

# LOOKING AHEAD

It is easy to speak about worshipping God without thinking deeply about what it entails. Our lessons this quarter—from the writings of Isaiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah—enable us to see the essential elements of worship that please God.

Our first unit consists of four lessons from Isaiah. The first of these reveals God's holiness, as seen in Isaiah's vision of the Lord, and the humbling effect it has on the worshipper. The second lesson sees worship grounded in thanksgiving for salvation and for the mighty deeds God has done before all nations. The third, however, pronounces woes on those who engage in meaningless worship while they walk in spiritual darkness. The fourth lesson looks forward to God's glorious new creation, where worship will be perfect.

The second unit, consisting of five lessons from Ezra, gives a glimpse of Israel's renewal of worship after returning from exile. Lesson 5 reveals the small, humble beginnings of this as the altar of sacrifice was restored and religious observances were resumed. This is followed in the sixth lesson by the dedication of the temple foundation, an event that brought a mixed reaction from different generations. The culmination of joyful worship came when the temple was dedicated and the Passover was held (lesson 7).

The eighth lesson introduces another aspect of worship—fasting and praying—as Ezra and his fellow travelers did before going to Jerusalem. Lesson 9 emphasizes worship through giving to further God's work.

Our final unit deals with protection of pure worship as exemplified in Nehemiah and his contemporaries. Lesson 10 introduces us to the Festival of Booths, a joyous harvest feast thanking God for His blessings. Lesson 11, on the other hand, shows the need for solemn confession of sins. The twelfth lesson returns to a joyous occasion—the dedication of the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem. The final lesson ends our series with a serious reminder to preserve a day of rest and worship.

Scripture does not require that Christians follow precisely the worship patterns prescribed for Israel, for types and shadows have yielded to spiritual realities in Christ. However, we still worship the same God, and we are expected to approach Him in the same humble spirit that He required of ancient Israel.

—Robert E. Wenger.

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# Holy, Holy, Holy

## Lesson: Isaiah 6:1-8

Read: Isaiah 6:1-12

TIME: about 739 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

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## *Introduction*

This quarter our lessons examine aspects of worship, by which God's people humbly acknowledge His worthiness and recommit themselves to glorifying Him. Our first unit, consisting of four lessons, is taken from Isaiah's prophecy.

It is fitting that the first of these prophecies emphasizes the Lord's holiness, for without recognizing this primary attribute, we cannot worship Him in an acceptable manner.

We live in surroundings in which sin is commonplace. So it is natural for us to become inured to the seriousness of sin in God's sight. We compare our standards to the norms of others and form a high opinion of ourselves, thinking we are “not as other men.” Then we carry this attitude into our acts of worship and as a result fail to give God the

glory due His holy name.

Isaiah too lived in wicked days in the history of Judah, when the majority fell woefully short of God's laws. Though they went through the motions of worship, the Lord rejected their observances because their hearts were unclean (cf. Isa. 1:2-15). Isaiah could minister to his generation only after he saw God's glory and was cleansed from his sin. His transforming vision is the subject of this week's lesson.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. THE PROPHET'S VISION—Isa. 6:1-4
- II. THE PROPHET'S RESPONSE—Isa. 6:5-8

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE PROPHET'S VISION

**ISA. 6:1** In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

2 Above it stood the seraphims:

each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of

**hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.**

**4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.**

**The time of the vision (Isa. 6:1a).** Isaiah had his vision of the Lord's holiness "in the year that king Uzziah died." This time notation could refer to any time up to a year prior to Uzziah's death or a year after his death. If Isaiah is here recounting his original call to a prophetic ministry, it would have had to occur *before* Uzziah's death (cf. 1:1). If, however, it recounts a second call, it could have taken place afterward.

Whichever it was, the striking thing to Isaiah in recounting it was that the vision occurred at a turning point in Judah's history. King Uzziah (also called Azariah) had a prosperous reign of fifty-two years (II Chron. 26:1-15). He and Jeroboam II of Israel lived in peace and between them expanded the borders of the two kingdoms to approximately the size of Solomon's kingdom (cf. II Kings 14:25-28). Uzziah was also a godly king during much of his reign.

However, becoming unduly proud of his accomplishments, Uzziah later in his reign usurped the place of the priests and tried to burn incense in the temple. The Lord struck him with leprosy, and he had to turn over his authority to Jotham, his son (II Chron. 26:16-21). Thus, the once-mighty king came to an ignominious end. Times of political trouble lay ahead for Judah, for the Assyrians had begun their westward march.

If we are to judge from the first five chapters of Isaiah (as well as from Micah, which was written a little later), the spiritual conditions in Judah were deplorable at this time. The people continued to practice the rituals of their religion, but their abom-

nable behavior showed a lack of real faith. So this was an appropriate time for the Lord to commission Isaiah. An earthly reign was ending; God's wayward people needed to know they were accountable to their heavenly eternal King.

**The nature of the vision (Isa. 6:1b-2).** Isaiah reveals that he saw "the Lord." The Hebrew word here (*Adonai*) places emphasis on God's sovereignty and His power to carry out His will. However, His covenant name, *Yahweh*, occurs in verses 3 and 5. Isaiah was no doubt impressed with the Lord's transcendent power in contrast to the fleeting and limited authority of earthly kings.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he did not actually see His essence, for that is impossible (Exod. 33:20; John 1:18; I John 4:12). Perhaps he saw a humanlike form seated on a throne. The Gospel of John informs us that this was none other than Christ (12:37-41), appearing in His preincarnate glory.

The throne on which He sat was "high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1), and the train of His flowing robe filled the entire temple. Since this was a vision, the temple was probably not Solomon's temple. Rather, it was God's heavenly dwelling, where He was attended by heavenly beings (cf. Ezek. 1:26-28; Rev. 4:1-11).

Above the throne "stood the seraphims" (Isa. 6:2). Here the English plural ending is unnecessary, for "-im" is already the plural in Hebrew. This is the only mention of heavenly attendants called seraphim in the Bible. They are evidently one of several categories of angels. The name comes from a Hebrew word that means "to burn," so they are probably bright and dazzling in appearance.

Isaiah saw the seraphim (whether few or many we do not know) hovering above God's throne. They covered

their faces and feet with their wings in reverence to Him. With the remaining two wings they flew, maintaining their position above the throne. Thus, Isaiah had a glimpse into the heavenly abode of God, where the glory of even the brightest creatures pales before His glory.

**The proclamation of God's holiness (Isa. 6:3-4).** The seraphim cried out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." This probably means that two groups of angels spoke antiphonally to each other. The title they used was "the Lord of hosts," or "Yahweh of armies." It implies that the armies of heaven are constantly at His command.

The word "holy" means "completely set apart." God is separate from and transcendent over all His creation, both in His essence and in His moral purity. He cannot be compared with anything the human mind can conceive, and it is impossible for Him to tolerate sin in His presence (cf. Jas. 1:13; I John 1:5-6). This truth greatly impressed Isaiah, for his prophecy repeatedly refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel" or similar titles (cf. 10:17; 43:15; 49:7).

Why did the seraphim repeat the word three times? Since ancient times, many Bible students have seen this as a reference to the Trinity, ascribing holiness to each Member of the Godhead. It may, indeed, be an Old Testament hint at a truth developed fully only in the New Testament. But we should be cautious not to claim too much for this passage. The repetition was most likely used for emphasis, calling attention to the fullness of God's holiness.

But although He is totally unlike His creation, God has not separated Himself from it: "The whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). The Hebrew more literally reads, "The fullness of all the earth is His glory." This whole earth is

the theater in which the splendor of His attributes is displayed. Those who dwell on it have ample opportunity to see this divine witness (Pss. 19:1-2; 24:1; Rom. 1:18-20).

The awesome scene before Isaiah was enhanced by physical manifestations. First, "the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried" (Isa. 6:4). The Hebrew can be interpreted to indicate that not only the posts but also the sockets in which they were anchored shook. The cause of the shaking was the thunderous declaration of holiness that came from the seraphim.

Second, the temple was filled with smoke. The presence of the Lord is often associated with smoke, for He is "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). At Sinai, Israel saw a mountain that both smoked and quaked (Exod. 19:18). In this case the smoke may have risen from incense on an altar, for we know such an altar was part of Isaiah's vision (Isa. 6:6). Whatever its source, the accumulation of all that Isaiah had seen and heard left him awestruck and humbled.

## THE PROPHET'S RESPONSE

**5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.**

**6 Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar:**

**7 And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.**

**8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.**

**Acknowledging sin (Isa. 6:5).** The heavenly vision brought Isaiah to a devastating examination of himself, and he cried, “Woe is me! for I am undone.” He who would be called to pronounce woes on others (cf. 10:1; 18:1; 31:1) had first to see himself in the same hopeless condition. To say that he was undone meant that he saw himself as cut off and doomed.

Isaiah’s reaction was identical to that of others who got a glimpse of God. Gideon (Judg. 6:22), Samson’s parents (13:22), Job (Job 42:5-6), Simon Peter (Luke 5:8), Paul (Acts 9:6), and John (Rev. 1:17) all were stricken with fear as they saw their sin laid bare before Him.

Isaiah was especially mortified that he was “a man of unclean lips,” who lived “in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5). He had just heard the seraphim proclaiming God’s holiness, and he sensed he ought to be doing the same. But his sinfulness made him unfit to do so. His lips were unclean because his heart was unclean (cf. Matt. 15:18-20). The same was true of the entire nation, and thus their acts of worship were abominable to God (cf. Isa. 1:10-15).

Isaiah was smitten with guilt because he had a glimpse of the King, the Lord of Hosts. Uzziah and Jotham were Judean kings, but they were nothing in comparison to the splendor of Yahweh, the *real* King of Israel. And having seen Him, Isaiah could only contrast his own moral nakedness and that of his people.

It is possible for us as God’s people today to have unclean lips in God’s sight. Through our lips we may bring forth filth, profanity, gossip, hatred, and lies. But even if we avoid these, our very prayers and expressions of worship may be unclean to Him because our hearts are insincere. And we may remain unaware of this because we have ignored the

Bible, God’s revelation of Himself. A mere glimpse of His holiness should bring us to our knees.

**Receiving cleansing (Isa. 6:6-7).** Isaiah expected to die because of his sin. But God had a better alternative—He would cleanse him and make him useful in prophesying to his own people. Though Isaiah likened his sin to the sin of his people (vs. 5), his life was probably not as degraded as most of theirs were. But he willingly took his place with them. Seeing the holy God left no room for boasting.

The Lord responded by sending one of the seraphim to cleanse him. He came to Isaiah carrying a burning coal that he had picked up from the altar with a pair of tongs. If this was indeed a piece of coal, it was not the mineral we know today but charcoal made from wood through a process of partial oxidation.

But the Hebrew word often refers to a hot stone. Such heated stones were used on the altar of incense, and the seraph took one and brought it to Isaiah. It is not necessary to assume that he handled the stone directly; rather, he may have held the tongs that in turn gripped it.

