

Why Are You Crying?

Laurie and I were at a wedding a few Saturdays ago.



We have some weddings coming up around here... and that is pretty exciting. Both are in October. Chris Jensen will marry Laci at the end of October. Chris is truly a son of Northshore. He grew up here and is a really important part of the ministry at Northshore. Some of you here today have known Chris all of his life; all of us love Chris... so we are looking forward to the celebrations ahead.

Our son Alex will marry Shannon in the middle of October... so that one is even more personal for me. You saw Alex playing bass this morning and you see him with Shannon, unless she is caring for babies in our nursery (an actual RN that volunteers to serve families in our nursery).

Weddings are fun... and they are a sacred moments as the Church gathers around new families taking this significant step.

So we were at this wedding a few Saturdays ago and it was wonderful. The bride was one of our son Donny's closest friends in high school... the kind of friendship that is so strong that it makes parents into friends of one another. There were lots of friends and it was a spectacular day.

As is often the case, there were little kids in the wedding party as part of the ceremony. That is awesome too... as it reminds the bride and groom that we would like some of those around someday down the road.

Having little kids as part of the ceremony is great, because when it is **good** it is so good. And when it goes **bad**... it is still so good (maybe even better since that is what memories are made of).

Donny was helping out with videography and sound and such, so he relayed a story from behind the scenes. Apparently they were in the throes of taking wedding pictures and at one point there was a bit of an episode with one of the cute little guys. I'm terrible at guessing ages... but I suppose this little guy was four (but he could have been three or five).

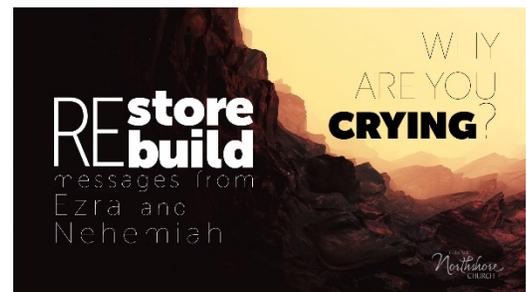
At one point when they were gathering part of the wedding party together for photos, this little guy lost it... he just started to bawl, lots of tears and heaving crying; it was a meltdown. The little guy's father made it over to the scene and asked, "Buddy, why are you crying." To which the young one responded, still heaving and howling, "I don't know!"

Have you ever been there?

Now the adults around could figure it out... it was just too much to handle for the little guy. His systems were overloaded, and sometimes the only thing one can do in such a moment is let it all out.

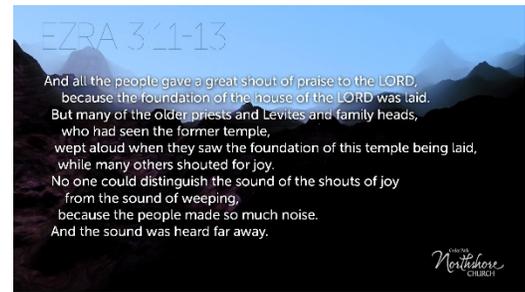
A cute story, I suppose... but what is the point?

I want to start by asking the same question of our text today. We are in chapter 3 of the Old Testament Book of Ezra, the second in a series we started a few weeks ago that will take us through the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.



I want to bring this question to the end of the chapter. Here is what it says:

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.
¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³ No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. ¹



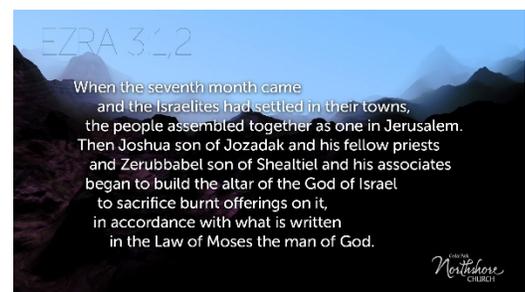
Notice that it doesn't say that anyone was weeping **because** it was so much noise; the weeping was *part of* what was making it so loud.

