Ezra - Commentaries by Edward B. Dennett

The Restoration From Babylon, Restoration From Babylon, The: Ezra 6

Article from https://bibletruthpublishers.com/bible-truth-study-bible/btsb

Ezra 6

The king thus appealed to, ordered the search to be made, and the decree of Cyrus was found (Ezra 6:1-5). The statement of the Jews was thus confirmed in every particular, and even more, for it was now discovered that Cyrus had not only issued his decree for the rebuilding of the temple, but had also ordered that “the expenses be given out of the king’s house,” as well as directed the restoration of the sacred vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away.

Acting then upon this decree, Darius commanded Tatnai, Shetharboznai, and their companions to cease to molest the Jews, and to allow them to continue their work in peace. To faith, God was manifestly working behind the scenes, and using the power of the enemy for the accomplishment of His own purposes, affording another instance of how He causes all things to work together for good to them that love Him. For not only did Darius, on the interposition of their adversaries, confirm the decree of Cyrus, but he also issued another to the effect that all the necessary provision for the house of God should be made at his expense.

He says, “Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king’s goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: that they may offer sacrifices of sweet savors unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons” (Ezra 6:8-10).

“When a man’s ways please the LORD, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Prov. 16:7); and when found, therefore, in the path of His will, he may safely leave his enemies in the Lord’s hands. So these elders of the Jews discovered, and they might have learned the lesson often taught in the Word of God, and ever needed by His people, “They that be with us are more than they that be with them.”

Thus God Himself was the shield of His people while they were engaged in His service; and as long as they were obedient to His Word, and counting upon Him for strength and defense, it was not possible for them to be hindered. In this way Satan once more overreached himself, and was used to further the work that he hated. The apostle wrote in after centuries, “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” (Phil. 1:12). When Satan succeeded in shutting Paul up in prison, he thought he had gained a victory, even as he did in the most notable case of all, when he urged the Jews to demand the crucifixion of their Messiah; but in both instances his apparent success was a most disastrous defeat. We may well, therefore, whatever the opposition or persecution, go calmly forward, courageous in perseverance because it is the Lord’s work on which we are engaged, and He has said, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.”

Darius went still further. He added, “Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. And the God that hath caused His name to dwell there destroy all kings and people that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed” (Ezra 6:11-12). The king thus surrounded the Jews with his authority, and guarded them against further molestation by attaching the penalty of death to interference with their work. And from the language employed, it can scarcely be doubted that Darius himself had some knowledge of “the God of heaven,” for he speaks of Him as causing “His name to dwell there.”

Be this as it may, God disposed his heart in favor of His people and of the work of building His house. The effect of the decree was instantaneous, for we read that Tatnai and his companions “did speedily” according to that which Darius had sent, and forthwith all opposition ceased, and the enemies of the work disappeared from the scene.

Not only had the opposition to the work of the house of God now ceased, but God, in His care for His people, and in response to their faith, had also turned the heart of the king toward them, so that his royal power had now become their shelter and defense. Hence we read:

“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 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” (Ezra 6:14-15).

Before entering upon the particulars of this statement, we may recall to the minds of our readers a striking parallel from the history of the building of the house of God in the New Testament. In connection with the death of Stephen, there arose “a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1).

Soon after, on the visit of Saul, after his conversion (we say, after his conversion—in fact, several years had elapsed—see Galatians 1:1—but we speak of the order of the narrative), to Jerusalem, opposition was once more aroused, and the Grecians went about to slay Saul; and the brethren sent him forth to Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30). The statement follows, “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified [built up]; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied” (Acts 9:31). God had given them rest from persecuting enemies, and they, by His grace, used the opportunity to build themselves up upon their most holy faith. So it was with the elders of the Jews. They builded, and they were encouraged by the comfort of the Holy Spirit as ministered by the

prophets.