The seraph placed the glowing stone on Isaiah’s lips, since this was the part of his body that he confessed was unclean. The angel then declared, “Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged” (Isa. 6:7). This purging by fire was administered by a heavenly being whose name (*seraph*) meant “burning one.” But the fire did not come from him; it was the holy fire taken from the incense altar of God.

Fire occurs often in Scripture as an agent of purification. Refiners of precious metals used fire to burn away dross and achieve purity in their products. So God’s purification is likened to refinement by fire (cf. Isa. 1:25; 48:10; Mal. 3:2-3; 1 Pet. 1:6-7). Though fire is

used as a symbol in these passages, it clearly implies that spiritual purification can be painful.

Isaiah's cleansing in our passage likewise is symbolic, not literal, since it was part of a vision. Yet the fire speaks of the drastic change that was needed before he could praise the Lord with pure lips. It was essential for a prophet, who would bring God's message to a sinful nation, to speak with purified lips and heart.

It is essential as well for those of us who carry Christ's gospel to a corrupt world to be properly purified as we do so. How sad it is when unbelievers justly charge Christians with living lives that contradict their message! It is our Lord who suffers disgrace when our behavior is the same as that of the world. Perhaps we, like Isaiah, need a new vision of the holy God and a cleansing by Him (I John 1:5, 9).

**Answering a call (Isa. 6:8).** Only after Isaiah had faced his sin and received cleansing did the Lord speak: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" God asked this question not because He did not know whom to send but because it would give Isaiah a chance to respond. The use of the plural, "us," has occasioned some discussion (Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Eerdmans). Some believe it is because God included the seraphim as a kind of heavenly council in this decision.

Yet Scripture always pictures God making His own decisions and not consulting any of His created beings. More likely it is a hint of the plurality of Persons in the Godhead (cf. Gen. 1:26; 11:7). The Trinity, fully revealed in the New Testament, is foreshadowed here.

Isaiah's response to the call was immediate: "Here am I; send me" (Isa. 6:8). His readiness is remarkable. He had no idea what his mission would entail, and he did not wait to find out. He simply volunteered for *whatever* it would be. As it turned out, his task

would be thankless. He would bring a divine message of judgment to a wayward people, and they would not repent (vss. 9-10). As a result, they would eventually be deported from their land (vss. 11-12).

Isaiah knew none of this when he accepted God's call. Yet he volunteered because he had experienced God's grace. A few moments before, he had expected to die for his sin. But now he was purified and accepted. After this, how could he *not* volunteer for God's service? He was not coerced into it; he did it out of sheer gratitude. How much more should we, who are cleansed by Christ's blood, live our lives in unconditional obedience to His call!

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. When did Isaiah's vision occur? What were conditions like in Judah at that time?
2. How could Isaiah see God when we are told this is impossible?
3. What did the seraphim whom Isaiah saw look like?
4. The seraphim declared God to be holy. What does this mean?
5. What unusual manifestations accompanied Isaiah's vision?
6. How did Isaiah react to his vision of the Lord? Who else in Scripture reacted similarly?
7. What did Isaiah's unclean lips keep him from doing?
8. Is it possible to have unclean lips without realizing it? Explain.
9. How was Isaiah cleansed from sin and fitted for service?
10. How was Isaiah's ready response to God's call remarkable?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Sing and Shout!

## Lesson: Isaiah 12:1-6

Read: Isaiah 12:1-6

TIME: about 735 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted” (Isaiah 12:4).

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## *Introduction*

One of the greatest hindrances to true worship is a lack of thankfulness, and the greatest hindrance to thankfulness is the illusion of self-sufficiency. The self-made businessman reasons that he owes God no worship because he has worked his way up the ladder by his own labor and wits.

In any endeavor we undertake, it is tempting to attribute our successes to purely natural factors—our strength and ingenuity. God rarely gets the praise He deserves unless we have come through the deep waters of failure. As much as we dread failure, disgrace, and humiliation, they often are necessary ingredients in God’s recipe for mature, sincere worshippers.

This truth was painfully apparent in

the history of Israel. Though warned repeatedly by their prophets, this people too often took credit for their own successes, forsook true worship, and served other gods. Only after they had passed through the disciplines of defeat and dispersion did Isaiah portray them as singing and shouting for joy because the Lord had redeemed and transformed them. That is the scene we will observe in this week’s lesson.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. PRAISE FOR GOD’S SALVATION—Isa. 12:1-3
- II. PRAISE FOR GOD’S MIGHTY DEEDS BEFORE ALL NATIONS—Isa. 12:4-6

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### PRAISE FOR GOD’S SALVATION

**ISA. 12:1** And in that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me.

**2** Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.

**3** Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.

**The people's thanksgiving (Isa. 12:1-2).** The words "in that day" remind us that the joyful praises of this chapter result from the events already related in the previous one. In the early chapters of Isaiah, the prophet intermingled messages of condemnation for national sins, predictions of judgment, and promises of restoration. Chapters 7 and 9 give glimpses of the coming Messiah, and chapter 11 presents a full-blown portrayal of His reign.

That reign will bring perfect justice, with blessings on the worthy and retribution on the wicked (Isa. 11:1-5). It will be a time of peace and harmony for all God's creation (vss. 6-9). A purified remnant of Israel will be freed from all former oppressors and regathered from the ends of the earth (vss. 10-16). The old rivalry between Judah and Ephraim will be gone, and both will live in peace under Messiah's rule.

It is in that day that the Israelites will raise their voices to thank the Lord. It is a day still future, when Jesus, the returning Messiah, will fulfill all the promises made to Abraham, David, and Israel. His reign will last a thousand years on earth and continue into eternity.

What will Israel thank God for in that day? They will say, "O Lord, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me" (Isa. 12:1). Isaiah's "thou shalt say" uses the singular form, viewing Israel as one person, unitedly saying these words. When the nation is finally redeemed, all its members will join together to thank their God, Yahweh, for His grace.

The Lord had been justly angry with Israel. Their long history had been a sad chronicle of His gracious blessings repeatedly requited with ingratitude and disobedience. Temporary represen-

tance had habitually given way to further waywardness. Prophetic warnings had gone unheeded until God's patience was exhausted. His judgment fell on both Hebrew kingdoms successively. They were exiled from their land, and though a remnant returned, they would never again control their own destiny.

However, by the time of Messiah's reign, God's anger will have been turned aside, and He will extend His comfort to Israel. This will happen not because He has simply decided not to be angry anymore but because His Son took that anger on Himself and died to redeem mankind. And just as Jesus' shed blood blots out the sins of trusting Christians today, so it will save the believing remnant of Jews at His return (cf. Isa. 53:1-12; Zech. 12:9-14; Rom. 11:25-27).

Because Israel's God is gracious as well as holy, He dispenses comfort as well as judgment. He does not keep His anger forever toward those whose sins are removed (Ps. 103:9-12). Thus, He can proclaim comfort to His redeemed people (Isa. 12:1; 40:1-2; 49:13-16). He will yet fulfill all His promises to Israel—in spite of their waywardness.

Israel's praise continues with the declaration, "Behold, God is my salvation" (Isa. 12:2). "Behold" calls attention to a marvelous truth—that God Himself is Israel's salvation (deliverance). He does not just provide salvation; it becomes identified with His very Person. He is so tied to His saving work that for the saved worshipper, the two are one. He is thus the exclusive object of trust, praise, and thanksgiving.

The salvation for which future Israel will thank God includes more than we are inclined to see. It surely includes the spiritual deliverance that comes with forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. But it also includes

their deliverance from all their enemies and peaceful resettlement in their own land (cf. Isa. 52:7-10). God's forgiving grace that will transform their lives (Jer. 31:31-34) will also preserve their nation and restore them to their inheritance (vss. 35-40).

Because God is Israel's salvation, they can confidently say, as one man, "I will trust, and not be afraid" (Isa. 12:2). They then expand their words of praise: "for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation." These words in Hebrew are identical to two other verses, Exodus 15:2 and Psalm 118:14, with one exception—the name for God is here repeated. "The Lord JEHOVAH" in our English version is *Yah Yahweh* in Hebrew. It is a repetition of His covenant name, given for special emphasis.

The kingdom of Judah was small and often at the mercy of the large empires on either side of it—Egypt, Assyria, and later, Babylon. When faced with crises, Judean kings often relied on one or another of these empires to protect them instead of relying on the Lord (cf. II Chron. 28:16, 20-21; Isa. 30:1-5; 31:1-3). These allies inevitably failed them. But after the Messiah's final deliverance, Israel will proclaim that Yahweh—and Yahweh alone—has been her salvation.

The latter part of Isaiah 12:2 was originally part of a song that Moses and the Israelites sang after God had destroyed the Egyptians in the Red Sea (Exod. 15:2). It was their first song of deliverance. How appropriate, then, that it should also be part of their final song! Their long history will have proved the truth of what Moses had professed—that the Lord Himself was their strength, their song, and ultimately their salvation.

**The prophet's observation (Isa. 12:3).** At the outset of our passage, Isaiah introduced what Israel would

say when finally redeemed. Now he spoke again, observing the continued blessings salvation would bring. He likened these blessings to water being drawn up from a well.

In the Bible, water is mentioned more often than any other natural resource. It assumed a great importance in the Near East because it was scarce. Whereas the Egyptians irrigated their lands from the annual Nile flooding, the people of Israel depended on seasonal rains, dew, and springs. They determined the location of their towns by the availability of a water supply. Deep wells were dug in arid areas, and both towns and individuals dug cisterns to conserve rainwater.

We are not surprised, therefore, to find Scripture using water as a symbol of salvation and its attendant blessings. Whereas crossing the Red Sea symbolized Israel's initial deliverance from Egypt, the provision of water from the rock (Exod. 17:1-7) illustrated the daily refreshing supply for them in the desert. Jeremiah lamented that the people of his day had forsaken God, the "fountain of living waters," and had dug "broken cisterns" of their own devices that held "no water" (Jer. 2:13; cf. 17:13).

Isaiah spoke often of spiritual refreshment as water (cf. Isa. 32:6; 41:18; 44:3-4; 55:1). Jesus took up the theme and promised that He would provide an abundant supply of living water to those who believed in Him (John 7:37-38; cf. 4:14). In Revelation, water symbolizes blessings of the redeemed in the New Jerusalem (7:16-17; 21:6; 22:17).

In the same vein, Isaiah said, "Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation" (Isa. 12:3). "Water" is actually plural, as is "wells," reminding us of the abundant supply. God's redeemed people can draw repeatedly from their salvation in

Christ, and the wells will never run dry. They can therefore always do so with joy.

## **PRAISE FOR GOD'S MIGHTY DEEDS BEFORE ALL NATIONS**

**4 And in that day shall ye say, Praise the LORD, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted.**

**5 Sing unto the LORD; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth.**

**6 Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.**

**The people's declaration (Isa. 12:4-5).** The second half of our passage is organized in a similar way as the first half, and it again begins with "and in that day." The "day" for Israel will be the day of her deliverance by the Messiah, when the nation will fulfill the destiny appointed by God. This section, however, has a different focus. Whereas in the first the people were thanking God among themselves for their salvation, here they are publicizing His mighty deeds to all peoples of the earth.

