

## Chapter 5: Repent! Rebuild the Altar! (Ezra 3:1-6)

The returning Israelites began by building an altar to the Lord for sacrifices and re-establishing practices that were laid out in the Mosaic Law. This was done even before the foundation of the Lord's temple had yet been laid. It is interesting to note that God's people didn't just start building a temple, they started with presenting themselves to God and submitting to Him in the ways they knew they should. They went back to the Law of Moses and worshipped God in the way they were directed to do. This is where we begin as well - rebuilding the altar.

What does this mean to rebuild the altar? This side of the cross, the sacrificial blood offering is no longer needed as Jesus was the final blood offering. But there is still the need for repentance. It is important we understand that the full meaning of repent is not completely accomplished unless it is unto salvation. The word repent comes from the Greek word *metanoia* which means "turning from sin." Stopping our understanding at this meaning actually doesn't take us fully to what the Bible means in regards to repent. Biblically speaking, when we look at the word repent and where it is used in the Scriptures, we see that what is being called for is a change of our mind which results in a change of action. Stopping at just turning from sin gets us to the point of resisting sin. But actually understanding that there is a change of our mind brings us to realization that our actions must change as well. It is the fullness of realizing that when God calls for us to repent, He is calling for us to have a heart change.

We can best understand this concept by looking at the beginning of repentance. Upon salvation we repented of our sins and accepted Jesus as our Savior. At that time, we changed our minds in regards to Jesus. In other words, before salvation we didn't consider Him Lord of our lives, but upon salvation we changed our minds and began to consider Him Lord of our lives. This is the work of repentance. This is what Peter was calling for at Pentecost when he preached for the ones present to repent (Acts 2:36-38) and what God is calling for in our lives today.

With this understanding and realization that a change of mind is what happens upon repentance of our sins, we see that as individuals who have accepted salvation we have changed our minds. With that change of mind, comes a call for a change in action. Our Heavenly Father pours out His Spirit upon us and equips us for this change. So when believers see the word repent in this section, what is being called for is the fullness of what repentance means - a change in action. It is a call to live the life of Christ. Peter put it this way, *"Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls . . . Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:8-9, 13-16)*

One of the problems I see with Christians today is that we have done a partial job when it comes to the Great Commission. This is what Jesus said:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "<sup>18</sup>All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20*

We have focused on verse 19 well - "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We have focused on that verse so well that some Christians believe that verse

19 is the Great Commission. I did. But then I examined the Scriptures for myself and saw that Jesus continued the commission in verse 20. That part is what we have neglected. We have neglected to teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded. After generation upon generation upon generation of neglect in doing this you, dear believer, may be a product of this neglect. Is it your fault? No. But now that you know, you have a responsibility to not only seek teaching for yourself, but for other believers as well. This comes with a repentance - a change of mind.

**Believer, you changed your mind, now embrace eternal life!**

When the Israelites returned and rebuilt the altar, they re-established their practices that were given to them by God. When we have returned from our own Babylon we, too, must establish habitual practices that lead us to a heart change and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Christ's sacrifice for our sins does cover all our sins when we accept Him as our Savior. However, Jesus tells us how we should respond to His gift of salvation if we are to grow in Him.

In Luke 10:25-28 Jesus was being tested by an expert of the religious law. He asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. Now, let's stop right here and review what Jesus said was the meaning of eternal life. These are the words He spoke to the Father in prayer,

*"Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God,  
and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent." John 17:3*

With this definition in mind, we see that Jesus is being asked a deeper question than how do I get to go to heaven when I die. So let's continue with our religious law expert's question. I believe he just asked Jesus how to inherit knowing God the Father, the only true God and Jesus Christ. At least, that is the way Jesus heard it, because He is Truth and refers to all things in truth. Let's see how Jesus answered Him. Jesus asked him what the law of Moses said. Hmm . . . looks like Jesus is skirting the question, but is He - is He really!?! Not our Lord. What He is doing is getting the religious leader to go back to what God's Word truly says which was, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind. And, love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told Him that He was correct and that if he did this he would live. Basically, what Jesus was telling Him, and us today, is that if we set our ways toward loving God with all our heart, all our souls, all our strength and all our minds, then we will have eternal life because we will grow in knowing the only true God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. When we accepted Jesus' salvation, we set our minds towards God. Now we have a responsibility in living out that salvation allowing God to renew our minds in Him. (Romans 12:2)

