

When God's Glory Shines

Ezra 3:1–13

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Archaeological Moment: The Ancient Oil Lamp

In the ancient world, the primary source of illumination was the oil lamp — a simple clay vessel burning pure olive oil. I have collected a number of these over the years, and I want to light one for you this morning.

The lamp I am holding is the kind of lamp that would have been familiar to any Israelite in the biblical period. Notice the shape, the wick, the way the flame draws on the oil. The Lord commanded Moses in Leviticus 24:2:

“*Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly.*”

This is the kind of lamp Jesus had in mind when He said in Matthew 5:15–16:

“*Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*”

Throughout all of Scripture, this image of a shining light is used to describe God's purpose for His people — a purpose to be light in a dark world, a people who reflect His glory. God's purpose for you is for you to be a light in this world. And light is meant to shine, not to be hidden, not to be placed under a basket. Yet, as we will see this morning in Ezra 3, that is exactly what God's people are doing. They are shining, yes — but out of fear, they are putting a basket over that light.

The Challenge of Coming Home

Over the past two weeks, we have been walking through the early chapters of Ezra, witnessing the miraculous return of the exiles from Babylon. We have seen how God stirred the heart of King Cyrus to issue the decree allowing His people to return home. We have marveled at how

He stirred the hearts of nearly 50,000 exiles to make that dangerous 1,000-mile journey back to Jerusalem. And we have been reminded of the miracle of identity — how these people never forgot who they were, even after seventy years in captivity: not just the children of Israel, but priests, gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants.

But now, in Ezra 3, we encounter something unexpected. These returned exiles — people who knew their identity, who had experienced God’s miraculous provision, who had witnessed His sovereign hand in their return — are living as if they are still in captivity. I am going to call what they are practicing “private obedience,” which is just another way of saying “light under a basket.” They are doing the right things, but doing them quietly, carefully, making sure not to draw attention or make waves.

But they do not stay that way. In Ezra 3, we are also going to witness a transformation — a movement from fearful, private obedience to bold, public faithfulness, from lights hidden under baskets to lights shining brightly. It is a transformation that speaks directly to how we are to live out our faith today.

The year is 536 BC. The first wave of exiles has returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the priest. Imagine what it must have been like to arrive. The city is in ruins. The temple mount is a pile of rubble. And they are not alone — other peoples have moved into the land during their absence, and these “peoples of the lands” are not exactly rolling out the welcome mat. In fact, we will see in Ezra 4 that they will actively oppose any rebuilding efforts. The returned exiles find themselves in a difficult position. They have come home to worship the Lord according to His law — and that is indeed why they have come — but they are surrounded by hostile neighbors. They want to be obedient, but they also want to survive. The tension between faithfulness and fear is what drives the story of Ezra 3.

With this in mind, let us read the first part of our passage together:

“When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.” —
Ezra 3:1–6

The seventh month on the Jewish calendar is the most holy month of the year. According to the law given in Leviticus 23, the first day of the seventh month is the Feast of Trumpets, which begins with a blast of trumpets. Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month — the most holy day of the entire year — is the Day of Atonement, when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies and sprinkles the blood of atonement upon the Ark of the Covenant, making atonement for the whole nation. And on the fifteenth day of that same month begins the Feast of Booths, a weeklong thanksgiving celebration of God’s redemption.

Knowing what the law requires for the seventh month, go back and notice what is missing. Verse 1 tells us the seventh month has come — but the Feast of Trumpets, literally called “the day of blowing the trumpets,” is nowhere to be found. It is supposed to be loud, celebratory, public. Instead, the people simply gather. Quietly.

Then in verse 2, notice who takes action: “Then arose Jeshua... with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel... with his kinsmen.” Just two families — the priest’s family and the governor’s family. They quietly set up the altar and begin offering sacrifices.

Now, do not misunderstand me. What they are doing is good and right. They are following God’s law as best they can. They are being obedient. But notice how they are doing it. Verse 3 tells us: “They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands.” I know the grammatical construction of that sentence is sometimes read to mean they set up the altar because they feared the peoples of the lands — as though fear were their motivation for acting. But I think that is a misreading of the passage. They set up the altar because they seek to obey the Lord according to the law. That is why the people gathered. That is why this is happening in the seventh month. That is why we are told multiple times that they are doing what is written in the Law. They are building the altar because they know it is what they are supposed to do. But they are doing it in such a way as not to offend the peoples of the lands. That is what the fear is referring to. Fear is shaping how they build the altar — just two men and some of their kin — and fear is shaping how they worship. They are doing the right thing, but doing it quietly, carefully, trying not to draw attention, trying not to make waves with their neighbors. Let’s be lights, they seem to be saying — but let’s put a basket over them.