"Praise the Lord" (Isa. 12:4) can be translated with equal validity as "Give thanks to the Lord." Yahweh is to receive thanks for all that the redeemed remnant of Israel has experienced. "Call upon his name" refers to broadcasting God's name to others rather than simply calling on Him for help.

To proclaim the Lord's name means more than just to mention His name to others, for the Hebrews used the term "name" to speak of the essential character of a person. Names often connoted characteristics associated with either the circumstances of a person's birth or what the person would eventually become (cf. Gen. 3:20; 5:29; I Sam.

25:25; Matt. 1:21). Likewise, people had their names changed when they experienced change in the direction of their lives (cf. Gen. 17:5, 15; 32:28; John 1:42).

Similarly, the "name" of the Lord refers to all that He is. It is the sum of all His attributes. *Yahweh* (almost always translated "Lord") is the personal name that sets Him apart from all false deities (Exod. 3:13-15). It signifies His eternal, changeless existence and consequent faithfulness to all His covenant promises. His character, revealed progressively in His dealings with Israel, is encapsulated in the word "name" (cf. Exod. 34:5-7; Isa. 30:27; Mic. 5:4; Mal. 3:16).

In the future millennial day, the redeemed of Israel will exhort one another to "declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted" (Isa. 12:4). "People" here more literally reads "peoples"; it includes not just Israelites but all the nations of the earth. "Make mention" means "cause to remember." So the redeemed are exhorted to spread the news of the Lord's mighty deeds to the ends of the earth, reminding mankind how glorious His reputation is.

By that time the deeds they recount will include not just the Exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, the reigns of David and Solomon, and the return from the Babylonian Captivity. They will also include the message—the church now proclaims—that the Messiah, Jesus, lived among them, died for sins, rose from the dead, and provides salvation for all mankind. Israel will also recount their final deliverance from tribulation by the returning Messiah.

They will be able to encourage one another to "sing unto the Lord; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth" (Isa. 12:5). With

echoes again of Israel's song of deliverance from Egypt (Exod. 15:1-2), this remnant will sound a theme that has permeated all of God's dealings with Israel—that through them His name might be exalted universally (cf. Josh. 2:8-11; 4:21-24; I Kings 8:41-43; II Kings 19:15-19). Purified by Jesus' blood, they will proclaim by word and deed alike that the Lord has done excellent things.

These words speak to Christians today as well. We, like Israel, have been called to proclaim the excellent deeds of the Lord to all the earth (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). The salvation we enjoy is not for our sakes alone; it is a message of God's grace to the whole world (Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 2:14-15; I Pet. 2:9-12). Therefore, let our conduct be consistent with our verbal witness so that God may be glorified in all the earth.

**The prophet's encouragement (Isa. 12:6).** Isaiah now added his own exhortation: "Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion." He personified the redeemed remnant as a female inhabitant of Jerusalem whom he encouraged to cry out for joy. The word for "cry out" means "to give a shrill shout." It is used in other similar passages that speak of jubilation (cf. 24:14; 48:20; 52:8; 54:1).

The reason for cries of joy is the greatness of the Holy One of Israel in their midst. From speaking of the universal impact of the Lord's mighty deeds, the prophet now reminded redeemed Israel that He is uniquely theirs. While He will rule all nations, Jerusalem will be His dwelling place. And though He is ineffably holy, He will live among the people He has graciously redeemed (Jer. 3:17; Zech. 2:10). The city will then be called "the Lord is there" (Ezek. 48:35).

When Christ returns, He will personally live on and rule the earth He

has purged. His redeemed will assist Him in ruling for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4-6). But we should also remember that even now He is ruling spiritually in the lives of Christians. And His temple today consists of those who have been joined with Him by faith—Jew and Gentile alike (Eph. 2:11-22). So we, like Israel's future remnant, have reason to praise Him and to spread His name to the ends of the earth.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. To what time period did the prophet refer by saying "in that day" (Isa. 12:1)?
2. Why had the Lord been angry with Israel?
3. Why will God be able to give comfort to Israel's future remnant?
4. What dual meaning will salvation have for future Israel?
5. When was Israel's first song of deliverance sung? How is their final song like it?
6. Why is water an apt illustration of salvation's blessings?
7. How does the second half of our passage differ in emphasis from the first?
8. What does it mean to proclaim the Lord's name?
9. What great deeds of God will redeemed Israel declare to the world?
10. Where will the Lord dwell during the millennium?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Meaningless Worship Condemned

Lesson: Isaiah 29:9-16

Read: Isaiah 29:1-24

TIME: probably 711 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (Isaiah 29:13).

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## *Introduction*

Worship entails paying reverence to God in thought or action to acknowledge His worth. The essence of worship is that the worshipper is absorbed in humble adoration of God.

Scripture focuses on worship of the true God from Genesis through Revelation. We cannot read far in any part of the Bible without seeing the kind of God we have and the worship He deserves.

But the Bible also gives examples of persons who engaged in meaningless worship. They mistook the external forms for the essence of worship. And

because their hearts were not attuned to God, their outward observances did not please Him.

Isaiah found spiritual impostors who tried to substitute ritual for reality. This week’s lesson gives God’s viewpoint on this sham.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. **SPIRITUAL DARKNESS OBSERVED**—Isa. 29:9-12
- II. **SPIRITUAL DARKNESS EXPLAINED**—Isa. 29:13-16

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### **SPIRITUAL DARKNESS OBSERVED**

**ISA. 29:9** Stay yourselves, and wonder; cry ye out, and cry: they are drunken, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with strong drink.

**10** For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the

prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.

**11** And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed:

**12 And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.**

**A divinely induced darkness (Isa. 29:9-10a).** This passage occurs as a part of the second of five “woe” oracles given by Isaiah in this section of his prophecy. These were directed primarily against the rulers of Israel and Judah because they were trusting human means of protection instead of the Lord. This particular woe was aimed at “Ariel” (vs. 1), which is a name here applied to Jerusalem. It foretold a siege that would bring it low (vss. 2-4) but eventually lead to the frustration of its enemies (vss. 5-8).

No specific enemy is mentioned in this text. It could well have applied to the Assyrians’ unsuccessful attempt to take Jerusalem (Isa. 36—37), though many believe it will have an application in the last days as well (cf. Zech. 14:1-4). At this point the people of Judah needed the spiritual discernment born of faith to understand Isaiah’s prophecy. But in their sinful condition, that was precisely what they lacked. So Isaiah went on to speak of their spiritual darkness.

He commanded them, “Stay yourselves, and wonder” (Isa. 29:9). The verbs speak of delaying what they were doing and standing in astonishment. The reason for this was that they could not comprehend what God was about to do. “Cry ye out, and cry” literally reads, “Blind yourselves, and be blind,” an allusion to Isaiah’s mission in 6:9-10, which was to blind their eyes to spiritual truth. They had already refused God’s revelation; now the inability to understand it would become a divine judgment.

Isaiah described the Judeans’ condition as a drunken, staggering stupor not traceable to the consumption of wine or any other drink. With alcoholic intoxication comes the inability to reason clearly and to keep one’s physical balance. But these people were con-

fused and disoriented spiritually. Having rejected God’s words for so long, they had no focal point to bring balance to their thoughts.

The prophet left no doubt about God’s role in this: “For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes” (Isa. 29:10). He changed the figure from drunkenness to sleep, but the thought is the same—spiritual insensitivity. God desensitizes the spiritual faculties of those who have determined not to receive His truth. Jesus cited this principle in explaining why His generation rejected Him (Matt. 13:12-15; cf. John 12:37-40), as did Paul in relating the unbelief of the Jews (Rom. 11:7-10).

It is perilous to withstand the gracious invitation to make one’s peace with God. Just as calluses form through repeated use of the hands, so the heart grows hard through repeated rejection of God’s message. He gives rebels over to their own inclinations, and the Spirit’s appeals no longer touch them (cf. Mark 3:22-30; Rom. 1:20-31).

**A widespread darkness (Isa. 29:10b-12).** To this point Isaiah had been addressing the nation in general. The people who were to be a light to the Gentiles were now walking in darkness, incapable of discerning God’s truth. But now he became specific: “the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.” Those who should have been the foremost in sharing spiritual insight had themselves become blinded.

The construction and vocabulary of this statement make it difficult to know how many groups are in view. Our English translation makes it appear that there are three—prophets, rulers, and seers. But the word translated “rulers” is usually translated “heads” and may refer to the heads of the seers being covered. It was common in biblical times to cover the head while sleeping. Perhaps, then, Isaiah was saying that the Lord had closed the prophets’ eyes

and covered the seers' heads.

In the Old Testament, the term "prophet" refers to an authorized spokesperson for God who receives His revelation and tells it to others. "Seer," something of a synonym for "prophet," is an older term (cf. I Sam. 9:9) with a different emphasis. It stresses the fact that he "sees" God's message with his eyes, through a vision, or by supernatural insight. Prophets and seers thus overlapped in function, though Isaiah chose to use separate terms.

Isaiah's main point is that those who should have been giving spiritual insights to the nation were themselves insensitive to divine revelation. They were as men in a deep sleep or as those stumbling about in the darkness. They were truly the blind leading the blind.

Isaiah illustrated the universality of the spiritual darkness thus: "And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed" (Isa. 29:11). "The vision of all" here includes not just the immediately preceding prophecy (vss. 1-8) but the entire revelation Isaiah had brought to them. All that he had spoken—of Judah's disobedience, of God's coming judgment, and of God's promised blessings—remained to them as a sealed book.

A book in Isaiah's culture was a scroll made of either papyrus or leather skins. Sheets of a chosen size were sewn together to achieve a desired length. Words were written on it using a sharpened reed. After the writing was completed, the scroll was rolled up around either one or two sticks. The outer edge was then sealed by impressing an applied patch of clay with the insignia from a signet ring. The scroll could be opened and read only by the authority of the one whose seal it bore.

Isaiah here likened his messages from God to a scroll whose seal had

not yet been broken. These messages were not literally sealed; they were open for all to hear and read. But they remained as incomprehensible to the Judeans as if they were still sealed. That was the spiritual condition God had given these rebels up to (cf. Matt. 11:25; 13:10-17; John 12:37-40).

Even the literate could not understand these prophecies. They were like a man who, asked to read from a sealed scroll, replied, "I cannot; for it is sealed" (Isa. 29:11). Though able to read, he claimed to lack the authority to break the seal and unroll the scroll. Even today, the most learned person in the world is denied access to the truths of the Holy Spirit if he lacks saving faith (I Cor. 1:18-24).