It is of importance to notice these two classes—the builders and the prophets. As pointed out when expounding Haggai, these two characters of service can never be confounded. A builder cannot assume the functions of a prophet, nor could a prophet exchange his prophetic mantle for the trowel of the builder. Hence the apostle says, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering” (Rom. 12:6-7). A builder is one whose work is to lay stones upon the foundation— one, that is, who is used of God by preaching or teaching to gather souls, to bring them as living stones to the foundation which is Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 3). A prophet is one who both urges the people forward in their work by the communication of the mind of God, and who also tests everything by His Word. A prophet sets the conscience in the presence of God, maintains therefore the sense of responsibility, and ministers guidance, rebuke, or exhortation according to the need of the moment, speaking as he is moved by the Holy Spirit— now, of course, through the written Word, but guided of the Spirit to the word suited to the case.

Thus the elders of Israel labored, and the prophets prophesied; and it is also recorded that “they prospered through the prophesying,” and so forth. The reason is evident. The Holy Spirit was acting in power, first through the prophets; second, in producing a response to the Word of God as ministered by the prophets in the hearts of the builders. All through the history of the kingdom the nation prospered when they heeded the voices of their prophets; and, on the other hand, every evil consequence flowed from disregard of these heaven-sent admonitions and warnings. Nor is it different in the church of God. Whenever “the builders” are attentive to the prophets who unfold and apply the mind of God as revealed in His Word, they prosper, their work is durable, and they themselves receive blessing.

But if they are careless of divine guidance and monition, and work after their own thoughts, they do but corrupt the work upon which they are engaged, and introduce wood, hay, and stubble in the place of gold, silver, and precious stones. Their work may seem greater, and even more prosperous, to the eye of man; but it remains to be tested at a future day, and the Lord alone is the judge of true prosperity of service.

There was now no further interruption, for they continued their work until they had it finished; and, as the Spirit of God carefully notes, it was finished “according to the commandment [or decree] of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” All was done, therefore, in obedience to God, and by the permission of the earthly power to which, by God’s appointment, they were in subjection. Blessed privilege for these workmen to have so labored, and no small honor, it may be added, for these Gentile monarchs thus to be associated with and to be used for the execution of the purposes of God! No doubt— and the lesson ought not to be passed over—the names of the kings are thus mentioned to show, for one reason, the value God attaches to the principle of obedience to constituted authority.

The only limit, as before pointed out, is where the “powers that be” intrude their claims into the province in which God is supreme. The moment human authority clashes with the claims of God over the soul, it becomes null and void. With this exception (Acts 4:19), the believer has ever to submit to the powers that are ordained of God (Rom. 13).

Then the date on which the house was completed is added. It was on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. That is, there were four years occupied from the recommencement of the building until its completion (Ezra 4:24). How many years had passed away since the foundation was laid cannot be exactly ascertained, inasmuch as the length of the reign of the sovereigns between Cyrus and Darius is not given. It could scarcely have been less, and was probably more, than twenty years. With what long-suffering and patience God had borne with the failures of His people. And now that His purpose is accomplished, and the house builded, with what delight He calls our attention to the labors of His people. Although all had been wrought by His grace, in that same grace He reckons to His people that which He Himself had wrought. And so it ever has been, and will be, as the judgment seat of Christ will abundantly testify. For if any of us receive for the good things we have done in the body, we shall confess to His praise that He Himself was the source and the power of all the good works which He has been pleased to commend.

Avoiding the Point, Ezra: Restoration From Babylon

Jehovah's house being now completed, we have in the next place the account of the dedication.

"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 a 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." vv. 16-18.

It was but natural that they should rejoice at such a moment, for the house of their God was the expression of all the blessings of the covenant in which they stood. And at length, after weary years of failure, difficulties, disappointments, and sorrow, it stood completed before their eyes. It was for this that they had been brought up out of Babylon, and if any of them had sown in tears they now reaped in joy. But their own feebleness, and the poverty of their circumstances, may be seen by contrasting this dedication with that of Solomon's temple. Then the king offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep, besides sheep and oxen which could not be told nor numbered for multitude, which were sacrificed before the ark (2 Chron. 7:5; 5:6). If they had dwelt on this aspect, their joy, as on laying the foundation, might well have been accompanied wit h lamentation and tears. Faith, however, has to do with unseen things, and it could thus recall to the mind of this feeble remnant that Jehovah was no less mighty and no less merciful for them than for Solomon.