It puts me in mind of a conversation I remember from a while back. A dear older saint came to me to submit a complaint. She told me that she and her husband almost didn't come into church because when they got out of their car in our parking lot they could hear the sounds of the music, especially the drums and the bass, and they found it quite distressing. I see now that I should have pointed her to this text so that she could see that it was scriptural! The sound **should** be heard far away.

Anyway... so here are "the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple," weeping... and not just a little. I want us to ask them, **"Why are you crying?"**

But first let's set the stage by jumping back to the beginning of the chapter, where it says:

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. ² Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ²



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 3:11–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 3:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

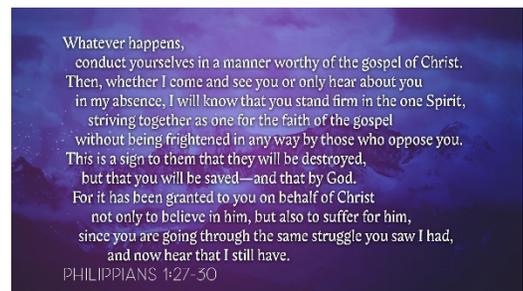
Jerusalem had fallen 50 or so years to Babylon, then ruled by Nebuchadnezzar, who ransacked and leveled the Temple built by Solomon. Nebuchadnezzar carried many of the people off into exile. The Babylonians later fell to the Persians, and King Cyrus determined to rebuild a temple to Israel's God, so he allowed some to return to Jerusalem, under the *sort-of-governor* Zerubbabel.

Once settled, they did well to attend to first-things first; they reestablished **worship** in Jerusalem by building an altar.

Notice that it says that they all “assembled together as one”; there was **unity**... a truly beautiful and powerful thing among the people of God.

It puts me in mind of a verse from the New Testament Book of Philippians (another series that we are currently in as well) where it says, commending the church in Philippi:

²⁷ [Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence,] **I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel**³



Unity is so vitally important; without it, the Body of Christ (the Church) is **impotent**.

From time to time I hear people wonder, and I wonder myself, why spiritual warfare isn't at the forefront in the American Church like it may be in other cultures. Spiritual warfare is real, just as the devil and his demons are real; our enemy seeks to destroy us, for sure. But it often doesn't seem to be obvious (until it is).

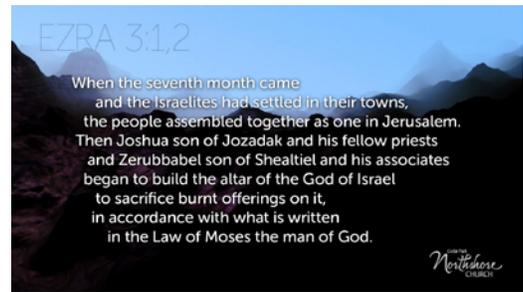
I have a theory. Why would the devil bother to **fight us** if he can simply keep us **fighting among ourselves**? Without unity, the Body of Christ, the Church, is powerless... and not a threat to the devil.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:27). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So there the people of God stood, back in Jerusalem, in unity... and they got to the work of worship; they built an altar.

This represented an important first step in the work of revitalizing the [people] ~~nation's religious life~~, since the altar

was the place of sacrifice, repentance, [and] rededication, ~~and acceptance by God~~. Before the greater work of rebuilding the temple could commence [or Nehemiah's work of securing the City with walls], there was this need felt in the hearts of the people to erect the altar, and to get right with God. This altar principle of cleansing, thanksgiving and renewal occurs again and again in Scripture.⁴



When Noah emerged from the Ark, there was an immense amount of work to be done... but ***first-things first***, Noah build an altar, worshipping and thanking God for deliverance.

When Abram first set foot in the Promised Land, the first thing he did was build **and altar**. In this, Abram was consecrating himself as the foundation builder of the chosen nation, ~~and he was also sending out a clear message to the pagan Canaanites that he worshipped the true and living God~~.⁵

When Elijah came against the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, there was first an altar. In Elijah's case he rebuilt a *neglected* altar, calling all to return to the True God, and turn away from the powerless Baal.

So these who returned to Jerusalem did well to follow the example of those who had come before, prioritizing worship... and worship meant sacrifice, sacrifice at an altar built to God.