If the highly literate cannot understand God's message, much less can the one who is "not learned" (Isa. 29:12). When told to read, he declines, saying, "I am not learned" (literally, "I do not know books"). Even if the scroll were unsealed and the words lay before him, he could only stare at them as so many marks on a page. Thus, the spiritual ignorance in Isaiah's day was not limited to one class or another. Whether learned or ignorant, rich or poor, powerful or lowly, they were all in spiritual darkness.

## **SPIRITUAL DARKNESS EXPLAINED**

**13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:**

**14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.**

**15 Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?**

**16 Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?**

**A judgment on hypocrisy (Isa. 29:13-14).** Why had the Lord given Judah over to spiritual darkness? The rest of our passage explains that they had brought it on themselves. Using the word for “Lord” that signifies God’s almighty power (*Adonai*), Isaiah gave His indictment. “This people,” God said, “draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me.” Judah was worshipping in blatant hypocrisy.

Even during the Israelites’ years in the wilderness, they had been guilty of empty professions of faith and loyalty (cf. Ps. 78:36-37). Their deeds simply did not match their words. Isaiah had begun his prophecy with this charge (Isa. 1:10-15), and it was echoed in Micah (3:11), a contemporary. By Jeremiah’s day, Judeans were using the temple as a kind of good-luck charm to protect them while they continued to practice wickedness (Jer. 7:4-11).

Their problem was that in their hearts—their innermost beings—they had departed from God and were now far from Him. “Their fear toward me,” He declared, “is taught by the precept of men” (Isa. 29:13). The reverence they professed in worship was external only; it came not from the heart but from the commands learned from men. Even during the godly reign of Hezekiah, many were only mouthing prayers and going through the motions of wor-

ship.

Jesus drew upon this text when condemning the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matt. 15:7-9). They had overlaid the Mosaic commandments with a body of accumulated traditions that actually enabled them to evade the true intent of the law. And in every generation, wicked hearts devise ways of seeming to be religious while remaining far from God.

But God refuses to be mocked. He declared through Isaiah that He would “do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder” (Isa. 29:14). He would perform a work regarding His people that, when they observed it, they would say, “Only God could have done this.”

Many times marvelous works and wonders were performed to bring about Israel’s deliverance and blessing (cf. Pss. 17:7; 98:1-3; Zech. 8:4-6). At other times they were reserved for judgment (cf. I Sam. 3:11; Hab. 1:5). Our present text is one of the latter occasions. Because the Judeans had been hypocritical, they would marvel at the judgment God would bring upon them.

His judgment would take this form: “The wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid” (Isa. 29:14). The wise and prudent were the political rulers, the prophets, and the priests. Facing the prospect of little Judah being swallowed up by its more powerful neighbors, they were responsible to devise ways to retain their independence.

But in their condition of spiritual apostasy, these leaders resorted to purely human solutions to Judah’s problems. Even before this, Ahaz had sought the help of Assyria to turn away military threats from Israel, Syria, and the Philistines; but this “wisdom” had brought no relief. It had only heightened the ambitions of Assyria and led

Judah into greater apostasy (II Chron. 28:1-6, 16-25).

Now, even under godly Hezekiah, there were so-called wise and prudent leaders advocating a similar policy without consulting the Lord. But this time, with Israel already captive and the shadow of Assyria threatening Judah, they advocated seeking help from Egypt (cf. Isa. 36:4-6). Isaiah would eventually expose the folly of this hope (30:1-3; 31:1-3). But now he merely asserted that God would bring to naught the presumed wisdom behind it. Any deliverance would come from the Lord (cf. 37:33-38).

**A judgment on arrogance (Isa. 29:15-16).** The Judean leaders were not only hypocritical; they were also arrogant, seeking “to hide their counsel from the Lord, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?” They plotted secretly to enlist Egypt’s help, assuming the Assyrians would not know it. They even assumed that the Lord Himself did not know their plans!

It is possible for sinful men to shroud their thoughts and deeds in secrecy and deception so long—and to do it so successfully—that they believe they have hidden them from God. Such is the man who for years pretends to be a faithful husband and father while carrying on an extramarital affair. Such is the financier who, pretending to invest for the good of his clients, is actually enriching himself at their expense. Either they rule God out, or they deceive themselves into thinking He does not see.

The beginning of Isaiah 29:16 should probably be seen as the prophet’s outburst: “Oh, your perversity!” or “Oh, you are turning things upside down!” He was struck by the complete lack of logic in the people’s arrogant assumption. To say God does not know what a person is doing turns the order of creation around.

It is like the clay pot telling the potter that he did not make it (cf. Isa. 45:9; Rom. 9:20-21). It is like a created thing telling its creator that he has no understanding. Humans who try to usurp the authority of God and treat Him as nothing, either by thought or by action, ignore the impassable chasm that lies between them and their Creator. What folly and incredible arrogance must lie behind this reversal of roles!

Those who bow before the Lord and admit their lack of wisdom have hope and deliverance. But those who only go through the motions of worship and proudly flaunt their wisdom before God have only darkness and confusion.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. Against whom was the “woe” in our passage spoken? What did Isaiah foretell would happen?
2. How had Isaiah’s people become blinded to God’s truth?
3. How did the figures of drunkenness and sleep fit the Judeans?
4. What was the spiritual condition of the prophets in Isaiah’s day?
5. How was God’s revelation through Isaiah like a sealed scroll?
6. Why are educated people often unable to discern God’s message?
7. Why are external professions of religion not enough to God?
8. What “marvellous work” and “wonder” (Isa. 29:14) was God about to perform in Judah?
9. How were the leaders of Judah resorting to human solutions to their problems?
10. How were the Judean leaders perverting their view of God?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# The Glorious New Creation

Lesson: Isaiah 65:17-21, 23-25

Read: Isaiah 65:1-25

TIME: about 700–695 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create” (Isaiah 65:17-18).

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## *Introduction*

When two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan in 1945, a stunned world looked on, appalled at the terrible destructive force that had been unleashed. Humans now had the power to destroy modern civilization. Yet almost immediately voices were heard calling for the harnessing of nuclear fission for peaceful purposes. There seemed to be no end to its possibilities, especially to generate power for both industrial and domestic use.

What most failed to see at that time, however, were the harmful side effects that can occur when nuclear power is not

perfectly contained. It is clear that sinful man cannot get a cursed earth to yield to his control and achieve its full potential.

But Scripture foretells a day when God will make all things new and both humans and their earth will fulfill His purposes for them. Isaiah gives us a glimpse of this new world in this week’s lesson.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. THE NATURE OF THE NEW CREATION—Isa. 65:17-19
- II. THE BLESSINGS OF THE NEW CREATION—Isa. 65:20-21, 23-25

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE NATURE OF THE NEW CREATION

**ISA. 65:17** For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.

**18** But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing,

and her people a joy.

**19** And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying.

A creation beyond comparison (**Isa. 65:17**). The word “for” at the beginning of our passage connects it with the Lord’s thoughts expressed in the

previous verses. In bringing judgment upon Israel for its sins, the Lord will preserve a believing remnant to inherit the land and prosper in it (vss. 8-10). These are contrasted with the unbelieving and disobedient, who will meet an entirely different fate (vss. 11-15). The remnant are then assured that the troubles they suffered due to sin are to be forgotten (vs. 16). “For” (vs. 17) now gives the reason the former troubles will be forgotten and hidden from God’s eyes.

That reason is that God will set about creating new heavens and a new earth. The new creation will be so amazing and wondrous that it will put the former one completely out of memory. No one will even give it further thought.

The prospect of new heavens and earth is also found in II Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1. In those texts the emphasis rests on the conditions existing in eternity future. Here, however, the description that follows in Isaiah 65:18-25 demands that this prophecy include conditions on the earth during Christ’s millennial reign. Isaiah apparently did not distinguish between these two aspects of God’s future program.

So remarkable will this new creation be that “the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind” (Isa. 65:17). Though it is possible to connect “former” with the “former troubles” of verse 16, it is more likely that it refers to the former heavens and earth. Conditions will be beyond comparison with all that has preceded. So superior will they be that no one will even think of comparing them with the past (see a similar idea in Jeremiah 3:16).

**A creation of joy (Isa. 65:18-19).** The Lord invites His people, “Be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create.” Indeed, this is why He will create it: “For, behold, I create

Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.” Millennial Jerusalem and its inhabitants will be intended for continual rejoicing in His presence and grace.

God had the same purpose for His original creation. He had made a beautiful, life-sustaining environment for mankind, whom He created in His own image. He intended that Adam and Eve would rejoice in His blessings and His fellowship. But all of this changed when they sinned, and their descendants have failed to find this perfect joy, even though they have sought it in every conceivable way.

From within fallen humanity God selected the nation of Israel to display the joy of walking with the living God. But, alas, even the chosen nation failed in its mission and too often imitated the depravity of its pagan neighbors. As a result, Old Testament Jerusalem was usually not joyful; it lay under the chastising hand of God for its sins. Eventually, it would be devastated and its people scattered. Even today it is a place of tensions and rivalries, not joy.

But the future Jerusalem will be a place of joy not only for its inhabitants but also for God Himself. He said that He would rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in His people. The Lord had always loved His people Israel, but they had not always brought Him joy. Many times He grieved for them as for a wayward son or for an unfaithful wife. And even as He punished them for their sins, He yearned for the opportunity to do them good (cf. Hos. 11:1-11). In the end, He will have the joy of doing so.

In the millennial Jerusalem, “the voice of weeping shall be no more heard . . . , nor the voice of crying” (Isa. 65:19). This is a prospect of which Isaiah spoke several times (25:7-8; 30:19; 35:10; 51:11), and eventually it will

reach beyond Israel to all mankind (cf. Rev. 7:17; 21:4). The tragedies, losses, and regrets bred by sin will no longer plague society during Messiah's reign. His righteous judgments will engender confidence and joy.

## **THE BLESSINGS OF THE NEW CREATION**

**20 There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed.**

**21 And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them.**

**23 They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them.**

**24 And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.**

**25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD.**

**Increased longevity (Isa. 65:20).** The Lord next enumerated the reasons His new creation will be the source of joy. It will fulfill on a rejuvenated earth what He intended for the original creation. One source of joy will be lives of fulfillment that will no longer be cut short by tragedy. "There shall be no more thence," God declared, "an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days." "An infant of days" refers to a child who lives only a short time and does not get to fulfill the full measure of a normal life.

Today, infant mortality remains a

problem, especially in countries where medical care is not readily available or where violence is prevalent. In the millennium, this problem will be erased completely.

At the other end of the age scale, no old person will die prematurely. The elderly will not be carried away by death before completing the fullness of a normal life span. In the beginning, men lived over nine hundred years (Gen. 5) because the effects of sin were not yet fully felt. It is possible that with the removal of sin's curse, men's lives will again reach this length, living as long as trees (Isa. 65:22).

Our text reveals that death will not be eradicated completely in this kingdom, "for the child shall die an hundred years old" (Isa. 65:20). This no doubt means that one who dies at the age of one hundred will be considered a mere child because he will have fulfilled so little of his potential life span.

