

Ezra 3 — The Altar Before the House — Worship Rebuilt on the Old Base, and the Shout That Could Not Be Told from Weeping

Ezra 3: the returned exiles gather 'as one man' to Jerusalem in the seventh month; Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor build the altar first and restore the daily burnt offerings and the Feast of Tabernacles, then lay the foundation of the second temple to trumpets, cymbals, and a shout in which joy and weeping could not be told apart; the return under Cyrus, altar and foundation c. 536 BC (scriptural chronology; the same window in secular reckoning).

A generation earlier, Judah had watched Solomon's temple burn. Nebuchadnezzar's army took the vessels, broke down the walls, and carried the people east to Babylon, and for seventy years the covenant nation lived without an altar in a land not its own. Then Cyrus of Persia issued a decree, and a remnant came home — not the whole nation, a remnant, a caravan of families with a list of names and a longing for a heap of ruins. Ezra 1 and 2 are the paperwork of that return: the decree, the vessels restored, the register of who came back. Ezra 3 is the first thing they do once they arrive.

Hebrew Word Studies

mizbeach (H4196) (מִזְבֵּחַ) — altar — literally, "place of slaughter/sacrifice" vv. 2, 3. The word for altar comes from the verb *zabach*, "to slaughter, to sacrifice" — so *mizbeach* is, at root, "the place where the offering is killed." It is the first structure Noah builds when he steps off the ark onto a cleansed earth (Gen. 8:20), the first thing Abram builds wherever God appears to him (Gen. 12:7–8), and now the first thing the returned remnant builds on the ruined temple mount. Notice the pattern: across scripture, the altar is what a people build when they are starting over. Not walls, not a roof — an altar. It marks the spot where heaven and a humbled people meet, and it is always built on a place of cost, because the offering is the point. The returnees set theirs "upon his bases" (v. 3), the old footings, so that the new worship stands exactly where the old worship stood. There is a straight line from this bare altar in the rubble to the Lord's teaching that reconciliation must come before the gift is even laid down: "leave there thy gift before the altar... first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matt. 5:24). And there is a longer line still to the great and last sacrifice, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8), toward which every morning-and-evening fire on this altar was quietly pointing.

tov (H2896) (טוֹב) — good — sound, pleasant, morally and covenantally good v. 11. *Tov* is the word God speaks over creation seven times in Genesis 1 — "and God saw that it was *good*." It is one of the most ordinary words in Hebrew and one of the deepest. When Israel sings "because he is *good*" at the founding of the temple, they are not paying God a compliment; they are making a confession about the nature of reality itself. The God who called light good and the world good is the same God whose mercy is now rebuilding a ruin. Notice *when* they sing it: not after the temple is finished and gleaming, but at the bare foundation, in a city still in rubble, with hostile neighbors watching. They call God good over a construction site. That is the hardest and truest place to say it. The refrain "he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever" is so central to Israel's worship that it frames whole psalms (Ps. 118, 136), and the Book of Mormon inherits the same conviction: "O how great the goodness of our God" (2 Ne. 9:10), and the running invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8) — a goodness proved not in the absence of trouble but in the mercy that meets us inside it.

chesed (H2617) (חֶסֶד) — mercy, lovingkindness, covenant-loyalty, steadfast love v. 11. If one word carries the theology of the whole Old Testament, it is *chesed*. It is God's covenant faithfulness — the loyal, unbreakable love that keeps its promises even when the other party has broken all of theirs. The KJV renders it "mercy" here, but *chesed* is stronger and warmer than pity; it is love that has bound itself by covenant and will not let go. And look at what these returnees have just lived through: seventy years of exile, the temple burned, the nation broken — the full weight of the covenant curses. If God dealt with them by strict account, they would still be in Babylon. Instead they stand on a new foundation and sing that His *chesed* "endureth for ever." The exile did not exhaust it. That is the astonishing claim: the very people God had disciplined are the people testifying that His covenant-love has no end. The word runs from Exodus, where God proclaims Himself "abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy (*chesed*) for thousands" (Ex. 34:6–7), straight to Lamentations, written in the ashes of the first temple's fall: "It is of the LORD's mercies (*chasdei*) that we are not consumed... great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22–23). The Book of Mormon's whole doctrine of the Atonement leans on the same reality — "his arm of mercy is extended towards them" (Mosiah 16:12), the mercy that "overpowereth justice" (Alma 34:15) — because *chesed* is finally the name for the love that pays what we owe.