If we look at the fact that to repent means to change your mind and that means you change your action, we see that Jesus is telling us that to truly know the Father and Himself, we must act on what we know. We must change our actions from being those of this world into being those of the Father. This begins by making it a habit to stay in God's Word and in commune with Him. Habits are developed for discipline purposes that lead us to the heart change which changes our actions. This heart change leads us to heart desires. In this case, a desire for God. Once we received Jesus as our Savior, we decided on this plan of action to change our ways and obtain eternal life - truly knowing the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

**Spiritual surgery is required! Ask for it.**

All my life I have heard the term, "be careful what you pray for." These well experienced Christians would testify to how they prayed for one thing and then God gave them what they asked for but not in a preferred manner. When I was a younger Christian I would take this advice and not pray for certain things thinking I don't want to ask for the wrong thing! But as I grew in Christ, I discovered more and more that God ALWAYS gives us what we need. It is our prayers

and attitudes that determine the direction in which He takes us to that need. Especially if there is a lesson we need to learn. God always gives us what we need at the time we need it. That is why I stopped worrying about praying for the wrong thing and started praying for a heart that desires more and more of God. Asking God to perform spiritual surgery on my heart is a way of doing this very thing. What we are asking God to do is remove the things from our hearts that are of no spiritual value. We are asking Him to guide us in changing our ways.

Spiritual surgery needs to be our mindset because we do have sinful ways so ingrained into who we really are that we need the Father to guide us into realizing they need to be removed. When asking God to perform spiritual surgery there is a part we must participate in and that is laying down on the surgical table and making ourselves available for Him to perform the surgery. This can be done by considering the things that are keeping you hostage to your “Babylon.” What is it that you like about living in captivity? Is life easier there? Do you feel like you have less sacrifice to make? Do you not see the need to return to God because the task seems daunting? Ask God to reveal to you the things you desire more than Him. Even after we have eliminated obvious obstacles that hinder our walk with Christ, there are still things that remain which are standing in the way. Our sinful nature is so deep within us that it hides in every nook and cranny of who we are. So we must really open ourselves up to God and allow Him to perform surgery. Take yourself to His throne regularly and ask Him to perform surgery. He will reveal to you the hidden things of your heart.

It’s not going to be pretty! Sin, while it seems pretty on the surface, is a nasty thing in our lives. There are going to be things God reveals to you about yourself that you do not even want to consider. But consider them. Don’t ignore them, don’t excuse them away, really consider them. If God has revealed them to you, then they need to be removed. One of the things I love about the story of Job is that the advice his friends were giving him wasn’t bad advice, it just wasn’t applicable to Job. Zophar told Job in Job 11:13-14, *“If you would direct your heart right and spread out your hand to Him, if iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and do not let wickedness dwell in your tents.”* That is what we are to be doing. Directing our heart right and spreading out our hand to God. In this effort we are allowing God to show us what is in our hand (our lives) that is dwelling in our tents (our heart). Then, put it far away!

### **Our sinful nature will resist.**

In Chapter 8, The War is Real, we will look at our enemy, Satan, and establish how he hinders the process of rebuilding the temple, but there is another enemy we must be aware of and that is the enemy within ourselves - our sinful nature. Let’s not get the idea that the rebuilding of the altar and re-establishing sacrifices to God was easy for the Israelites. We see in Ezra 3:3 that even though the people were afraid of the local residents, they rebuilt the altar at its old site. Then they began to sacrifice burnt offerings on the altar to the Lord each morning and evening. This act of re-establishing the altar and sacrifices were met with feelings of fear and, obviously, they had great reasons to fear. However, they did not allow their feelings of fear to steer them away from what they knew they should be doing for the Lord.