But why will such premature death occur at all? Perhaps the answer lies in the ending of the verse: Anyone who makes it only to age one hundred will be considered a sinner under curse. We must remember that the millennial kingdom is not heaven. Although those initially entering it are regenerated, children who have sinful natures will be born to them. Though Messiah's rule is perfect, His subjects are not. He will have to administer justice and mete out punishment when necessary.

So the sinner who dies at the age of one hundred is an incorrigible person who refuses to obey the King and has to suffer the just consequences. This, in fact, may be the only cause of premature death in the millennium, since the tragedies stemming from injustice or a flawed environment will have been eliminated (cf. Isa. 11:4; Jer. 31:29; Ezek. 34:16). Some, of course, will conceal the evil of their hearts until it breaks out in open rebellion at the millennium's end (Rev. 20:7-9).

**Security from oppression (Isa. 65:21).** Moses had described in graphic detail the woes awaiting Israel if they departed from the Lord. Among those woes were invasion and oppression by foreign peoples, who would take for themselves all of Israel's possessions (Deut. 28:30-33; cf. Mic. 6:15; Zeph. 1:13). One vivid fulfillment of this prediction was the Midianite invasion in the days of Gideon (Judg. 6:1-6), a clear result of Israel's apostasy.

But in the coming kingdom all such oppression will cease: "And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them" (Isa. 65:21). A redeemed people will enjoy the full fruit of their labors without fear. The just rule of Messiah will bring a peaceful pursuit of their occupations and an abundant return for their work (cf. Isa. 62:8-9; Amos 9:14).

Foreign nations once invaded Israel to despoil it in times of weakness. But in the future kingdom they will come in peace, seeking to share in its abundant blessings (cf. Mic. 4:1-4; Zech. 8:20-23). This drastic change will come about because of the Lord's presence in Jerusalem.

**Divinely blessed labor (Isa. 65:23-24).** As we just noted, God's people will, through increased longevity and peace, live long enough to enjoy the work of their hands. Now the obverse side of this is seen: "They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble." They will not spend long hours and days cultivating crops that amount to nothing because of invasion or a natural disaster.

After Adam and Eve sinned, God told them that only with difficulty would they bring forth sustenance from the soil. It would produce thorns and thistles to hinder their work (Gen. 3:17-19). Thus, Israel's history was marked by droughts, unseasonable

storms, and plagues of insects, often as judgment for their waywardness. What they labored so hard to produce was often carried away before they could enjoy it.

But this will never be the case in Messiah's kingdom, nor will His people experience heartache and futility in childbearing. They will not produce children only to see them snatched away by disaster. In ancient times, Job pondered the apparent inequity of watching the wicked prosper, reach old age, and see their children prosper as well (Job 21:7-9). But in the millennium, this inequity will not exist. It will be saints who will be thus satisfied.

The reason they will be blessed is that "they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord" (Isa. 65:23). They are His redeemed ones, whose faith has qualified them to enjoy His gifts. "And their offspring with them" could well be taken as "and their offspring are left to them." Their children will be enjoying the same blessings they are because they have not been taken away by premature death.

This future generation will experience the Lord's presence and provision in a remarkable way. "And it shall come to pass," He said, "that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear" (Isa. 65:24). In our present world, answers to prayer are often delayed. Sometimes sin is a hindrance (59:1-2). Sometimes requests have wrong motives (Jas. 4:3). Sometimes lack of faith is a barrier (1:6-8). And sometimes God understands our needs better than we do when we ask (Rom. 8:26; II Cor. 12:7-9).

But in the kingdom age, these obstacles will be gone. The will of the saints and the will of God will so coincide that He will respond immediately to the prayer of the heart before it can be voiced. In His omniscience,

the Lord knows each person's needs (cf. Ps. 145:18-19; Matt. 6:8); with human obstacles to fulfillment removed, He will meet them immediately.

### **Harmony in nature (Isa. 65:25).**

This picture of the blessings of the new creation concludes with a shortened portrayal of the harmony depicted in 11:6-9. Human and plant life will be drastically altered, and animal life will enjoy a tranquillity it has not known since Eden (cf. Rom. 8:21-22).

Several examples illustrate this harmony. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together" (Isa. 65:25). "Together" here can be translated literally "as one." The incompatibility between the carnivorous wolf and the helpless lamb will be so dissolved that the two will graze as if they were one animal. In the parallel passage in chapter 11, further examples of this harmony are given—the leopard and kid; the calf, young lion, and fatling; and the cow and bear (vss. 6-7). And they will be tame enough for a child to lead.

The lion, known as one of the most ferocious beasts, will feed on straw like an ox. One can hardly comprehend this kind of transformation. It is also noted that dust will be the serpent's food. It is possible here to see the serpent as an exception to this return to Edenic conditions because of the curse placed on it in Genesis 3:14. But it can also be taken as an assurance that snakes will no longer hurt people because their food will be dirt (cf. Isa. 11:8).

Because of the subsidence of animosities among animals and between animals and men, "they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord" (Isa. 65:25). The "holy mountain" is not specifically Mount Zion, the Temple Mount, or even the city of Jerusalem. It is

probably a more general reference to the entire mountainous homeland of Israel (cf. 57:13). Peace and safety will enclose the land because knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth (11:9).

For all of history since the Fall of man, the earth has been wracked with tragedies and disasters, some natural, some man-made. But when Jesus, the Messiah, returns and rules, He will set all things right and make all things new. This passage offers only a glimpse of that wonderful coming age when the earth will become all it was intended to be.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. How does the emphasis on the new creation in Isaiah differ from that in Revelation?
2. In God's new creation, why will the former one not come to mind?
3. Why does the original creation often not bring God joy?
4. Why will no crying be heard in the millennial Jerusalem?
5. What will happen to the life span during the millennium?
6. Why will death not be eradicated entirely in the millennium?
7. Why did foreign oppression occur in ancient Israel? Why will it cease in the millennium?
8. What promises are made concerning the fruits of labor and of reproduction?
9. How will the nature of prayer change in the millennium?
10. What changes will occur in the animal kingdom?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Joyful Worship Restored

Lesson: Ezra 3:1-7

Read: Ezra 1:1—3:7

TIME: 537 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number” (Ezra 3:4).

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## *Introduction*

Only when something precious is taken away from us do we appreciate its true value. Family keepsakes lie neglected until they are destroyed by fire or flood; only then do their owners mourn the loss of these treasures.

Sadly, the same principle holds true for the spiritual privileges we enjoy. Christians in free countries have access to Bibles, worship services, and open propagation of their faith. But those who live under repressive conditions eagerly grasp the few Bibles they can get and cherish their times of corporate worship. They are even willing to risk their lives for them.

The Hebrews had been exiled to Babylon for their neglect and abuse of

worship of the Lord. Their temple had been destroyed. Only then did they treasure the heritage they had despised. But now some of them had been permitted to return. As this week’s lesson reveals, they lost no time restoring true worship.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. THE SETTING FOR THE RESTORATION—Ezra 3:1
- II. THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE RESTORED—Ezra 3:2-3
- III. THE RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES RESTORED—Ezra 3:4-6
- IV. REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE INITIATED—Ezra 3:7

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE SETTING FOR THE RESTORATION

**EZRA 3:1** 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.

**The time (Ezra 3:1a).** The people of Judah had been taken captive to Babylon in a series of deportations beginning about 606 B.C. The Exile, according to the Prophet Jeremiah, was to last seventy years (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). In God’s providence Babylon

fell to the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C., and the Persian conqueror, Cyrus the Great, adopted a policy of repatriating peoples exiled by Babylon. Thus, in the first year of his reign over Babylon, he issued a decree that the Jews could return (Ezra 1:1-4).

About fifty thousand persons (Ezra 2:64-65) accepted this opportunity and returned to Judah. The trip of nine hundred miles probably took about four months, and when they arrived the people spent a few months resettling in the towns and villages where their ancestors had lived (vs. 70).

“When the seventh month was come” (Ezra 3:1), the Jews gathered in Jerusalem. The seventh month on their religious calendar was Tishri, corresponding to our September-October. It was the first month of the civil calendar; thus, the first day celebrated the new year, with the blowing of trumpets and a holy convocation (Lev. 23:24-25). The Day of Atonement followed on the tenth day (vss. 26-32), and the Feast of Tabernacles was observed from the fifteenth to the twenty-second day (vss. 33-36).

The seventh month was thus filled with spiritual significance and was an appropriate time for the Jews to reestablish their worship. The construction of the altar of sacrifice coincided with those commemorations that gave meaning to their offerings.

**The people’s circumstances (Ezra 3:1b).** Although the Jews had settled in their towns, it is unlikely that they could have fortified themselves against enemies in the short time since their arrival. Nevertheless, they came to Jerusalem “as one man,” in full agreement that the reestablishment of worship must take precedence over all else. They knew that the very difficulties they faced made it essential that they wait upon the Lord for protection. Neglect of worship would invite disaster.

## THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE RESTORED

**2 Then 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.**

**3 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.**

**The leaders of the restoration (Ezra 3:2).** The leaders in the project of restoring worship were the two men who had led the migration from Babylon (2:1-2). Jeshua (also called Joshua in Haggai 1:1 and Zechariah 3:1) was the high priest. His grandfather, Seraiah, had been the last high priest before the Captivity and was killed by Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 25:18-21). Jeshua’s father, Jozadak, had been taken captive and spent the rest of his life in Babylon (I Chron. 6:14-15).

Jeshua is no doubt mentioned first in our text (Ezra 3:2) because of the religious nature of the task they were undertaking. He was assisted by “his brethren the priests,” who numbered 4,289 among those who returned (2:36-39). It was important that the restored worship be carried out properly by descendants of Aaron.

The second important leader was Zerubbabel. Though his name was Babylonian and means “offspring of Babylon,” he was of royal lineage. He was the grandson of Jehoiachin (I Chron. 3:17-20) and perhaps for that reason had been designated the political leader of the returning exiles. His “brethren” (Ezra 3:2) could refer to all the laymen of Israel or, more likely, to

others of the royal Davidic line.

All these people set to work rebuilding the altar of God in order to offer burnt offerings on it. This altar took precedence over everything else. Although the foundations for a temple had not yet been laid, sacrifice remained the central feature of the Jews' worship, for it was the divinely given means of atonement for sins. And without an altar, there could be no sacrifice.

The altar was built according to the directives given in the Law of Moses. Both the existence and the form of the altar were specified in the law, and these returning exiles saw the necessity of following that law. Their fathers had been removed from their land for disobeying it, and they did not want to repeat their mistake.

**The burnt offerings resumed (Ezra 3:3).** The people set the altar upon its "bases," meaning its foundation. Most likely they were able to locate among the ruins the place where the altar had originally stood. They then used the same place for the new altar.