Before any foundation was laid for the Temple or the City walls, before one timber was stood up to begin work on a building, worship was reestablished. Worship would be the life and heart the people of God... not a mere building. They had **worship** before a *Temple*.

⁴ Williams, P. (2006). *Opening up Ezra* (p. 40). Leominster: Day One Publications.

⁵ Williams, P. (2006). *Opening up Ezra* (p. 41). Leominster: Day One Publications.

Sadly, it seems, there are many cold buildings, **religious** buildings, all over the world, that lack a heart of worship. God help us to never settle for some religious exterior that is empty of worship... having merely “a form of godliness.”

Here what the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy:

There will be terrible times in the last days. ⁶

Can we see that these are the last days? Doesn't this sound familiar?

² People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴ treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.



We may not be talking about it as we should; nevertheless, **time** will come to an end, and it could be soon... any moment really.

I heard from Jody this week; she said: “I don't think the church knows how close we are to the Lord coming... time is running out... we need to be excited for our future with the Lord.”

I don't know that **she** would say that she was prophesying with her email; but **I** wouldn't say that she wasn't. It is 2018... of course we can prophesy with our smartphones.

We cannot know the day or the hour, but we can interpret the signs and see that we are ever closer to time, as we know it, ending when Jesus *steps back in* to establish His Eternal Kingdom.

We must not be found with mere buildings and a **form of godliness**, but denying its power. Our altars, our hearts, must remain hot with worship.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (2 Ti 3:1–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Once worship was established, and a few years passed, they began work on the Temple:

Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.

⁸ In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak and the rest of the people (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work.⁷

This puts the decree of Cyrus into perspective. You might remember from last time that he said God appointed *him* to build a temple... but all he really did was issue a *permit*. The People of God did the work; and the People of God funded the campaign.

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

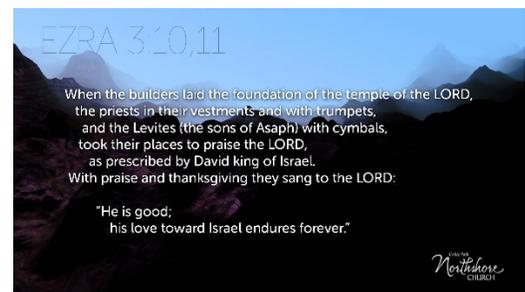
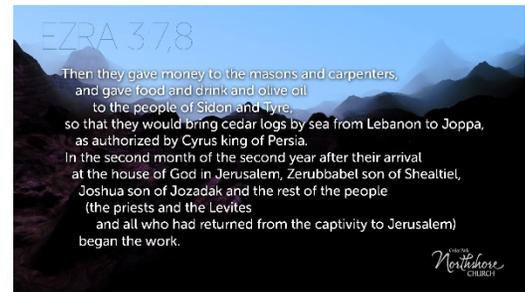
“He is good;
his love toward Israel endures forever.”⁸

This was a *groundbreaking ceremony*. The plans were made and resources were gathered, at least enough to get started. It was a happening. The clergy had on their vestments and there were fanfares with trumpets and cymbals.

And they sang the traditional song:

“He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.”

It was King David song, found in the Psalms. It was the song sang at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple that once occupied that very spot.



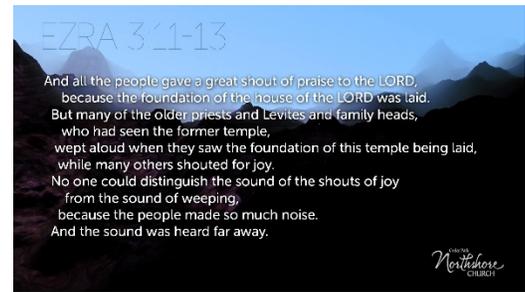
⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 3:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 3:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And then, again,

all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD,
because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads,
who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw
the foundation of this temple being laid⁹



What were they crying about?

We don't have the benefit of many details; we can't simply approach them and ask them, like that little guy's dad. Perhaps if we did, they would reply the same way, "We don't know!" But they were adults... and they likely were not merely overcome with more than they could handle; they knew.