yasad (H3245) (יָסַד) — **to found, to lay a foundation, to establish vv. 6, 10, 11, 12.** This is the theme-verb of the chapter, and it beats through these verses like a hammer on stone: the foundation "was not yet laid" (v. 6), "the builders laid the foundation" (v. 10), "the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid" (v. 11), "when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes" (v. 12). *Yasad* means to set the founding course, to fix the base a whole structure will rest upon — and Hebrew loves the word for more than masonry. God "hath *founded* it upon the seas" (Ps. 24:2); by wisdom the LORD "hath *founded* the earth" (Prov. 3:19). A foundation is the small, hidden, unglamorous work that everything visible later depends on — and that is exactly why laying it is worth trumpets and cymbals and a great shout. The people are not celebrating a finished building; they are celebrating a *beginning*, a base to build on, the promise implicit in a first course of stone. Scripture's deepest use of the word points to the one sure foundation: "Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone... he that believeth shall not make haste" (Isa. 28:16), the cornerstone Peter and Paul both name as Christ (1 Pet. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:11). Helaman gives the Nephites the same architecture: "remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer... that ye must build your foundation" (Hel. 5:12). Every foundation laid to shouting in this chapter is a small rehearsal of the Foundation that cannot be moved.

rua / bakah (H7321 / H1058) (רוּא / בָּכָה) — **to raise a shout (of joy or alarm) / to weep, to cry vv. 11–13.** Two verbs collide in these verses and refuse to separate. *Rua* is the great shout — it is what Israel does when the ark comes into the camp (1 Sam. 4:5), when the walls of Jericho fall (Josh. 6:20), the "joyful noise" the Psalms command before the LORD (Ps. 95:1; 100:1). It is a whole-body, whole-congregation roar of triumph. *Bakah* is the plainest word for weeping — it is Hagar lifting up her voice in the wilderness (Gen. 21:16), Joseph falling on his brothers' necks (Gen. 45:14), the exiles by the rivers of Babylon: "there we sat down, yea, we wept (*bakah*), when we remembered Zion" (Ps. 137:1). And here, at the foundation of the second temple, the same people who *wept* in Babylon *shout* in Jerusalem — and some of them do both at once. The Hebrew makes no attempt to referee it; verse 13 simply says the two "noises" could not be told apart. That is the honest anatomy of a redeemed moment: the *bakah* of what the exile cost and the *rua* of what God is restoring, sounding together, "heard afar off." The prophets promised exactly this braided sound would come: "they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isa. 35:10) — but the fleeing is not yet finished at a foundation. At a foundation, they still sound together, and God counts the whole cry as praise.

From the Chapter's Architecture

But there is a deliberate ordering worth naming, because it is the chapter's whole spiritual argument. Everything moves from the inward and the essential toward the outward and the visible, and then it inverts our expectations at the climax. First the congregation is reassembled ("as one man"), then the altar (the means of worship), then the daily offering (the rhythm of worship), then the feast (the seasons of worship), then at last the foundation (the place of worship). Worship is restored from the inside out; the building comes last, not first. And then the climax refuses to be a simple triumph: the foundation everyone had labored toward produces not a clean cheer but a cry in which joy and grief cannot be distinguished. The chapter that began with a unified people ("as one man," v. 1) ends with a people divided down the middle by memory — the young shouting, the old weeping — and yet the two sounds fuse into a single noise heard afar off. Ezra 3 opens on unity of action and closes on unity of sound born out of opposite emotions. That is not a flaw in the structure. That is the structure telling the truth about how God's people actually feel when He starts to rebuild what they lost.