The house might be less glorious, and they themselves but poor subjects of a Gentile monarch, but if God was for them, as He was, the resources available to faith were as unbounded as ever. This truth cannot be too deeply impressed on our minds, that Christ remains the same for His people in a day of difficulty as in a season of prosperity. To be in the power of this raises us, as nothing else can, above our circumstances, and give s us courage to press on, whatever the perils of the path.

And faith was in exercise in these children of the captivity, for we find that they offered a sin offering for all Israel. All Israel was not there -only representatives of two or three tribes-but these few were on the ground of the nation before God, and they understood this, and thus included in their sin offering all the tribes of Israel. This is surely a significant lesson for the remnant gathered out in these last days to the

name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They may be but few, and both poor and feeble; but if they enter into the truth of their position, they will include in their hearts and in their prayers all the members of the one body. In spirit they will occupy the ground on which they have been set "with all the saints"; or otherwise they will but add another to the many sects which already divide the Church of God. This becomes easy when faith is in lively exercise, for the faith that on the one hand links itself with God, on the other, links itself with all His people.

They were also characterized at this moment by obedience. They regulated the service of the house-the priests and the Levites—"as it is written in the book of Moses." The path of obedience, whether for the individual or for the assembly, is the only path of blessing. At such a time—just when the house of God was completed-it would have appeared folly to them for man to have intruded his thoughts into the house of God. Their only concern was to know what God had said- what He had directed. So it was when the house of God was built at Pentecost, in the apostolic Church; and so it was when God graciously permitted the revival of the truth of the Church at the beginning of the last century. But what happened after the departure of the apostles has happened again (as also with the remnant, as will be seen in the closing chapter of Ezra); that is, the Word of God as the sole regulator of His house is often displaced by man for his own convenience, or for his own wisdom.

No danger is more subtle than the gradual creeping into the assembly of human thoughts and arrangements in substitution for the Word of God. In effect, although not so intended, it is the deposition of the Lord from His place of supremacy over His people. There never was a time, therefore, when it was more necessary to remember the words of our risen Lord: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Following the dedication of the house, although actually a short interval elapsed, the Passover was observed.

"And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 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 s even 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." vv. 19-22.

The connection is exceedingly beautiful. The house of their God finished, His people celebrate the memorial of their redemption from the land of Egypt, and thus remind themselves, to the praise of Jehovah, of the ground on which they stood, and of the fact that the foundation of all their blessing, of all God's actings in grace toward them, was the blood of the slain lamb. This according to the word of Moses, was "a night to be much observed unto the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt; this is that night of the LORD to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations." Exod. 12:42. Nothing could show more distinctly that these children of the captivity were at this moment in possession of the mind of the Lord than their observance of the Passover. Passing by the glories of the kingdom, they traveled upward until they reached the charter of all they possessed, whether in title or in prospect, and there confessed God as the God of their salvation. Thus they built on what God was for them on the ground of the blood of the passover lamb, and they found in that, as individual souls ever find, a rock which is both immutable and immovable. Their hearts were in this feast; "for," as we read, "the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure." (See Numb. 9:10-14.) They discerned what was due to Him whose feast they kept.

There were others besides themselves who united with them in this observance—those who had "separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel." Whether these were of the few Israelites who had been left behind in the land when their brethren were carried away captive, or whether they were of the heathen, is not mentioned. In Exodus 12 it is said, "There shall no stranger eat thereof"; but it is added, "When a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it." (See also Numb. 9:14.) There were probably therefore "strangers"; and if so, they had been attracted to the children of the captivity by witnessing the divine power that was seen in their separation from evil. Alas! we do not read of any more being thus drawn; rather the children of Israel were drawn afterward to the heathen. It is ever the same with the people of God. When the Spirit of God works in their midst, and when, as a consequence, they walk in any measure according to the nature of their calling, there will always be numbers, constrained by what they behold, seeking their company and fellowship. When, on the other hand, life and power vanish, and are succeeded by coldness and indifference, it is the world that attracts, and not the Church. Hence it is that every movement in the Church of God is most influential at the outset, because then the display of the Spirit's power is more manifest.