The disclosure that the returnees lived in fear of the peoples of the surrounding regions provides the reason for their promptness in building the altar. Because of potentially hostile neighbors, they craved the Lord's protection. So they restored regular offerings to Him morning and evening as He had directed in the Law of Moses (cf. Num. 28:1-8). In burnt offerings the whole animal was consumed as a symbol of the worshiper's total commitment to God.

"The people of those countries" (Ezra 3:3) were the inhabitants of the area Israel had once occupied. These included the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites to the east and southeast; the Philistines in the coastal cities; and foreign and hybrid peoples living in Judah and Israel. As early as the Assyrian deportation of Israel, peoples of the east had been relocated there. Some of them intermarried with

Jews, creating the group later called the Samaritans. All these resented the restoration of Jerusalem.

The returned Jewish exiles, significantly, did not resort to raising an army or building fortifications to protect themselves. Those things would eventually have a place, but their first priority was to restore true worship of their God. They understood, at least in part, the truth spoken to Zerubbabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).

## **THE RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES RESTORED**

**4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required;**

**5 And afterward 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.**

**6 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.**

**The Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4).** This feast, also called the Feast of Booths and the Feast of Ingathering, was the last of three annual feasts that all Jewish males were to attend (Exod. 23:14-17). Since it began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, it was the first one celebrated by the returned exiles after restoring their worship.

This feast was primarily a joyous harvest festival, when all Israel could thank the Lord for the fruit of their land (Deut. 16:13-15). It also commemorated God's care for their fathers as they traveled in the wilderness, and the booths they constructed called to mind the temporary dwellings in the desert (Lev. 23:39-43).

They observed this festival “as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom as the duty of every day required” (Ezra 3:4). This refers to the precise instructions given for its observance. It was to last seven days, and certain daily offerings were prescribed (Num. 29:12-38). The sacrifices offered at this feast were more numerous than those at any of the others. Now that the altar had been rebuilt, it was used fully.

**Other feasts (Ezra 3:5).** After the Feast of Tabernacles ended, a regular schedule of offerings was resumed, including those of “the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord.” The new moon sacrifices were offered at the beginning of each month. They included several burnt offerings, grain offerings to accompany each of them, a drink offering, and a sin offering (Num. 28:11-15).

The appointed feasts of the Lord were five annual festivals. The first was the Passover, with the Feast of Unleavened Bread following. On a family level, this entailed the killing and eating of the Passover lamb in a prescribed way (Exod. 12:1-20). On a national level, it involved additional burnt offerings and a sin offering (Num. 28:16-25).

The second appointed feast was the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, so named because it occurred seven weeks after Passover. It marked the completion of the wheat harvest and featured the offering of two loaves of bread from the new harvest. It also included burnt offerings, a sin offering, and a peace offering (Lev. 23:15-22; Num. 28:26-31).

The third feast of the Lord was the Feast of Trumpets, which signaled the beginning of the civil year on the first day of the seventh month. This, again, involved extra sacrifices besides the regular burnt offering—burnt offerings, a grain offering, drink offerings, and a sin offering (Num. 29:1-6).

The fourth feast was the Day of Atonement, a day of sorrow and re-

pentance. This occurred on the tenth day of the seventh month. It was the one time in the year that the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies, bearing blood to atone for the nation’s sin. Afterward a scapegoat was sent away into the wilderness (Lev. 16:1-22), and numerous additional sacrifices were offered (Num. 29:7-11).

The fifth feast, the Feast of Tabernacles, has already been discussed. But this enumeration serves to remind us of the daily, monthly, and seasonal offerings that necessitated the use of the rebuilt altar. Our text (Ezra 3:5) only mentions in passing the freewill offerings that people could bring at any time and does not mention the sacrifices of every Sabbath (Num. 28:9-10). Surely there was a need for this altar!

**Continual burnt offerings (Ezra 3:6).** The backbone of the Jews’ observances was the burnt offering sacrificed twice daily. Each consisted of a lamb, a flour offering, and a drink offering (Num. 28:3-8). The priests began this practice on the first day of the seventh month—that is, as soon as the altar had been erected. This gives evidence of the people’s zeal to return to a strict observance of the law.

The statement that the foundation for the temple of the Lord had not yet been laid is important. It shows that worship could go on even in the absence of the temple. The temple had been the centerpiece of the Israelites’ religion for several hundred years before the Captivity. It was a magnificent structure, and over time they had come to depend more on the building than on the Lord (cf. Jer. 7:1-4).

The pre-Captivity Israelites had made a mockery of their faith by disobeying the law and mistreating one another. They had even polluted the temple they revered by introducing pagan rites into the midst of it (cf. II Kings 21:1-7; Ezek. 8:3-18). Yet they somehow believed that the presence of this building would keep

invaders from destroying their city. Jeremiah had had to disabuse them of this notion (Jer. 7:8-15). Their descendants now learned that worship could now go on without it.

## REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE INITIATED

**7 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 Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia.**

**Craftsmen hired (Ezra 3:7a).** The temple, however, would eventually be rebuilt, and construction would begin in just a few months (cf. vs. 8). So preparations for that project were being made. Masons and carpenters were hired to work in stone and wood. They were paid out of the gifts the people had collected before returning to their homeland (1:4, 6) and from the royal treasury (6:4).

**Materials obtained (Ezra 3:7b).** The Jews gave “meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa.” The food, drink, and oil were products of Judah that could be traded to the Phoenicians of Sidon and Tyre for valuable cedarwood from the Lebanon Mountains. Wood from these trees was coveted by many peoples for both its fragrance and its resistance to rot and insects.

As David and Solomon had done in amassing wood for the first temple, these Jews relied on the Phoenicians to float it on rafts down the Mediterranean to Joppa (cf. I Chron. 22:4; II Chron. 2:8-10, 15-16). From there the logs were transported overland to Jerusalem.

“According to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 3:7) refers not to a grant of money or mate-

rials but to the permission Cyrus had given. The original decree of Cyrus specifically gave the right to build the temple (1:2-4) and even specified some architectural details (6:3-5). Cyrus would also have had to grant permission to obtain cedar from Phoenicia, since it was a separate province in the Persian Empire.

Thus was worship restored by the returning Jewish exiles. The altar of sacrifice enabled them to restore their sacrifices, and steps were taken to rebuild their temple. Their zeal in doing this reveals how they valued the precious privileges their fathers had despised.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why was the seventh month significant for the Jews?
2. Why did Jeshua have a prominent role in rebuilding the altar?
3. Why did the Jewish exiles rebuild the altar of sacrifice soon after their return to Judah?
4. Who were the peoples living near the Jews? Why were they feared?
5. How did the rebuilding of the altar help to relieve those fears?
6. What was the first feast commemorated by the returnees from Babylon? What did it signify?
7. How many appointed feasts of the Lord were celebrated by the Jews?
8. What wrong attitude toward the temple had the Jews' forefathers had?
9. Where did the Jews get the finances to rebuild the temple?
10. Whose services did the Jews use to get building materials?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# The Temple Restored

## Lesson: Ezra 3:8-13

Read: Ezra 3:8-13

TIME: 536 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“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 3:11).

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## *Introduction*

It is not possible for us Christians to understand fully what the temple meant to Israel. From the New Testament we understand that the true dwelling place of God is in and among His people (cf. I Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Eph. 2:19-22). God is in our buildings when His Spirit-indwelt people are there to worship.

But God revealed Himself to Israel in stages, and these included the temple as the place of His presence. At Sinai, He prescribed a way for them to know He was among them—the tabernacle (Exod. 25:8-9). When it was dedicated, the Lord’s glory filled it. This tent structure accompanied Israel.

David longed to build a more permanent dwelling for the Lord, but only dur-

ing Solomon’s reign was this accomplished. It became the centerpiece of Israel’s identity.

We can therefore hardly imagine their devastation and grief when foreigners pillaged the temple of all its sacred objects and eventually destroyed it. Now, however, they had the opportunity to rebuild it. As this week’s text reveals, it was a time of great joy.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. **THE BUILDING BEGUN**—Ezra 3:8-9
- II. **THE FOUNDATION DEDICATED**—Ezra 3:10-13

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE BUILDING BEGUN

**EZRA 3:8** Now 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.

9 Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, togeth-

**er, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.**

**The leaders (Ezra 3:8a).** The returned Jews had rebuilt their altar of sacrifice at the beginning of the seventh month in the year of their return (vss. 1-2). Now, in the second month of their second year there (probably 536 B.C.), they began to work on the temple foundation. This was the same month (April-May on our calendars) Solomon had begun building the original temple (I Kings 6:1). It is the beginning of the dry season in Israel—a good time to start.

The leaders of the project were the recognized political and religious officials—Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest (Ezra 3:8). They were joined by “the remnant of their brethren,” which included the priests and Levites (Jeshua’s kin) and all the rest who had returned to Jerusalem (Zerubbabel’s kin). It must have encouraged the leaders to see such widespread support. It indicated a desire to see true worship restored to the center of national life.

**The supervisors (Ezra 3:8b-9).** Those appointed to “set forward” (oversee) the work were Levites twenty years of age and older. The designated age for Levites to serve in the tabernacle and temple varied from time to time, becoming gradually lower. The first age requirement was thirty (Num. 4:3), then twenty-five (8:24-25), and finally twenty (II Chron. 31:17). This lowering was probably due to increasing need, along with (in this case especially) a scarcity of Levites.

The Levites were members of the tribe of Levi, which God had chosen to perform duties related to Israel’s worship. The descendants of Aaron were given the priestly responsibilities, but the rest of the Levites were assigned other duties to assist them (Num. 1:50; 3:5-9; 8:19-22). They were in every

sense helpers, doing the tasks (often menial) that would free the priests to fulfill their duties in the sanctuary.

When Israel settled in Canaan, the Levites were scattered among the other tribes and given forty-eight cities in which to live (Josh. 21:41). Only a minority continued to minister at the tabernacle in Shiloh. The rest apparently functioned mainly as teachers in their communities (cf. II Chron. 17:7-9). When David set up a more elaborate worship in Jerusalem, more Levites were needed, especially as musicians (I Chron. 15:16). When the temple was built, the demand increased even more.

Though the Levites had played a prominent role in periodic reforms in Judah (cf. II Chron. 19:8-10; 23:1-8; 29:25-30; 34:12-13), we know nothing of their role during the Captivity. Perhaps they copied manuscripts, wrote psalms, and taught. Very few returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:40-42), and later Ezra had to recruit them to have any to return with him (8:15-19). Perhaps many found their life abroad more congenial.

Nevertheless, those who had returned were now given an important supervisory work in the temple’s reconstruction (Ezra 3:8). Three groups of Levites are named. The first was Jeshua, accompanied by his sons and brothers (vs. 9). This Jeshua is not the high priest but a Levite of the same name (cf. 2:40). The second group comprised Kadmiel and his sons, who in 3:9 are called “the sons of Judah.” “Judah” should probably read “Hodaviah,” as in 2:40. These men provided oversight for the workers in the temple of God.

