them both to show together. There was such a mix of noise, of joy and weeping, that nobody could tell the difference between them.

[17 : 53] Both these feelings existed together, both the happiness and the sadness. I think that's a wonderful example of what life is like today. Don't we always feel both of these things at once?

There is joy and there is grief. There is happiness and there is sadness. And I think especially today, on this first Sunday in this new lockdown, it's been bad for the past nine months.

Often church has felt like that, like the remnant felt, like it was a now but not as it was time. Maybe we sit at home thinking, if church was like it was in 2019, I would be happy.

But I want to tell you all and remind you all that that isn't the case. Even if you took the very best service St Silas had ever done, best sermon, best worship, best prayers, best everything, then that best service is nothing but a preview of what is going to come next.

You see, we live in a time that is now but not yet. Our church services are not the end product. They are a taster of what it will look like when Jesus returns.

[19 : 09] It's important to note here that the temple and the Jewish celebration at the temple is not the same as our church services. We don't equate those. But the feelings both people are feeling here are similar but not the same.

You see, what the church is on earth is a foretaste of the gathered of all believers, of everyone who is in Christ. And what we will see when Christ returns is that in its perfection.

What church is today is a shadow of what that will be. We can see bits of that future and find joy in them. Even tonight, even on Zoom, it would be easy to think this is Zoom, it's rubbish.

All the faces make me anxious. I don't, the talking's awkward, the pauses are bad. But what it, and that is right, but we feel those feelings when we're in physical church.

When we're in normal times, we have those same times of grief and mourning and weeping and feeling like something's not right. Whether it's the person who's annoyed us, the coffee that's not very nice.

[20 : 19] Whether you're sitting with somebody who's a bit smelly. I don't know what it is, but there's something about that service that just isn't right. But what it does do is point towards what will be. And we can find joy when that song that we sing as a congregation together, we find joy in that.

That is pointing towards when we will all gather together to sing in worship and praise of Christ. So we don't weep and mourn because it used to be better.

That's how the remnant wept and why they wept, and that isn't where we are. Rather, we ache for the return of Christ to make his church perfect. But alongside that, we feel the joy of the small blessings we gain in the church today.

Tonight, we have joy that we have free access to read to his words. We find joy in the fact we are all able to join on Zoom and see each other's faces. And most importantly, we find joy that Christ died for us so we could be transformed more like him every day.

So that the church could be made more in his image every day. These feelings, this grief and this joy do not go as one or the other. But rather, they're both always there in our life.

[21 : 39] We don't have to pick being happy or being sad. No, often in this life, it is both. And that is the right thing to feel so long as the weeping drives us to joy over what will come.

The weeping of how we don't have it yet reminds us of the joy of what is to come. What comes next, which will be the joy of living with Christ forever in a world which was as it was made to be.

There will be a time when everything is as it's meant to be. When all believers of every generation will stand together, will be physically together and we will be allowed to sing.

And in one voice, as one people, with that same unity the remnant faced, we will sing, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

So, brothers and sisters, let's acknowledge these feelings. But let's frame them around the right thing. Not of that now, but not as it was.

[22 : 45] But rather in that now, but not yet. Let's weep as we ache for the longing of our Lord as the things that aren't as they're meant to be. But let's find joy where we can.

Let's find joy that we can sit together and have people in all parts of the world join us on Zoom and rejoice in the word together. As a gathered community of one mind and one goal.

Let's go forth and ensure that we are putting God and our relationship with him first, no matter the situation we face, just like the remnant did. The God we follow is faithful and he will be with us always.

So we need to respond rightly to him, just like the remnant did. Let me pray before we go on to the next part. Father, thank you that you are a faithful God.

You are a God who gathered the remnant out of exile and you are a God who is with us all even today. Father, as we go forward, we ask that your spirit would work in us and that we would be given the self-control and the discipline to put our relationship with you first.

[23 : 51] Help us in the small things to give them over to you in prayer that we might build up to being wholly reliant on you and praying constantly. Give us strength in this lockdown.

Give us energy when Zoom fatigue is going to set in. I ask, Father, that you would make the next time in our groups fruitful as we continue to discuss and think how to apply these things.

I ask all these things in your holy name, Father. Amen.