And then we read they kept the Feast of Booths. That is well and good — most of them were probably still living in temporary shelters as returned exiles, since a booth is simply the ancient equivalent of a tent. But did you notice what else is missing? What about the Day of Atonement? Did they not observe the most holy day of the year? There is no mention of it. Technically speaking, they could not perform the full ritual without a temple — there is no Holy of Holies to enter — but they could have held some service of repentance and seeking forgiveness. Instead, we move from the altar straight to the Feast of Booths, a celebration observed largely in the privacy of people’s homes.

Do you see the pattern? Everything they do in these first six verses is characterized by minimal participation — just two families initially — quiet practice with no fanfare or public

celebration, and safe choices that skip the most sacred observances. They are being obedient, but it is a private obedience shaped by fear of what others might think or do.

Here is the problem with that: God did not call His people to blend in with the other nations. He called them to stand out. When the Mosaic covenant was given at Sinai, God told them in Exodus 19:5–6:

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples... and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Their core identity was to be priests — a holy nation, lights that reveal the Lord to the world. But when they hide their faith, when they practice it privately to avoid discomfort or conflict, they are not just being cautious. They are abandoning their very purpose.

The Temptation to Hide Our Faith

And that is exactly where many of us find ourselves today. We face the same temptation those early returnees faced. We want to be obedient to God, but we also want to fit in. We do not want to make waves. We do not want to make anyone uncomfortable. And so many of us practice this same kind of private obedience — we follow God quietly, carefully, making sure our faith does not draw too much attention.

We live in that same tension between faithfulness and fear. The fears that press upon us to hide our faith take many different shapes. At school, the fear of rejection or of seeming strange leads a person to blend in with the crowd. At work, the fear of being passed over or left out leads a person to keep their beliefs carefully concealed. On social media, the fear of what others might think means a person never posts anything that would identify them as a follower of Jesus. In social settings, the fear of not fitting in leads someone to join in with the meanness, crassness, and crudeness of the crowd rather than stand apart. And perhaps most painfully, the fear of conflict keeps a person from ever talking about spiritual things with family or friends — even when the Spirit of God is pressing them to speak.

When we hide our faith, we pay a real price. We miss opportunities to be salt and light in our world. We fail to live up to our identity as God’s people. We rob others of the chance to see God’s goodness through us. And we rob ourselves of the experience of seeing God work through us.

Public Faithfulness Born of Identity

Reading on in our passage, something changes. In Ezra 3:7–13, we witness a transformation — a movement from private obedience to public faithfulness. Let us read:

“So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia. Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers. And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.” — Ezra 3:7–13

Notice how different this is from what came before. Instead of just two families, there are hundreds of people at work — the whole community is involved. And when the foundation is laid, there is a celebration, and a loud one: trumpets, cymbals, singing, and crying out, so loud that the sound was heard far away. The peoples of the lands heard it. There was nothing private about this celebration.

I believe the transformation began when they decided to rebuild the temple. If they are going to rebuild the temple, they cannot remain a hidden people. A temple is, by its very nature, a public statement. It declares to everyone: “This is who we are. This is who we worship. This is what matters most to us.” That decision — to build something so visible, so unmistakably public — gave them the courage to worship openly, to give thanks, to celebrate all that the Lord had done. And when they did, the emotional and spiritual floodgates broke open. Seventy

years of bottled-up prayers, buried hopes, quiet fears, and unspoken longings — everything they had carried in their hearts through exile — came pouring out in worship.

“Many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping.”