Ezra 3:9 also names a third group: “the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.” These do not appear in the list in 2:40, but a son of Henadad, a Levite, is mentioned in Nehemiah 3:24 and 10:9. All of them, though not numerous, were dedicated to their task. The word “together” in Ezra 3:9 means “as one,” “unitedly,” or

“without exception.” They grasped the importance of their task.

Although we are not engaged in literal temple construction today, we need to enter into the thinking that lay behind it. The Jews did this because they believed the Lord should be at the center of their national life. And we, living in a thoroughly secular society, should establish this same principle, living by it and teaching it to those Christians who follow us. Though we may be strangers and pilgrims to those around us, we should build a witness that tells them God is indeed among us (I Pet. 2:11-17).

### **THE FOUNDATION DEDICATED**

**10 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.**

**11 And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever 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.**

**12 But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:**

**13 So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.**

**The rejoicing of the musicians (Ezra 3:10-11a).** Our text does not dwell on the process of rebuilding the foundation of the temple or tell how long it took. It

moves directly to its completion and describes its dedication. It is noteworthy that these Jews did not wait until the temple's completion before dedicating it. The foundation alone was considered sufficient reason for rejoicing.

The priests and Levites were appointed to lead the celebration with music. The leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, installed the priests in their vestments and gave them their trumpets. All the priests wore special coats, belts, and headgear, with the high priest's clothing being the most elaborate (cf. Exod. 28).

The trumpets they used on this occasion were not ram's horns (shofars) but long, narrow silver instruments with a flared end. The Lord had instructed Moses in the manufacture and use of these instruments (Num. 10:1-10). They were to signal calling assemblies, setting out on the wilderness journeys, mustering troops for war, and celebrating monthly and annual feasts. They were always blown by the priests.

The Levites also took part in the dedication, playing cymbals (Ezra 3:10). These men in particular were descendants of Asaph, a Levite who oversaw worship music in the days of David and Solomon (I Chron. 16:4-5; 25:1; II Chron. 5:12). Over the centuries Asaph's descendants retained this calling, and 128 of them returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:41). They continued to assist in worship in the days of Nehemiah (Neh. 11:17, 22; 12:35-36).

Those who dedicated the temple foundation did so according to the directives of King David. David had been a musician himself, and he had taken care to appoint skilled men to provide music for the tabernacle worship (I Chron. 6:31; 25:1). The returned exiles were eager to conform to all the practices he had prescribed.

As important as the musical instruments were, they only provided accompaniment for the singing. “They sang together by course in praising

and giving thanks unto the Lord” (Ezra 3:11). The voices of the Levites articulated their praises.

The Hebrews were renowned for their vocal music. The first example we have is their song of triumph after their escape from Egypt (Exod. 15:1-21). Another noteworthy song is that of Deborah and Barak after the Canaanites were defeated (Judg. 5:1-31). Singing accompanied military victories (cf. I Sam. 18:6-7) as well as marching into battle (cf. II Chron. 20:21-22). David was “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (II Sam. 23:1), and Solomon composed 1,005 songs (I Kings 4:32). This was an art at which Israel excelled.

So important was singing to temple worship that a group of Levites were designated professional singers (I Chron. 25:5-8; Ezra 2:41). A number of the psalms were written for the use of the “chief musician” (choir director) (cf. Pss. 80—81). So at the dedication of the second temple’s foundation, some of these Levitical singers joined together in offering praise and thanks to the Lord through song. Their theme was familiar, extolling the Lord for His goodness, rejoicing that His mercy to Israel would endure forever.

The expression “sang together by course” (Ezra 3:11) probably means that the singers sang antiphonally, with one group starting the thanksgiving and another completing or repeating it in response. The words they sang are almost the same as those in Psalm 118:1-2. They were sung on at least two other historic occasions: when David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (I Chron. 16:34) and when the ark was placed in the temple (II Chron. 5:13).

These singers saw themselves as part of that same tradition of temple worship, though the ark was no longer with them and only the temple foundation had been laid. They recognized the Lord’s goodness and everlasting mercy (or covenant loyalty) to Israel in pre-

serving them from what seemed to be national extinction. He had redeemed them from captivity and was again demonstrating His great covenantal love.

**The response of the people (Ezra 3:11b-13).** When the musicians sang their praises to the Lord, “all the people shouted with a great shout, . . . because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.” They heartily joined in because they realized the historical and spiritual significance of what was happening. The Lord was still among them. He had chastised Israel for its sins, as the prophets had foretold, but He had not forsaken the nation. This event gave evidence of that fact.

But the response was mixed. Many of the elderly priests, Levites, and family heads remembered the first temple. Solomon’s temple had been a structure of grandeur, admired by all the surrounding nations. These elderly men had seen it with their own eyes before it was destroyed and they went into exile. They carried the image of it in their minds, no doubt enhanced by nostalgia.

They could not help comparing the new structure, visualized through its foundation, with the one they had known. And when they did so, they wept. Though we do not know the dimensions of the second temple, it was probably smaller than the first. In addition, the materials available for building in their present economic condition probably could not compare in quality or richness to those in the first.

Besides all this, they knew they were not building this temple as free men. The first temple had stood as a reminder of Israel’s national glory under David and Solomon. But that was now gone. They had laid this new foundation only with the permission of their Persian overlord, Cyrus, and they were beset by fears of surrounding hostile neighbors. As they would soon discover, a change in Persian administration

could bring their project to an abrupt halt (Ezra 4:11-24).

Although these old men could appreciate the new things God was doing for them, they could not escape regret over what Israel had lost. This sadness persisted even when, later, the building continued. The Prophet Haggai had to encourage them with the assurance that the Lord was with them to do even greater things (Hag. 2:1-9). Zechariah also had to encourage Zerubbabel to look beyond these small and seemingly insignificant beginnings to the completion of the divinely ordained task (Zech. 4:6-10).

Those remembering the former temple “wept with a loud voice” (Ezra 3:12), as was the Near Eastern custom (cf. I Sam. 30:4; II Sam. 3:31-34; 19:4; Mark 5:38). But many others at the same time offered loud shouts of joy. These were no doubt younger people who had never seen Solomon’s temple and had grown up in captivity. For them, the present situation was encouraging. The Lord had preserved them, given them favor with the Persian ruler, and provided the means to begin rebuilding.

It was true that much still remained to be done. But the altar had been rebuilt, daily worship had been restored, and now the temple foundation had been laid. These were to them a foretaste of even greater things the Lord had for them. For them, the “good old days” had never existed; the best days lay ahead. For us too there are times to forget what is behind (cf. Phil. 3:13) and reach forward to the spiritual victories God has in store for us.

Thus, two sounds, representing two outlooks—joy and lamentation—mingled together so that one could not distinguish between them (Ezra 3:13). And the noise they created was so loud that it was heard far away. The surrounding peoples could tell that something momentous was happening among the re-

turned Jewish exiles. This worried them, and some therefore attempted to join the project. When they were rebuffed, they proceeded to conspire to have the work stopped (4:1-6).

This passage has reminded us that when we are willing to trust God, even when accomplishing small things, He gives grace to move on to greater things. Though we may lament changes from bygone days, we must move on in faith. Indeed, it is faith we need, for every spiritual step forward will entail new challenges.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. Who were the leaders who oversaw the rebuilding of the temple?
2. What position did the Levites have among Israel’s tribes? What role did they now fulfill?
3. Were many Levites among the returned Jews? How do we know they were dedicated to their work?
4. What did the priests do when the temple foundation was dedicated?
5. What was the vocation of the sons of Asaph?
6. How do we know that vocal music was important to the temple worship?
7. Of what did the musicians sing at this dedication service?
8. How did the older men of Israel respond to the laying of the new temple’s foundation? Why?
9. Why could the younger Jewish men be optimistic about the future?
10. What spiritual lessons can we learn from this passage?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Celebrating with Joy

## Lesson: Ezra 6:13-22

Read: Ezra 6:1-22

TIME: 516 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“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” (Ezra 6:16).

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## *Introduction*

Many of us were brought up with the motto “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” We have applied this adage in schoolwork, sports, courtship, employment, and a variety of other endeavors. Sometimes we eventually succeed; sometimes we do not. But we work with the assumption that failure is not inevitable.

The returned exiles to Judah had to learn the importance of a second try. The original group who returned under Zerubbabel’s leadership had much reason for optimism. They had quickly rebuilt their altar of sacrifice and laid the foundation of the temple.

But their progress had come to a

grinding halt when local adversaries, having been excluded from the project, began to oppose them. Construction stopped for at least sixteen years. But this week’s lesson reveals how, when given a second “try,” the Jews succeeded in their task.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. **THE TEMPLE FINISHED**—Ezra 6:13-15
- II. **THE TEMPLE DEDICATED**—Ezra 6:16-18
- III. **THE PASSOVER OBSERVED**—Ezra 6:19-22

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE TEMPLE FINISHED

**EZRA 6:13** 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.

**14** And the elders of the Jews

built, 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.

**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.**

**Cooperation by Persian officials (Ezra 6:13).** The foundation of the temple had been laid during the reign of Cyrus (536 B.C.), but apparently nothing more was done until the second year of the reign of Darius (520 B.C.). Ezra emphasized the external opposition as a cause for this delay (4:1-5). But from the book of Haggai we also learn that the Jews themselves had been lax in completing the work, placing their own interests first (1:2-11). As a result, God had brought a famine that drained their resources.

The building was then resumed (Ezra 5:2; Hag. 1:12-15). But the regional Persian officials soon intervened, asking by what authority the Jews were doing this and writing to Darius, requesting that he investigate the matter (Ezra 5:3-17). Darius did so and found the decree of Cyrus, with its specific instructions for rebuilding the temple (6:1-5).

Darius then made a decree of his own, commanding his regional officials to desist from hindering the project (Ezra 6:6-7). He also ordered them to use tax money to provide not only building materials but also supplies for the sacrifices (vss. 8-10). He even decreed a capital penalty for altering his decree and hindering the work (vss. 11-12).

Ezra 6:13 records that “Tatnai, governor on this side the river,” along with his assistant Shethar-boznai and other colleagues, carried out the king’s decree “speedily.” They had received the answer they requested, and whatever their personal attitudes toward the Jews might be, they had no choice but to obey. “The law of the Medes and Persians” (Dan. 6:8), known for its unalterability, stood firm from the days of Cyrus, and his decree was finally obeyed.

**Other encouragements to build (Ezra 6:14-15).** The Jews themselves were now enthusiastic to finish the temple. The builders, “the elders of the Jews,” achieved success “through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo.” Haggai had earlier rebuked the people for stopping work to build their own houses. Now he encouraged Zerubbabel and Jeshua with visions of future glory that would come to this house (Hag. 2:1-9).

Zechariah likewise looked to the future to inspire the people. He foresaw a glorious future for Jerusalem (Zech. 2:10-12; 8:1-13), the coming reign of the Messiah (3:6-10; 6:11-13), and the Holy Spirit’s empowerment for Zerubbabel (4:6-10). Through these encouragements the builders prospered and completed the task.