After the Passover, they observed according to the Word of God the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy. (See Exodus 13.) This feast followed immediately upon the Passover, and derives its special significance from it. The Apostle has explained this to us. He says, "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." 1 Cor. 5:7, 8. That is, the moment we are redeemed God claims us, and He desires us to respond to His claims by holy lives—separation from evil, and separation unto Himself. The feast lasted seven days; that is, a perfect period-typically, the period of our lives. Thus in the Old as in the New Testament all God's claims upon His people are founded on redemption. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price." This, whatever the change of words, is the unvarying note, and teaches the uniform lesson, everywhere repeated, that since He is holy, we also are to be holy. Leaven must not be found in our dwellings, but we are to keep the feast perpetually with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Nor should these two things ever be disjoined in teaching. If grace—grace unbounded—is displayed in our redemption, grace should be operative in the hearts of the redeemed. If God calls us out of the world, it is not that we should go back to and find our home again in the world. If by His grace we are washed in the precious blood of Christ, He surely looks that we should keep our garments undefiled. If then the memorials of our redemption are sweet to us, if we delight to be found around the Lord's table, to feast upon the emblems of His body and His blood, let us also delight to keep the feast of unleavened bread in testimony to Him who has redeemed us.

It was a time of joy to this poor remnant, for the blessing of God rested upon them, and the heart of the Gentile king was turned toward them. For a season the clouds had disappeared, and they could rest in the sunshine of heavenly and earthly favor.

Here the first part of the book closes; the remaining four chapters are occupied with the mission and work of Ezra.

Courtesy of BibleTruthPublishers.com. Most likely this text has not been proofread. Any suggestions for spelling or punctuation corrections would be warmly received. Please email them to: BTPmail@bibletruthpublishers.com.

Ezra 3

In this section the account is given of the actual laying of the foundation of the temple. An interval of at least seven months must be placed between verses 7 and 8. How it was spent is not revealed. The ostensible ground of the pause before commencing the work of the building would seem from the connection to be waiting for the “cedar trees.” However this might have been, “In the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren, the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD” (Ezra 3:8).

Three things are to be noted in this statement. Whatever the state of the people at large, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the governor and the priest, are foremost in the Lord’s work. Officially at the head, they retain the spiritual lead of the people. Happy is it for the people of God in every age, when their leaders are in the secret of the Lord’s mind, when they can call upon the people to follow them in His service. It is not always so; indeed, not infrequently the first action of the Spirit of God is in the midst of His people, and then the nominal leaders are set aside, or constrained to follow to preserve their place.

Second, the governor and the priest know how to associate the people with themselves in their sacred enterprise. This is the sure mark of spiritual power on their part, as well as a testimony to the fact that God was working with them. Thus far there were no schisms, but all were banded together by the Holy Spirit for one common object. Last, we find that the Levites from twenty years old and upward were commissioned to set forward the work of the house of the Lord. This was evidently a recurrence to the scriptural order arising out of a divine intelligence as to the nature of the work on which they were engaged. (See Num. 4; 1 Chron. 23:24.) The maintenance of God’s order in the work of His house is of the first importance, for it is in fact subjection to His will as expressed in His Word. To man’s thoughts some other method might have seemed preferable; but the only question for the Lord’s servants was, and is, What has He directed? From not perceiving this, there has been perpetual conflict in the church of God between man’s will and the Lord’s; and, alas! the consequence has been that man and man’s thoughts have almost universally usurped the place of Christ and His Word.

The Levites through grace readily entered upon their labors. There were but seventy-four. (The children of Asaph, and the children of the porters (Ezra 2:41-42) were also Levites. All together, therefore, they numbered three hundred and forty-one; but only these seventy-four were available for this special work.) In the wilderness, comprising only those who were “from thirty years old and upward even unto fifty years old,” they numbered “eight thousand and five hundred and fourscore (Num. 4:47-48). When the Lord therefore opened the door of deliverance for them from their Babylonish captivity, very few had cared to avail themselves of it; they had found a home, alas! in the land of their exile, and had forgotten Jerusalem, and ceased to remember Zion. The more precious to the Lord was the fidelity of these seventy-four, and with His presence and blessing they were enough for His service as overseers of the workmen in the house of God. Grace too had wrought in their hearts, for they stood “together,” or, as the margin reads, “as one” in their office. This was true fellowship, and sprang from the fact that they were in communion with the mind of God concerning His house. His objects were theirs, and hence they were not hampered by divided counsels; but “as one” they set forward the workmen. Blessed augury for the success of their enterprise, as well as the evident fruit of the action of the Spirit of God!

