

Vision Sunday 2023 – True Purpose

Ezra 3:8-13

(Expanded Sermon Notes)

Opening – An interview with Ward Leek: 60 years of God’s Faithfulness

This year, our church is turning 60 years old. Over the last 60 years, we have gone through ups and downs, challenges and successes, and through it all, God has been faithful. This anniversary is not about us. It is about the Lord. The simple truth is that none of this would have been possible without the Lord’s leading, grace, and his faithfulness. Yes, his people have been faithful over the years, but it is the Lord who deserves the praise. Proverbs 21:31 says, “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.” This verse reminds us that without the Lord, we are powerless, but as we cooperate with the Lord and join him on mission, he does great things through us. So what have we seen the Lord do? And how has this church kept its eyes on the Lord over the last 60 years?

To answer those questions, we need to look at the prayer cards that were created for this service. These cards remind of God’s faithfulness to lead us as a church through many different seasons that included multiple buildings and locations, a name change, and key ministry efforts through the years. The reason that we take time to look back and remember is not because we want to over-glamorize the past, but we want to intentionally remember God’s faithfulness so that our trust and confidence is increased in him as we seek to faithfully follow him into the future. What have we seen the Lord do? First, he united the original group of people that planted this church to move forward with a building plan even though they didn’t like the building design. Why? Because the church isn’t a building, it is a group of people who are to follow the Lord and it was the best stewardship decision to not spend more money on new plans. The Lord led this church to plant churches both locally and internationally. The fruit of those churches is fruit that we participate in. God led us through a season of change and transition both in name and location. These are things that split churches. And yes, there were disagreements along the way, but by-in-large, this church remained unified because we have been committed to God’s leading and not merely making sure our preferences were realized. As we look forward as a church and ask the Lord, “What’s next?” we must stay committed to honoring God and staying unified around the mission. The book of Ezra gives us a glimpse at what happens when we prioritize form (our preference) over function (the mission).

1. Identity informs purpose.

a. Who are we?

- i. People of God – The Bible is clear, those who are place the faith in Jesus are now the people of God and they belong to God’s family. This means that their identity is fundamentally changed in Jesus. Paul reminds the church in Corinth of the centrality of their identity change. This was a church that routinely had issues with sin and dysfunction.
 1. **2 Cor 5:17 - ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**
- ii. **The Bible answers the question of “Who am I?” by asking, “Whose am I?”** → I.e., Do you belong to Jesus or the world? (Those are the only two options.)
- iii. The book of Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ends. As prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 44:28), the Persian King Cyrus had sent exiles led by Zerubbabel back to Jerusalem in 538 b.c. (Persia had defeated Babylon in 539.) **Despite opposition from the non-Jewish inhabitants of Judea, and after encouragement by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was rebuilt (515). Then in 458, Ezra led the second of three waves of returning exiles.** By the time Ezra arrived, the people had again fallen into sin. Ezra preached God’s word and the people repented (10:9–17). Ezra succeeded because God’s hand was upon him (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). This book, perhaps written by Ezra, shows God’s power in covenant faithfulness, moving even pagan kings to accomplish his redemptive purposes.¹
 1. The larger perspective of the Ezra and Nehemiah is that the people of God are returning back not only a physical place but also into right relationship with God.
 2. Their identity as the people of God informs what they are to do. → Glorify God.

b. Why are we here?

- i. To glorify God – That is the main purpose of the people of God. It was the main purpose from the beginning in the garden and even through the fall that didn’t change.
 1. If we are created in God’s image, that is, we are to reflect God’s character and nature, and that reflection glorifies him.
- ii. The people constructed the altar and set in motion the restoration of right worship in Jerusalem.
 1. So the first thing to be built was the altar (2), before even the materials were ordered for the Temple (7). Abram had marked his arrival in the land in just such a way, setting up his altar as a bold Amen to the promise (Gen. 12:7). But these settlers were moved as much by fear as by faith: *fear ... because of the peoples of the lands* (3). **This could be taken to mean that they dared not attempt anything so ambitious as a Temple; but in view of verse 7, which sees them putting that work in hand, it is more likely to imply that the threatening situation had brought home to them their need of help, and therefore of that access to God which was promised at the altar.** ‘There’, he had said, ‘I will meet with the people of Israel’ (Exod. 29:43).²

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ezr.

² Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 50–51.

2. Why were they there? → To glorify God and be in relationship with him.
3. Why are we here? → To glorify God and be in relationship with him.
 - a. We cannot let secondary items of our identity become the main thing. In that way we will lose sight of the mission of God and that is the thing we are to be about.

c. What are we to be about?

