

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Ezra 6:13-22

Lesson Title: Celebrating with Joy

Introduction

After the Israelites returned to Jerusalem they restored the altar and laid the foundation of the temple. As soon as they determined to rebuild the temple they were met with much opposition (Ezra 4). Those who opposed the rebuilding of the temple were Samaritans, the descendants of the mixed races. They had settled in the land after the capture of the Jews and upon hearing that the Jews were building the temple requested of Zerubbabel to help with the work (Ezra 4:2). Zerubbabel and Jeshua replied, *"Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God..."* (Ezra 4:3). If we are tempted to think that Zerubbabel and Jeshua were being stubborn or acting superior to these Samaritans, we should think twice about such a conclusion. This group of people attempted to worship Jehovah while at the same time worshipping their own gods (2 Kings 17:33). They were clearly enemies of the work of the Lord and as such were not allowed to cooperate with God's people.

While the enemies of God's work can never stop it completely they can slow it down and sometimes hinder its progress. And that is what happened in this case. The rebuilding of the temple came to a halt. But God sent a message through His prophet Haggai: *"In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built. Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste"* (Haggai 1:1-4). God's message worked! About three weeks after Haggai prophesied, work on the temple began again (Haggai 1:14-15).

Once the Jews started rebuilding the temple, political leaders from surrounding regions became concerned (Ezra 5:3-5). *"Tatnai, governor on this side the river..."* (Ezra 5:3) came and inquired as to who gave the orders and authority for God's house and the wall to be built. Ezra 5:6-7 introduces the letter from Tatnai to Darius. The letter repeats the Jewish response to the first of Tatnai's questions: *"Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls?"* (Ezra 5:9). Then, after explaining why the temple needed to be rebuilt in the first place (Ezra 5:11-12), the Jews recap the decree of Cyrus, as found in Ezra 1. This response answers Tatnai's question. Then the Jews go on to explain a bit more about the restoration project, especially with regard to the return of the sacred implements to the temple. Presumably their purpose was to authenticate Cyrus' commitment to the project.

Tatnai's letter ends at the close of Ezra 5 with a recommendation that king Darius conduct *"a search made in the king's treasure house"* (Ezra 5:17). This *"search"* would be evidence for the Jewish claim that Cyrus had given authorization for the work that was being done.

Ezra 6 opens with Darius' response. He followed Tatnai's request and searched for records authorizing the building projects. A "roll...was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes" (Ezra 6:2) that contained information similar to that of Ezra 1. That "roll" gave credibility to the Jewish claim that they had Cyrus' authorization to do the work. Darius made some updates to the original decree and it was evident that he supported the work of God people on the temple. As our lesson text begins the updated authorization of Cyrus through Darius is carried out.

The Decrees Followed (Ezra 6:13-14)

Verse 13

"Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shethar-boznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily."

"Tatnai" was "governor" or overseer of a portion of territory across the Euphrates. "Shethar-boznai" was an individual who function in the role of a stenographer or recorder of official records. Once they received orders from "Darius the king" to let the Jews build in peace, they wasted no time in carrying out his orders (Ezra 6:1-12). It was a serious offense in biblical times to defy or disobey the order of a king. It must have brought great joy and relief to Ezra and the people to hear that these two officials were complying with Darius' decree.

Sometimes God's people must wait for all the pieces to come together in order to proceed with God's work. Things do not often flow smoothly in our undertakings for the Lord. But once everything is in place the work should proceed "speedily." The word "speedily" means "thoroughly, eagerly, and diligently."

Verse 14

"And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia."

"And the elders of the Jews builded..." is a reference to the older men who looked after or overseen the work. The work "prospered" means "went well" or was successful. The building was successful because it was "through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo." The "prophesying" meant that these prophets had a word from God. Every work *for* God must begin with a word *from* God. "Haggai's" stern and powerful messages had served to stir up the people and renew a sense of accountability for the work to be done. God's people need a God appointed leader to encourage them and challenge them to do what God has called them to do.

"Zechariah" was the prophet of visions. His visions while somewhat different than Haggai's preaching also gave hope and encouragement to the people. One particular word from Zechariah which would have brought great hope is: *"Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to*

Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem" (Zechariah 1:16).

"And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel..." emphasizes that the work they were doing was more than just a physical building project. This was a spiritual work that had to be done "according to the commandment of the God of Israel." Obedience is still better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22). They "finished it" meant that the work was done properly from the foundation to the top level of stones. Nothing was left undone. They also did the work "according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia."

In addition to the prophets "Haggai" and "Zechariah," the Holy Spirit records for us the names of three Persian monarchs. "Cyrus" was the one who gave the original order and authority for the Jews to build and "Darius," one of his successors, gave the orders for the work to resume and continue. The mention of "Artaxerxes king of Persia" is most unusual because according to chronological history, "Artaxerxes" will not actually become king of Persia until some 50 years later. He has already been mentioned in Ezra 4:7 which would have also been before his actual reign. One can only speculate as to how a king who has not yet reigned is mentioned as a part of the work of God being completed. Certainly God could show his prophet Ezra the future before it happened. That may have been the case here but it seems the main reason "Artaxerxes" is mentioned is that Ezra is concerned more about the how God did all of this instead of listing everything in chronological order.

"Builded" and "finished it" are words not to be taken lightly. Think of all the projects and plans that have been conceived, started, and never finished in the name of the Lord. God's work, no matter how large or small, *demand*s and *deserves* completion. The words "builded" and "finished it" are also a tribute to God's people, God's prophets, and God's providence in having "Cyrus, Darius," and "Artaxerxes" in power at this particular time.

The Temple Finished and Dedicated (Ezra 6:15-18)

Verse 15

"And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king."