The next two verses describe the celebration of the laying of the foundation. “And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because He is good, for His mercy endureth 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” (Ezra 3:10-11). It was a day of great joy and gladness; and as they had gone back to the word, “as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God,” for directions concerning the altar, the sacrifices, and the feasts, so they have recourse to “the ordinance of David king of Israel” for guidance in their service of praise. (Compare 2 Chron. 5:12, 13.)

In the wilderness indeed we do not read of songs of joy; they had sung the song of redemption on the banks of the Red Sea, but even that soon died away on their lips, and was succeeded by the murmurs which were begotten by the hardships and perils of their pilgrim journey. But when in the land the ark had found a resting place, if but for a time, in Zion, David “appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, and to record, and to thank and praise the LORD God of Israel.” Also Asaph and others were to play upon psalteries and harps; Asaph himself was to make a sound with cymbals, while certain priests were to blow with trumpets. “On that day David delivered first this psalm to thank the LORD into the hand of Asaph and his brethren,” in which the words occur, “O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever” (1 Chron. 16). Few and feeble therefore as were the children of Israel who gathered this day on Mount Moriah, they were scrupulously exact in obedience to the Word. Engaged on the Lord’s work, they discerned rightly that in it human thoughts and human wisdom had no place. The Lord, and the Lord alone, must prescribe the method of His house.

Three classes are distinguished in this joyful celebration: there were the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the sons of Asaph with cymbals; and there were outside of these the people who answered the praise they heard with a great shout because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. None but priests were permitted to blow with the sacred trumpets (see Num. 10) for it needs to be in the holy place, in the presence of God, in communion with His mind, to discern when to sound the notes of testimony and praise. So likewise only the sons of Asaph—Levites, “according to the king’s order”—must use the sacred cymbals (1 Chron. 25:6). Thus duly arranged, “they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD,” and the burden of their song was, Jehovah “is good, for His mercy endureth forever toward Israel.”

But there were tears of sorrow mingled with their notes of praise, for the next verse tells us of many of the priests and Levites, and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, those who had seen Solomon’s temple in all its glory and splendor, and as they contrasted it with the house they were now commencing, they wept with a loud voice while the others shouted aloud for joy. And truly the tears of the one and the gladness of the other befitted the circumstances of the day; for those who had seen the glory of the kingdom and the visible cloud of the presence of Jehovah in the first temple, and who were now spectators of the desolations of Jerusalem, and felt their present impoverished

condition, and their feebleness in attempting to build anew the house of the Lord, it was but natural, whatever their gratitude, that grief should predominate. For those, on the other hand, who remembered only their captivity in Babylon, with its deprivation of both altar and temple, it could be nothing but unmingled gratitude and praise.

And who can doubt that both the tears and the gladness were alike acceptable to the Lord, inasmuch as both might equally have been the fruit of the working of His grace in their hearts? Indeed, might not a parallel be found in our own times? When the Lord brought some of His people out of their Babylonish captivity, and they entered anew upon the possession of their priestly privileges of access and worship; when they marked out again from the Word the true ground of the church, and sought in whatever feebleness to occupy it, their hearts, under the power of the Holy Spirit, would of necessity overflow in thanksgiving and praise. Now delivered from sacerdotal assumptions and claims, from the corruptions of the church and of Christianity, and filled with gratitude to Him who in His grace had opened their eyes, smitten off their fetters, and brought them into this wealthy place, they could but shout “aloud for joy.”

On the other hand, when the ancient men who were more deeply instructed in the Word, and who had often pondered the beauty and order of the church in Pentecostal days, compared it with their own feeble efforts to conform themselves according to the directions of the Scriptures, and when they reflected how many of their brethren had been left behind in bondage, sorrow was as appropriate as joy. There could not but be the blending of the two so that, as in the case of the children of Israel, there might have been a difficulty in discerning “the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people.”