- i. Our mission – We are called to both work for the Great Commission and work for our church’s specific mission from the Lord.
 1. In fact, when we work out the mission of this local church, it is the unique way God has invited us to join him in the Great Commission.
- ii. **Mission** – Connecting people in life-defining relationships in Christ.
 1. How do we know if we are doing that – corporately & personally?
 - a. Are you enjoying God daily?
 - b. Is the Spirit flowing through you?
 - c. Who are you fishing with?
 - d. Do you have someone(s) to share tough stuff with?
 - e. Are you practicing hospitality with a worn welcome mat?
 - f. How are your investments doing?
 - i. These are questions that get at living purposeful and relationship-oriented lives in Christ.
- iii. Their mission was worship and to do that they needed to restore the Temple.
 1. **V. 7** - To lay the foundation is one meaning, but not the full range, of this single Hebrew word which can cover the whole process of making a structure fit for use—a job which here would include the work of carpenters as well as masons, and which in 2 Chronicles 24:12ff. meant the repair of a building which was by no means in ruins. In verse 10 it obviously describes the first stage of all, but in Haggai 2:18 it marks the resumption of this work after many years’ neglect.³
 2. **In the transaction with Sidon and Tyre there is an echo—perhaps a conscious imitation—of Solomon’s preparations for the first Temple.** He too had had the timber sent by sea to Joppa, and had paid for it with the country’s natural exports of grain, wine and oil (2 Chr. 2:10, 15f.), which could presumably be loaded onto the returning ships. All this was now made possible not only by the gifts recorded in 2:68f. but by the *grant ... from Cyrus* (which is mentioned here for the first time), for the new settlers would not yet have any produce of their own to export. It was a tiny foretaste of the ‘wealth of the nations’ and ‘the glory of Lebanon’ which it was promised would flow in one day ‘to beautify the place of (God’s) sanctuary’ (Isa. 60:11, 13)
 3. Vv. 8-9 – It was fitting, again, that the work should start in *the second month* of the new year, for the first was dominated by the Passover. Besides—and this would hardly have escaped their notice—the second was the month in which Solomon’s Temple had been started (1 Kgs 6:1). The careful planning and recording of the operation are impressive. There was enthusiasm, reflected in the ‘all’ who came forward for the work (8b), but there was strict attention to standards, as is shown by the double mention of *the oversight*: first of *the work*

³ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 51.

(8), secondly of the *workmen* (9). Evidently, the Levites as a whole supervised the work of the laymen, and were themselves directed by their leading families (9).⁴

2. Purpose is a unifier.

a. A word of caution from Erza – Form is not as important as function.

- i. You can have the most beautiful building in the world, and that doesn't mean it is a faithful church.
- ii. You can have every one of your preferences fulfilled ("I would like this...") and that doesn't mean that everyone will agree with you.
- iii. Erza points us to the reality that the heads of the households had given of their time, talents, and treasure, but they missed out on the joy of what the Lord was doing because they missed the purpose through a misplaced sense of identity.
 1. The last two verses have all the unexpectedness of actuality. The spontaneous cry of disappointment, breaking into the celebrations, was a foretaste of much that was to follow. **Haggai would recognize that note and preach against it (Hag. 2:3ff.); Zechariah would have to challenge those who 'despised the day of small things' (Zech. 4:10).** But both those prophets did so with such memorable words that we can be grateful that they had to meet this mood and answer it.⁵
 2. **In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: ² "Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, ³ 'Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? ⁴ Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, ⁵ according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. ⁶ For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. ⁹ The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.' " ⁶ - Hag. 2:3ff**
 3. **⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁹ "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. ¹⁰ For whoever has**

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 51–52.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 53.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Hag 2:1–9.

despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. ⁷ - Zech. 4:10

- b. God has done amazing things through this church over the last 60 years, he has much yet to do for his glory.
 - i. We are not a perfect church.
 - ii. There have been several moments over the last 60 years where we could have split and broken unity.
 - iii. Our healthy future is following the Lord faithfully and not confusing form and function.
 - 1. As a church we have seen God be faithful over and over again. We have watched him lead us through challenges with grace and patience for each other.
 - 2. **Caution – If our growth for the future is merely about form, we will be a people and a place without purpose. That is a tragedy that we should never be swindled into.**
- c. Purpose (function) builds several things in us:
 - i. **Patience** – I am about God’s business in God’s timing.
 - 1. When I focus on the work and mission of God it keeps resetting me that I am not the one in control of what happens or when it happens. That doesn’t excuse me from preparing or a willingness to engage, but it does reframe my expectations.
 - 2. How often for so many of us, it wasn’t that God wasn’t working, it was that he wasn’t working on my timeline? → We grow frustrated with God and with those around us who don’t seem to move on my preferred timeline.
 - ii. **Persistence** – I keep going even when things are hard.
 - 1. There is nothing about the historical account of Ezra and Nehemiah that shows us their work was easy or without challenge. In fact, the very opposite is true. Their work and the context they lived in were filled with immense challenges.
 - 2. Keeping the mission in mind and their ultimate purpose in focus allowed them to grow in persistence.
 - 3. The same happens for us. There is something to sticking in a church where the mission is worthwhile even if my preferences aren’t met. It builds persistence in us and allows us to see God’s clear hand of grace and good work.
 - iii. **Perspective** – It refines and reframes how we see what is happening around us.
 - 1. This is the great tragedy of Ezra 3, there was a whole group that through a wrong perspective missed the work of God.
 - 2. Even when things seem slightly off from my perspective, if I can step back and see the purpose and mission are still in focus, then I am able to reorient my perspective. This is also why we need one another. Too often we can get in a narrow tunnel and think things are far worse than they actually are. We need the voices of others to help us through that.
 - 3. When we commit to being about the mission it transforms our perspectives into God’s perspective.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zec 4:8–10.