Those old men and women who wept that day wept with the weight of deep grief and trauma. Seventy years of sorrow, of silence, of keeping it all together — it all came loose at once. Their weeping carried the pain of what had been destroyed, the loved ones they had lost, the temple that once was. But mingled with that grief was joy — joy that God was still at work: *“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”*

And then there were the young — those born in Babylon, who had never seen Jerusalem, never known the former glory. To them, that newly laid foundation was not a shadow of the past but a glimpse of the future. They shouted with unfiltered joy, with hearts full of wonder and hope. *“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”*

As the sound of worship rose, you could not tell where the weeping ended and the rejoicing began. Grief and joy, memory and promise, what was lost and what was being restored — all of it blended together into one great, holy roar. A sound so full, so raw, so human and so authentic, that it was heard far away. Their light shone.

What is so beautiful to me is that both responses were acts of worship. The tears and the shouts were not competing with each other — they were harmonizing. They belonged together. Grief and joy, memory and hope, loss and restoration — all came together through worship.

This is what authentic, public faith looks like. Real faith is not polished or predictable. It is not everyone responding the same way or feeling the same thing. Authentic faith is real people with real histories bringing their whole selves to an encounter with the living God. And when that happens out in the open — when we stop managing appearances and start responding honestly to God — that is when our light truly shines. That is when people notice. That is when hearts are stirred and lives are changed. Authentic faith is magnetic. When people see genuine faith — faith that includes tears and laughter, doubt and certainty, struggle and celebration — they are drawn to it in ways they never are to polished performances or sanitized spirituality.

A genuine public faith — letting your light shine — does not mean being obnoxious or confrontational. But it also is not the same as compartmentalization. You may know what I mean by that. People who compartmentalize their faith treat it as though it only belongs in certain parts of life — Sunday mornings, private devotions — and then keep it tucked away the rest of the time. Compartmentalized faith says, “God can have this piece, but not that one.” It draws lines between the sacred and the secular, between church life and the rest of life.

A faith that shines is a faith that welcomes Jesus to shape all of you — the public and the private, the spiritual and the practical, the way you speak and the way you spend your money, how you lead at work and how you serve at home. A faith that shines shares what God has done for you when those opportunities arise. It makes decisions based on godly values. It is not afraid to celebrate God’s goodness in ways that others may see. This may look like praying before a meal in a restaurant, or treating a difficult colleague with extraordinary kindness and integrity, or choosing to forgive rather than hold a grudge, or inviting a neighbor to church, or simply being ready to explain the hope you have in Christ.

So let me ask you today: where are you tempted to keep your faith hidden? What fears are shaping the way you follow Jesus? Is it the desire for peer approval? Career concerns? Family pressure? The wish to simply keep the peace? Jesus says:

“Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” —
Matthew 5:15–16

Just like the ancient lamp, your light was made to shine. Not under a basket, but on a stand. Let it shine before others — because the world needs the light of Christ in you.

At the Lord’s Table

Ezra 3 reminds us that God is calling His people to be light in a dark world. This morning, we get to do that through worship. Just as the exiles once gathered around the temple’s foundation in Jerusalem, today we gather around the Lord’s Table together, for all the world to see. Communion is not a private ritual to be done at home. It is something we do together, publicly, as the body of Christ.

In a moment, you will be invited to come forward and receive the bread and the cup. That movement — of your standing, your coming forward, your taking the bread and the cup — is itself a testimony. It is a visible declaration to the world and to yourself: “This is who I am. This is who I worship. This is what matters most to me.”

At this Table, we remember a body given and blood poured out — not alone, not hidden, but openly, for all to see. Jesus’ death was a public death. He did not compartmentalize His obedience, nor did He conceal His love. He gave His whole self. And so, as you come to this Table, bring your whole self — your joy and your sorrow, your confidence and your doubt, your fear and your faith. Let this be a moment for your light to shine.

The table is prepared. Let us remember. Let us rejoice. Let us shine.

Responsive Reading: Psalm 136

When the foundation of the temple was laid in Ezra 3, this is almost certainly the very psalm the congregation recited together in worship that day. I would like for us to repeat it together now.

Leader: Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever.

Leader: Give thanks to the God of gods,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever.

Leader: Give thanks to the Lord of lords,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: to him who alone does great wonders,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: to him who by understanding made the heavens,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: to him who spread out the earth above the waters,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: to him who made the great lights,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: the sun to rule over the day,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: the moon and stars to rule over the night,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: It is he who remembered us in our low estate,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: and rescued us from our foes,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever;

Leader: he who gives food to all flesh,

All: for his steadfast love endures forever.

All: Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.