Altogether the celebration of laying the foundation of the temple is a beautiful scene. The reader, however, will remark that in accordance with the nature of the book and the position of the people, the record is wholly taken up with what the people did and felt. God is not visibly in the scene, though it is apparent that all is being done for and to Him. In a word, His people are acting in faith, and faith only could bring Him in, and that of necessity was an individual thing. But we are not left without witness of God’s thoughts of His people on this day. If we turn to the book of Zechariah, we shall find that He was watching for His people, and interested in their doings. As yet God had not begun to speak by prophecy to His restored people, either by Haggai or by Zechariah; but when He, some years later, stirred them up and encouraged their hearts by this means, He refers to the laying of the foundation of the temple. Zechariah thus speaks: “The word of the LORD came unto me, saying, The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto you. For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth” (Ezra 4:8-10).

We thus learn how precious to God was the commencement of His house. His heart was set upon it, and He ever rejoices when His people understand His thoughts and, with intelligence of His mind, seek to be found in the path of His will. Zerubbabel had laid the foundation, and he also should finish it; and this should be a sign to the people that the Lord had sent His servant. It might be a day of small things, as measured by the outward eye; but it was a day which contained within itself the promise of the restoration of the kingdom in glory, under the sway of the promised Messiah (see Zech. 6:12-13), and it was the privilege of faith to link itself in this day of small things with the full accomplishment of the purposes of God toward His people.

Moreover, the eyes of the Lord—“those seven,” His perfect intelligence and cognizance of all things, for they are the eyes of the Lord which run to and fro through the whole earth—should rejoice, and see the plummet in the hands of Zerubbabel; that is, when His house should be completed. In the previous chapter these seven eyes are upon the foundation stone. “Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee: for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth My servant the BRANCH. For behold the stone that I have laid before Joshua; upon one stone shall be seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree” (Ezra 3:8-10).

The Scripture reveals to us the full significance in the thoughts of God in the laying of the foundation of His house by the remnant in Jerusalem. It was the assurance of the introduction of Christ, the Branch, who should secure to His people the promised blessing. So looked at, it was God that was doing all, if His people were the instruments. He laid the foundation stone (compare Isa. 28:16), though it were by the hands of Zerubbabel. It was His work, inasmuch as it was the fulfillment of His counsels. His eyes were upon the stone—that stone of grace and blessing—for indeed it was “a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation”—and He Himself would engrave the graving; that is, He would unfold and declare all its divine import, and then He would remove the iniquity of the land in one day. For truly it was through His death and resurrection that Christ would become the Savior of His people from their sins, and thus the foundation stone on which His people should be built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4-5), and on which His people Israel should also rest, and trusting in which they should never be confounded. The consequence, therefore, should be full earthly blessing, every man calling his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree.

Combining the above scriptures with the narrative in Ezra will enable the reader to view the proceedings of that day with a double interest. If in Ezra the Spirit of God would associate us with the thoughts and feelings of the people in connection with their work, in Zechariah He draws us into fellowship with the thoughts of God. The people, it may be, saw but little beyond the promise of the restoration of the temple and its services; but God, with whom a thousand years are as one day, beheld in that day of small things the commencement of His work of grace and power, in virtue of which He would accomplish all His counsels through the advent, death, appearing, and reign of His anointed—His King, whom He would one day establish on His holy hill of Zion.

The Restoration From Babylon, Restoration From Babylon, The: Ezra 3

Ezra 3

At the close of the last chapter we have seen that “all Israel”—the remnant in fact, but taking the place of the nation before God—dwelt in their cities. The commencement of this chapter opens out another remarkable action of the Spirit of God. “And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem” (Ezra 3:1). In the book of Numbers we read, “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, ye shall have a holy convocation; ye shall do no servile work: it is a

day of blowing the trumpets unto you" (Num. 29:1). This feast of trumpets prefigures the restoration of Israel in the last days; and it was therefore with a true spiritual perception that the people assembled themselves in Jerusalem at this time—a perception which, combined with their perfect unity, showed that both they and their leaders had been taught of God, and were under the power of His Word. (Compare Acts 2:1.)

It is but seldom in the history of God's people that such oneness has been displayed, because it can only be produced, not by any general agreement, but by common subjection of all alike to the power of the Spirit through the truth. Twice only has it been seen in the history of the church (see Acts 2:4), and now it will never more be displayed on earth in the church at large, though it might perhaps be exhibited in small companies of the saints. But here, as at Pentecost, the whole congregation was as one man—one will dominating all, and gathering them with irresistible power to one common center—for they were all with one accord in one place in the city on which the mind and heart of God were at that time set.