We might give them the benefit of the doubt and determine that their weeping was because they were happy... that these were tears of joy. These were those who had memories of the last days of Solomon's Temple. They were likely among those who wept when they saw it ransacked and destroyed. They had longed for the day, over the passing decades, when they would again see a Temple in Jerusalem... so tears of joy would have been appropriate.

But we have a pretty good clue that these were not tears of joy... and that clue is in a little three letter word: **but**. There were shouts of joy and "praise to the Lord"... **but** it says. The weeping is set in **contrast** to the shouts of joy and praise.

It seems pretty clear that these were tears of **disappointment**. With the foundation laid and the plan underway, it was clear that this Temple would not be nearly as grand, and not even close to as richly adorned as Solomon's Temple. It was clear that this was not a step back to *the good ol' days*; it was terribly disappointing, and they wept.

Allow me to point out a few things that made this weeping fruitless, if not even a bit pitiful.

⁹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 3:11–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

First, whatever they were longing for from the past, it didn't work. We have a way of overrating the past in our nostalgia. The mere building itself, as spectacular as the Temple was, did not protect them... not physically, nor spiritually. The fire in the altars of their hearts went out long before the fire in the Temple. The spectacular resources and building could not keep their hearts closely aligned with God.

Second, whatever they remembered wasn't even genuine, not the original. Nebuchadnezzar and the Persians were not the first to ransack the Temple. Do you know how many generations it took for the Temple to be raided after Solomon. Was it Solomon's great-great-grandsons? Perhaps it was Solomon's grandsons? It was his son. Merely one generation. Solomon's successor couldn't keep it together.

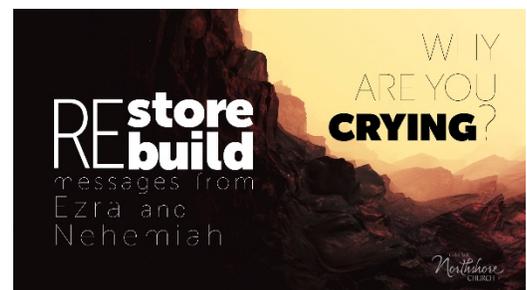
It only took five years into the reign of Rehoboam for he and all the people of Israel to abandon the Lord. So God allowed the Egyptians victories in Israel, depleting the Temple of its treasure. So Rehoboam replaced the items of gold that were carried off with items of bronze... the sort of thing that could pass for gold unless you took a close look.

It is clearly a good thing to respect and learn from the past. We see that in the way that the rebuilders were celebrating according to the Scripture. But it is another thing to long for the *trappings* of the past.

Perhaps they were intent on ***making Jerusalem great again...*** when they should have simply pursued making Jerusalem **great** by serving God in their day, in their way, with the resources they had.

We brought the question to the text; let's ask the question of ourselves. **Why are we crying?**

I'm not saying that we shouldn't cry... actually it is quite the opposite. We **should** cry.



Our mere words and actions *and such* are not enough to express the greatness of our God and the depth of our devotion to Him. Our worship should include tears. But not tears longing for some nostalgic fantasy of *the good ol' days*.

We learn from the past, we respect the past... but these Christian lives have just one direction: **forward**.

There should be tears... but not merely the tears of an overwhelmed child, not knowing **why** we are crying. There should be tears of joy for today, and tears of longing for the days ahead as we pursue God's plan, purpose, and presence.

Those at the *groundbreaking ceremony* for that new Temple were wasting their time longing for the imagined grandeur of their nostalgic past. They should have rather joined the loud worshippers, longing for the future when the glory of the Lord would fill the place... when their worship would be overwhelmed by the presence of God (and that new Temple, by the way, **would** contain the presence of God in the incarnate presence of God: Jesus).

So let's ask ourselves, "Why are we crying?" And let's look to God for gifts of faith and courage to cry for these days, and the days ahead, as we seek to serve Him, and worship Him, experiencing His glory. There should be tears of joy for today, and tears of longing as we pursue God's plan, purpose, and presence.