The "third day of the month Adar" is generally agreed upon by scholars to be March 12, 515 BC. If that is accurate that means the temple was completed in a little less than five years after work was resumed on September 21, 520 BC (Haggai 1:14-15). Solomon's Temple, the first temple, took seven years to build (1 Kings 6:38). Four to five years was a short time for a work so large.

This time frame of less than five years is consistent with the temple being finished "in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king." The rebuilding effort had started in "*the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia*" (Ezra 4:24) which would place the completion between four and five years.

Verse 16-18

"And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy, And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses."

These verses record how the people celebrated the dedication of the rebuilt temple. The word "joy" is mentioned once in verse 16 and twice in verse 22. It is the dominate emotion which characterizes this great celebration. Although there is "joy" over the rebuilt temple there is a note of concern when you consider what was "offered" at this celebration. The "hundred bullocks, two hundred rams and four hundred lambs" for a "sin offering," were few compared with the twenty-two thousand oxen, and the one hundred and twenty thousand sheep offered by Solomon at the first temple (2 Chronicles 7:5). But in spite of the amount of the offerings they all spoke of the same Christ who, *"having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself..."* (Colossians 1:20). Things may not have been as great at this dedication as at the first temple dedication, but there was still "joy." More will be said about "joy" in verse 22.

By identifying those who celebrated as "the children of Israel," Ezra is telling us that this occasion was a united celebration. This unity is also evident in the "twelve he goats" that were offered. "Twelve" is the number of all the "tribes of Israel." Some of every "tribe of Israel" returned home from captivity making it possible to regard the re-established people as "Israel." God wants all His people to celebrate with joy.

"Kept the dedication of this house of God" is stated twice in verses 16-17. These words served as a reminder that their past is still connected with their present. What they were celebrating was "the house of God." And although the second temple may be less than the first and a lot of other things different, it was still "the house of God" and they could "joy" and celebrate its completion.

The completion of the temple was followed by the proper placing and arrangement of leaders to serve in the temple. "They set priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God." This arrangement had originally been made by David, and afterwards adopted by Solomon, for the service in the old temple (1 Chronicles 23:6-23; 24:1-19). "As it is written in the book of Moses" is a reference to Numbers 3:6-10 and Numbers 8:6-26 where the offices of "priests" and "Levites" were set in place. But the "courses" themselves were not established until David's time. It will always be important to do the Lord's work the Lord's way.

The Passover Kept (Ezra 6:19-22)

Verse 19

"And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month."

Now that the children of Israel were delivered from Babylonian captivity and had rebuilt the temple it was only right that they celebrate their deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. Every deliverance in the life of God's children is rooted in our deliverance from sin. Matthew Henry said, "Fresh mercies should put us in remembrance of former mercies."

The "passover" which commemorated that night when Israel was redeemed from the hand of Pharaoh was to be kept "upon the fourteenth day of the first month" (Exodus 12:6). The Passover spoke of the death of Christ, our Passover who was offered for us (1 Corinthians 5:7). When they gathered around the Passover, they were gathering around the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, according to the Word of God.

Verse 20-22

"For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves. And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat, And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel."

During King Hezekiah's reign, the priests were not purified and therefore unable to properly minister (2 Chronicles 30:1-3). But now, when the second temple is complete, they were "purified together, all of them were pure." They were committed to keeping themselves ceremonially clean for the work of the Lord. God still demands that his ministers and servants be clean and holy (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4). The purity of God's ministers adds much to their ministry; so does their unity.

"All such as had separated themselves unto them, from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat." Not only were the children of Israel who returned from Babylonian captivity partakers in the Passover, the local people who had separated themselves from the filthiness of sin and fellowship with sinners, joined in the Passover. Although they were strangers and foreigners, they were welcome to eat of the Passover, as fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God. The phrase, "filthiness of the heathen" has reference to the immoral and idolatrous practices of the nations around Judah. Separation from sin is still required if anyone is to biblically worship the Lord.

The Lord had made those who partook of the Passover "joyful." "Joy" denotes "gladness that penetrates the heart" to the point that it reveals itself on the outside. Being able to worship and keep the Passover had given the people cause to rejoice. It was now about twenty years since the foundation of this temple was laid, and we may suppose the old men that then wept at the remembrance of the first temple were most of them dead by this time, so that now there were no tears mingled with their joys. Those that are keeping the Passover are joyful. And those of us who have been redeemed have reason to be thankful.

Passover was followed by "the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy." While "the feast of unleavened bread" and "the Passover" are two separate observances but are both blended together into one observance called "Passover" (Exodus 12:15-20).

The particular occasion they had for "joy" at this time was that God had "turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." While it is difficult to identify the "king of Assyria," most believe Ezra was referring to Darius. In spite of the inability to clearly say who is being referred to, it is very clear that Ezra is reminding the people that everything that had taken place was in fact by the unseen hand of God. All the kings, all the decrees and all the circumstance that had taken place resulting in their return and the rebuilding of the temple was not mere chance. And that was cause for "joy."

Conclusion

The dedication of the new temple brought joy to the hearts of those who worked and witnessed the hand of God. God's people were there along with some strangers who didn't belong. The priests were there and all who had separated themselves from sin. And they all rejoiced as they kept Passover and the feast of unleavened bread.

If the people of Ezra's day can have "joy" over a building built with stones, how much more should God's people today have "joy" because we *"as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5).

God created man to enjoy Him and glorify Him forever. The psalmist said, *"Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore"* (Psalm 16:11). The prophet Isaiah said, *"And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away"* (Isaiah 35:10). We have reason to celebrate now and in the future.

Amen.