Having thus assembled, there "stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening" (Ezra 3:2-3). The governor, Zerubbabel, and the priest, Jeshua (aided by their respective "brethren"), united in this blessed work, the combination of the two foreshadowing Him who will be a priest on His throne, the true Melchizedek (see Zech. 6:9-15).

One of their motives in the erection of the altar would seem to have been their felt need of the protection of their God, and faith discerned that this protection would be ensured on the ground of the efficacy of the sacrifices. And what could be more beautiful than this exhibition of confidence in God? They were but a feeble remnant, having no outward means of defense, and surrounded by enemies of every kind; but their very weakness and peril had taught them the precious lesson that God was their refuge and strength. The setting up of the altar was therefore their first object; and as soon as the sweet savor of the burnt offerings ascended up to God, all that He was, as then revealed, was engaged on their behalf.

Moreover, it will be observed that their burnt offerings were presented morning and evening. This was called, at its original institution, the "continual burnt offering" (see Exod. 29:38-46), in virtue of which God had been able to dwell in the midst of His people. And if His presence was no longer in their midst, if He dwelt no longer between the cherubim overshadowing the mercy seat, the efficacy of the burnt offering remained; and as long as faith brought this and presented it to God morning and evening, the people were as surely under the protection of Jehovah as before; as safe as, indeed far safer than when Jerusalem in her glory was surrounded by her fortified walls and bulwarks. They might have therefore adopted the language of one of their psalms: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof" (Psa. 46:1-3).

The altar having been duly ordered, they kept the feast of tabernacles, as it is written (see Lev. 23:33-36), and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required. The feast of tabernacles was a figure of millennial joy (Lev. 23:40). Israel was to rejoice before the Lord their God seven days. To human eyes looking at their desolate condition it might have seemed a mockery for these poor returned captives to be keeping a joyful feast. But faith is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," and thus brings the future into present realization. Moreover, when the soul once stands before God in all the acceptance of Christ, as prefigured by the burnt offering, it has already the certainty of every promised blessing as secured in Him. It was thus open to the believing Israelites who stood around the altar which they had erected amid the ruins of the temple, and as they saw the smoke of the burnt offerings ascend up to heaven, to look onward to the time when all God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be fulfilled, and when the ransomed of the Lord would return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads—when they would obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing would flee away.

They also, we are told, "offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD" (Ezra 3:5). And it will be remarked that the striking feature of all their proceedings was that they offered everything now according to the word of God (Ezra 3:2,4). Whatever they may have practiced in Babylon, whatever had been their traditional rites and customs, all these had been left behind in the scene of their captivity; and now, delivered and brought back, nothing could satisfy them short of the authority of the written Word.

We might therefore characterize the proceedings narrated in this passage as the restoration of scriptural worship. This contains a principle of immense importance, and one that has found an illustration within the memory of some who are still living. [This was written in 1885.] There was a movement some fifty or sixty years ago, as already pointed out in a previous chapter, corresponding largely, as to its spiritual features, with this deliverance from Babylon; and the first object of the saints of that time, as with this remnant, was the restoration of the altar (using this term as a symbol of worship), and the ordering of the assembly in all its meetings according to the written Word. Customs, traditions, observances, all rites and ceremonies, were now tested by the recorded apostolic practices, and such as could not stand the proof were abandoned. It was but a remnant also that were brought out of bondage; but they had light and life in their dwellings and in their gatherings because "as one man" they sought to give the Lord Jesus Christ His rightful place of pre-eminence as Son over His own house. In truth, God owned this movement in a remarkable manner, using it to recall believers in every part of the land to the authority of the written Word, to the knowledge of the fullness of His grace in redemption, to their priestly place and privileges, to the truth of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and to the expectation of the Lord's return. And if the spiritual power of that day has not been maintained, its influence is still felt; and it is not too much to say that the whole church of God is indebted to it, through the sovereign grace and appointment of God, for the exhibition and preservation of the full-orbed truths of Christianity.