They were afraid of being attacked by these surrounding people. Let’s establish who these people were. They were a mixed group whose ancestors had been conquered by the Assyrians. As a tactic of war, the Assyrians would attempt to prevent nationalistic uprising of conquered people by having foreigners resettle in their land. Therefore, after they had defeated Israel and took her people captive in 722 BC, the Assyrians had forced foreigners to resettle in the Northern Kingdom of Israel’s land. These people would be upset when the Israelites returned because they would view it as a threat to them taking over “their land.” We will see later on in Ezra that these feelings prove true as the Israelites begin to rebuild the temple.

When you begin to rebuild your altar, there will be a need for you to return (or begin for the first time) to studying

God's Word daily and regularly (morning and evening is a good goal). You will need to establish regular ways of observing God's faithfulness. This may mean for many to return to or begin an unceasing prayer habit; attending a Bible teaching church or class. However, we should be aware that the enemy, Satan, will use our sinful nature to steer us away from these things because he is threatened when we rebuild our altar. What we are saying is we are going to act out our salvation and that is not what he wants at all. He is threatened because he has settled in your land and he doesn't want to leave. But we must persevere even though our sinful nature is tempted by the enemy.

### Deepening the Walk

We begin the third chapter of Ezra with a description of the time that had passed after they had settled into their towns. The journey itself from Babylon to Jerusalem would have taken them approximately four months (900 traveling miles) to accomplish.

**Read Ezra 3:1-6.** What did they do after they settled and reached the time for the Feast of Tabernacles?

Did they face this task of returning to the ways of God without obstacles? What was a factor they had to overcome? (v. 3)

Even though the Israelites were faced with the fear of enemies around them, they still continued to persevere in returning to the ways of God. They did so because they saw it as their responsibility as people of God who knew the truth.

**Read Hebrews 10:26-31.** What is a believers responsibility after they have knowledge of the truth? (v. 26)

What are we doing when we deliberately continue to sin? (v. 29)

**Read Galatians 4:3-9.** As little children we were once in bondage to what? In what ways does Jesus release us from this bondage?

When we consider that repent means to change our minds, which changes our actions, we begin to realize that if we are placing Jesus as Lord of our lives, then our actions must follow. However, within ourselves there is a struggle with our sinful nature.

**Read Romans 7:15-25** How does Paul describe this struggle?

What is waging war against our mind? (v. 21-24)

Who is the answer to rescue us from this wretched state? To what should we make our minds enslaved?  
(v. 25)

Once we realize the struggle within ourselves, we see that when we accepted Jesus as our Saviour this repentance - changing of our minds - and making Jesus Lord of our lives comes with the responsibility to enslave our minds to God's law. Renewing our minds with the Mind of Christ.

To really understand the concept God is calling us to here, let's go back to what David told Solomon in regards to building the first temple.

**Read 1 Chronicles 28:9-10.** Who does David tell Solomon to acknowledge and serve? And in what manner?

**Continue Reading 1 Chronicles 28:11-19.** What did David give Solomon?

From Whom did David obtain this information? (v.19)

The Lord gave direction through David to Solomon of how to build the first temple. He also gave direction to Solomon that he should do it with wholehearted devotion and a willing mind for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. When we seek the Lord, He will be found. (1 Chronicles 28:9)

As we consider rebuilding the altar of our temple, we must realize that we have to begin with a wholehearted devotion and willing mind to be renewed by God's Word. As we seek Him, He will be found. He desires that we put on the mind of Christ and allow a renewing of our minds. Changing it into being more Christ-like.

### **Reflect Upon God's Desire:**

Read Psalm 139. God desires that we place ourselves in His Hands and allow Him to mold us into putting on the mind of Christ. A mind that we already have access to. (1 Corinthians 2:16). In what ways does David seek for God in this psalm?

### **Praise, Repent And Yield:**

Lord, I **praise** You for . . .

I **repent** of . . .

I **yield** to You . . .