

Set Your Heart

Worship, the Temple, and the God You Can't Look Away From

Ezra 1 | Ezra 7–8 | Ezra 9–10

THIS WEEK'S THESIS

You can build the temple. You cannot build the heart that worships.

In 2018, I drove from Indiana down to a friend's farm in Tennessee to see a total solar eclipse. I'd studied the cloud cover, picked the right spot, and made the trip because I'd heard it was worth it. At 97 and 98 percent, the sky dimmed and everything went gray. Interesting. Impressive, even. But not life-altering.

Then 100 percent arrived — and it was like a light switch. The corona ringed the moon in neon. The sky turned a mystical purple. The chickens fell asleep. The grasshoppers stopped. And no one in that field looked away. You couldn't. That is what worship is supposed to do to you. Not 97 percent. One hundred.

Worship is setting your heart on what you find most beautiful and compelling — the thing so profound that once you find it, you can't look away. We are all wired for this. We are all looking for something to fix our whole selves on. The question Ezra asks is whether the thing you've set your heart on is worthy of the gaze you're giving it.

God builds the second temple precisely because he knows who we are. He knows that once we truly see him, we need a place to express what we see. And Ezra shows us three things a worshipping life requires: you have to show up, you need leaders who point to God and not themselves, and the person you share your life with will shape what you worship.

MOVEMENT 1 Show Up: The Environment Can't Decide for You

Ezra 1:1–4 | Ezra 3:1–6 | Ezra 6:13–18

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD.” — Ezra 1:2–3

God stirred Cyrus. The exiles returned. The vessels of the temple were restored. Zerubbabel led the construction. The second temple was built and dedicated — and then for sixty years, no one came back to worship in it.

Sixty years. They had the building, the menorah, the table of showbread, all of it restored. The instruments of worship were in place. And the people went home and found other things to do. They had other things to set their hearts on. It could have been vineyards, children, other gods. Not all of it was bad. But none of it was God.

The temple — the screens, the lights, the music, the pews — none of it is worship. Worship is you setting your heart upon God and showing up because of it. C. S. Lewis put it this way: the delight is incomplete until it is expressed. You see the eclipse, and you cannot stop talking about it. You see God, and the response is the same — you have to say something, sing something, show up somewhere and express what you've seen.

The bride is supposed to show up at the wedding. Not catch the livestream and sign the contract later. If the groom is there and your heart is genuinely set on him, you want to be in the room. You want to look at him. The sixty years of silence tells us the people's hearts had simply drifted to lesser things. The building was never the problem.

DISCUSSION

Q1 The temple sat empty for sixty years after it was built — not because of bad intentions, but because hearts had drifted to other things. When you're honest with yourself, what are the things that most consistently pull your attention away from God? Are they bad things, or just other things?

See Matthew 6:19–21; Revelation 3:15–16

Q2 Worship is setting your heart on what you find most beautiful and compelling. What does your actual schedule and attention reveal about what you are worshipping? Where is your gaze fixed most consistently?

See Romans 1:25; Colossians 3:1–2

MOVEMENT 2 Look Up: God-Appointed Leaders Point to God, Not Themselves

Ezra 7:1–5, 10 | Ezra 8:15

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” — Ezra 7:10

After sixty years of an empty temple, God raises up a leader. His name is Ezra, and he is qualified by two things: he is a descendant of Aaron, which establishes his priestly legitimacy, and — more importantly — he had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach it. Those two things together make him God's man.

A spiritual leader can only lead you where his heart is. If his heart is set on God's Word, he will point you there, and God's Word will show you who God is — his patience, his love, his character — until your eyes get big and your heart follows. But a leader whose heart is set on his own platform will, eventually and inevitably, lead you only to himself. You'll realize after a while that you're not looking at God. You're looking at him.

When Ezra gathered the leaders for the journey, he found none of the Levites — the men God had appointed 987 years earlier for exactly this work. They were missing because somewhere along the way, a previous leader had hand-selected his own team instead of trusting God's

appointments. That is what self-appointed leadership does. It surrounds itself with people it chose, not people God chose.

Here's a story I've never quite gotten over. I was in the getting-to-know-you stage at Dallas Theological Seminary — we called it GTKY. We were not official. The reason being is there was another guy. We're the finalists. She was choosing. One afternoon, walking across the parking lot, I see her and wave. I think she's waving back at me until I realize she's looking right past me — at the other guy. I had to turn my head back to see the other guy. She didn't even see me.

It wasn't about me.

That's what God's leader does. Turns your head. Gets you to look at God.

| *A leader worth following is the one who turns your gaze toward God.*

DISCUSSION

Q3 Ezra was affirmed by lineage and by a heart set on God's Word. As you think about the spiritual leaders who have most shaped you, what made them trustworthy? What did their lives actually point you toward?

See Hebrews 13:7; 1 Timothy 3:1–7

Q4 God-appointed leaders turn your eyes toward God; self-appointed leaders draw your eyes toward themselves. Have you experienced both? How did each affect the way you actually worshiped?

See John 3:30; 2 Corinthians 4:5

MOVEMENT 3 Guard Your Heart: Worship Shapes Who You Become

Ezra 9:1–2 | Ezra 10:1–4

“The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations...for they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” — Ezra 9:1–2

After the temple is rebuilt and the worship reform is underway, Ezra receives devastating news. The people — including the leaders — have intermarried with the surrounding peoples, the Canaanites, Hittites, Moabites, Amorites. And Ezra is undone by it. He tears his garments and falls on his face.

I want to be careful here: this is not about ethnicity. The key word in the passage is abominations. Because in that culture, you did not merely marry the person — you married their gods and everything that came with them. The men of Israel knew this. They wanted it. That is why Ezra grieves.

For Israel, the answer was divorce. The apostle Paul later gives different guidance for Christians already in mixed marriages — stay, if the unbeliever is willing. But the underlying principle remains. The most intimate, life-defining relationship you have will shape what you worship. If the person you share your life with gazes in a fundamentally different direction than you, the practical conflicts are not small: How do you raise your children? Where does your money go?

What does a summer look like? What does your moral code look like? Those fights are not about preferences. They are about worship.

Here is the invitation: worship gives you someone worth living for — a reason to work, to marry, to spend your days a certain way. You've tried the other things. They work for a while. But they run out. God never runs out. And when you set your heart on him, your whole life gets reordered around something that lasts.

Whoever you decide to do life with — make sure they're setting their gaze upon the same person you are.

DISCUSSION

Q5 In Ezra's context, marrying outside the community meant marrying into foreign gods and their practices. The person you share your life with shapes what you worship. How has a close relationship — a spouse, a best friend, a community — shaped what you worship, for better or worse?

See 2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 15:33

Q6 Worship gives you someone worth living for — a reason to work, to marry, to spend your days a certain way. Where do you need to let God reorder your life around himself this week? What would that actually look like in practice?

See Psalm 27:4; Colossians 3:23–24