Before that time Christianity, in the hands of its public advocates, had degenerated into a mere code of morals, and the consequence was Socinianism and widespread infidelity; whereas since that day, whatever the increasing power of evil, and the rapid development of the signs of the coming apostasy, there has never been wanting a full testimony to the truth of God, and to His Christ as glorified at His right hand. All this proclaims to us, as with a trumpet voice, that the path of obedience to the written Word, in the power of the Spirit, is the path of recovery from error, the secret of all blessing, and the true method of arresting spiritual decline.

The first five verses of this chapter are a delightful record, and might well be studied in connection with the first days of the Church after Pentecost (Acts 2:4). In both places alike individual, as well as collective or corporate, spiritual energy is manifested. Thus it was not only the new moons and the set feasts that are noticed as having been observed, but it is added, and “every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD” (Ezra 3:5). When God’s Spirit is acting in power, He fills the hearts of many of His people to overflowing, and the vessel, not being able to contain the blessing, runs over in thanksgiving and praise to God. This is the secret both of devotedness and worship.

The next two verses close up this period, preparatory to the introduction of another. “From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tire, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 3:6-7). The record of the commencement of offering burnt offerings the first day of the seventh month is made with evident delight. It was grateful to the heart of God to behold the return of His people to Himself, acknowledging His claims, and the only ground of their acceptance. It shows us how particularly He observes the actions of His own, and that He takes pleasure in their approach and worship. Producing these fruits by His grace in their hearts, with the same grace He puts them to their account. (Compare Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:10.)

Then follows, as we judge, a note of sadness—“But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.” The people had responded largely to the grace and goodness of Jehovah in their restoration, they had rejoiced to place themselves under His protection, and had ordered His worship according as it was written in the law of Moses the man of God. But at present they went no further.

Instead of entering into God’s thoughts concerning His house, they rested in the blessings into which they had now been brought. Their spiritual energy had in measure expended itself in their first efforts, and their temptation was now to pause before going farther. Such has ever been the history of all real revivals in the church of God. Take, for example, the mighty work of God, of which Luther was the instrument.

At the outset the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures was the battle-ax with which he waged war upon the corruptions and idolatries of Rome, and God wrought with him and granted a remarkable deliverance. But what followed? Luther, and his followers alike, rested in and feasted upon the fruits of their first victories, and the Reformation subsided into a system of state churches and creeds, out of which all vitality soon departed. (See Rev. 3:1-3.) They failed to go on in communion with the mind of God—they labored for their own objects rather than His—and the consequence w as that blight and decay soon showed themselves; the movement was arrested; and now, today, the very truths which were then recovered are fast fading away (if they have not already gone) from the very places which were the scene of the conflict.

We learn therefore that the safety of God’s people lies in their rising to the height of their calling. He calls us to fellowship with Himself and with His Son Jesus Christ. If, forgetting this, we are satisfied with the enjoyment of our blessings, and lose sight of God’s desires for us, feebleness and decline will soon mark us, whether as individuals or as companies of believers. If, on the other hand, God’s objects are ours, if our minds are set upon what is before Him, He will ever lead us on into fuller intelligence of His purposes of grace, as well as of His ways, and into larger blessedness. He delights in our happiness, and He would ever increase this by associating us in His grace with His own objects and aims.

If, however, the children of Israel did not prosecute the work of the Lord with all diligence, they were not unmindful of the purpose of their restoration; for, as we have seen, they began to make provision for the materials wherewith to build the temple (Ezra 3:7). To understand the circumstances of the remnant in contrast with the glory of the kingdom when Solomon’s temple was built, 1 Kings 5 and 1 Chronicles 28-29 should be read. Together with this, it should be remembered that Jehovah was the same, and that His resources were as available, through the exercise of faith, for this feeble remnant as for David and Solomon in all their power and splendor. True, they were outwardly dependent upon the grant of a Gentile monarch for permission to build, and for the means to secure the necessary materials; but it was God’s work on which they were engaged and, counting upon Him, He would enable them to prosecute it to a successful issue. When believers work with God, their apparent difficulties and obstacles become the servants of faith to bring God in, before whom crooked things are made straight, and rough places plain.

clickbible.org