But the real key to the completion of their project was that it was “according to the commandment of the God of Israel” (Ezra 6:14). He was behind it all. While “the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes” is also mentioned, it was by the sovereign working of God that these kings issued their edicts. It was a classic case of men ruling but God overruling to bring about His will.

There is a question as to why Artaxerxes’s name appears here with the other two, for he did not rule until after the temple had been completed. But it should be noted that the temple is not mentioned in this verse—only building in general. Artaxerxes *did* give Nehemiah permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:1-8), and he also gave support for the ongoing temple services (Ezra 7:12-17).

Thus, as Ezra was writing this account some years after the temple was built, he incorporated the decrees of all the kings who had played a part in the reconstruction until that time. His primary thought was that whatever role these kings had, it was God who had motivated them.

Returning to the subject of the temple,

Ezra wrote that it “was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king” (Ezra 6:15). Adar corresponds to our February-March, and the sixth year of Darius’s reign was 516 B.C. This was twenty years after construction had started and almost seventy years after the first temple had been destroyed.

As noted last week, some were disappointed by the modest size of this temple when compared to Solomon’s. But it would eventually outlast Solomon’s temple. The first temple lasted just under 400 years; the second, including the improvements later made by Herod, stood for 585 years.

### **THE TEMPLE DEDICATED**

**16 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.**

**17 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.**

**18 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.**

**The joyous celebration (Ezra 6:16-17).** Now that the temple was complete, “the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity” dedicated it. “The children of Israel” is the name given to all twelve tribes. Even though most of those present were from Judah and Benjamin, the restoration of worship was on behalf of all the tribes. There was no longer any recognition of the division that so long existed.

The groups that constituted the children of Israel were the priests, the

Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles. The priests and Levites served the Lord full-time in the activities of worship, while the rest were lay worshippers. Only these groups had been authorized to reconstruct the temple (cf. Ezra 1:3), and they alone dedicated it. It did not include any of the surrounding peoples, who earlier had greatly compromised their religion (Ezra 4:1-3; cf. II Kings 17:26-34).

The dedication of this temple was kept with great joy. The elderly men who had wept at the laying of the foundation had now passed away, and the younger generation embraced the completion with pure joy. They saw this as the beginning of a new era in their national history, when the former worship that had characterized Israel could be restored in all its fullness.

The dedication featured the offering of “an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs,” along with a sin offering of “twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel” (Ezra 6:17). Although the numbers of these sacrifices seem large to us, they were meager in comparison to the 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep offered by Solomon at the dedication of the first temple (I Kings 8:63). The smaller number of animals testifies to the modest resources these Jews had.

The sin offering for the whole nation was no doubt included because it had been sin that had caused the destruction of the first temple and the cessation of worship for seventy years. It expressed to God the Jews’ intention to put that behind them and recommit themselves to godly worship. All twelve tribes were represented by the twelve goats, though most of them had no representation there. All twelve tribes comprised covenant people, and there was hope for their total regathering.

**The assignments for priests and Levites (Ezra 6:18).** Now that the temple was restored, “they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in

their courses” to conduct the prescribed observances. David had inaugurated this system of divisions and courses after the ark was brought to Jerusalem (I Chron. 23—24), and this organization continued after the temple was built. Now it was revived.

But the emphasis in our text is not on adherence to David’s instructions but to those “written in the book of Moses” (Ezra 6:18). It was Moses who gave the original prescription for priestly and Levitical duties (Exod. 29; Lev. 8; Num. 3; 8:5-26). Obedience to the mandates of Moses’ Law was considered crucial to the leaders of these postexilic Jews, for they knew what had happened to their fathers, who had taken it lightly.

### **THE PASSOVER OBSERVED**

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

**20 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.**

**21 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,**

**22 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.**

**Preparation by the priests and Levites (Ezra 6:19-20).** Just as the rebuilding of the altar was soon followed by the Feast of Tabernacles (3:3-4), so the dedication of the new temple was followed, after about three weeks, by the Passover. This occurred at its

scheduled time, the fourteenth day of the first month (Nisan). The Passover, their most important festival, commemorated Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

We do not know how regularly the Jews had observed this feast over the centuries. The Passovers recorded were those associated with decisive events, including other rededications of the temple (cf. II Chron. 30:1-27; 35:1-19). One thing seems certain: the Passover had not been observed during the Captivity. So this may have been the first one the Jews had commemorated in many years, and it was fitting that it should follow so closely the restoration of temple worship.

The reason the Passover could be observed at the proper time was that “the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure” (Ezra 6:20). To carry out their functions, priests and Levites had to undergo purification from ceremonial uncleanness (cf. Exod. 29:4; Num. 8:5-8). Such uncleanness could have been caused by contact with a corpse, certain diseases, or running sores. A Passover in Hezekiah’s day had to be postponed a month because priests had not been purified (II Chron. 30:1-3).

The Levites killed the Passover lambs for all the returned exiles, as well as for their brothers the priests and themselves. Originally, every family had had to slaughter a lamb to insure deliverance from death. Its blood was placed around the door of the house, and the meat was eaten by the family (Exod. 12:1-10). The head of each household was to kill the lamb.

But at some point the practice changed, and the Levites were given this responsibility. At Hezekiah’s Passover, the Levites killed the animals because many heads of households had not sanctified themselves (II Chron. 30:15-19). And at Josiah’s Passover it appears that they did it as a normal

part of their duties (35:1-6, 10-11). The Levites killed and skinned the animals, and the priests sprinkled the blood. This removed the possibility of an unclean person offering a sacrifice.

**Celebration by the people (Ezra 6:21-22).** The priests and Levites were joined by “the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity,” in eating the Passover meal. What a joy it must have been for these people to worship their God in their own land! They were further joined by “all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel.” Although these may have been Gentile proselytes to the Jewish faith, it is more likely that they were Jews already living in the land among pagan neighbors. Some also could have been mixed people arising from the intermarriage of Jews and Gentiles.

When the Assyrians overthrew Samaria in 722 B.C., they deported most of the Israelites and replaced them with peoples from other lands (II Kings 17:24). These had been introduced to a version of Israel’s religion but had kept elements of their own paganism (vss. 25-34, 41). The few Israelites left were later invited by Hezekiah to participate in the Passover, but most refused (II Chron. 30:1-11).

It is also possible that a few of the people who remained in Judah after Jerusalem had fallen to Nebuchadnezzar had not fled to Egypt with the rest (cf. II Kings 25:22-26). The descendants of these, as well as of those in the northern tribes, now renounced the mixed religion of their neighbors and once again sought “the Lord God of Israel” (Ezra 6:21). The Passover thus had the effect of reuniting Israelites of various tribes.

The Jews kept both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread during the seven days that followed. They did so with joy, especially rejoicing that the Lord had inclined King Dar-

ius to favor them and give them all that was necessary to finish the temple.

But why did Ezra call the Persian king “the king of Assyria” (Ezra 6:22)? Darius was, in fact, king over all that had once been the Assyrian Empire, and an ancient king list of Babylon includes him in a list that begins with Assyrians and continues far after his time (Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, Eerdmans). Ezra may have chosen this title to draw a contrast between the earlier Assyrian kings—used to chastise Israel—and this one—used to bring God’s blessing.

This joyful time reminds us of God’s sovereignty. Rulers make their own decisions, but behind the scenes is the hand of God (cf. Prov. 21:1).

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why did the returned exiles have difficulty finishing the temple? How long did it take?
2. What encouragements did the Jews have to finish the building?
3. Why was Artaxerxes included among the kings who gave support to the Jews in their building?
4. Which temple stood longer—Solomon’s or the second one?
5. Who had been authorized to build the temple? Who were excluded?
6. How did the offerings at this dedication compare with Solomon’s?
7. How do we know this temple was intended for all twelve tribes?
8. Why were these Jews careful to do all that was in Moses’ Law?
9. What roles did the priests and Levites play in the Passover?
10. Besides the exiles, who joined in the observance of the Passover?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Fasting and Praying

Lesson: Ezra 8:21-23, 31-32

Read: Ezra 8:21-23, 31-32

TIME: 458 B.C.

PLACES: Ahava Canal; Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us” (Ezra 8:23).

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## *Introduction*

Suppose you faced vast new opportunities that could change the direction of your life. Vistas opened before you that could bring additional influence, income, educational advancement, or opportunities for service. But along with the opportunities came challenges—overseas travel, language and cultural barriers, physical danger, or financial risk. How would you prepare?

People have many ways of preparing for the opportunities and challenges they face. They acquaint themselves with the field they are entering. They make key contacts. They arm themselves with legal credentials and medical inoculations. They study the nec-

essary languages and cultures. And they accumulate or arrange for the financial resources they need.

For God’s people, an additional preparation must be seeking the will of God and committing all their plans to Him. All else may superficially seem to be favorable, but without God’s blessing, the best-laid plans come to nothing.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. THE FAST BY THE RIVER OF AHAVA—Ezra 8:21-23
- II. THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM—Ezra 8:31-32

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE FAST BY THE RIVER OF AHAVA

**EZRA 8:21** Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

**22** For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him.

### **23 So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us.**

Fifty-eight years had passed since the new temple had been dedicated in the sixth year of Darius's reign (516 B.C.). The reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) had come and gone (485–464 B.C.). And now, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes's reign (458 B.C.), a second group of Jews returned from exile to their homeland, led by a devout priest named Ezra.

Ezra had an impressive lineage and could trace his ancestry back to Aaron through Eleazar (Ezra 7:1-5). We do not know what his position in the Persian Empire was, but he must have been important enough to gain the favor of the king. He is also called "a ready scribe in the law of Moses" (vs. 6). He was a learned man, skilled in knowledge of the law and prepared to teach it to others (cf. vs. 25).

We gain insight into Ezra's spiritual stature through a statement of his goals. He "had prepared his heart to seek (study) the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). He had a firm determination to master God's law. But to him this was more than an academic discipline; he also determined to practice it as a way of life. Beyond this, he determined to teach the law to all Israel. Only through this could they learn to please God.

With this purpose in mind, Ezra obtained permission from Artaxerxes to lead a group back to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6-7). The king sent with him a copy of his decree, thereby establishing Ezra's authority in his homeland. The king gave permission for all who wished to accompany Ezra to do so (vs. 13). He also gave Ezra the authority to inquire about affairs in Judah (vs. 14) and to take wealth to support worship at Jerusalem (vss. 15-20).

Ezra was also authorized to draw upon tax money from the western provinces to provide for temple worship (Ezra 7:21-23) and to exempt all temple ministers from taxation (vs. 24). Remarkably, he could even establish government among the Jews based on the laws of God, teach those who were ignorant of them, and punish those who refused to obey (vss. 25-26). He and his subordinates had virtually absolute authority in that realm.

**The proclamation of the fast (Ezra 8:21).** Ezra and the expatriates with him, who numbered probably between four and five thousand persons, left Babylon on the first day of the first month (7:9). After about nine days of travel they had reached "the river of Ahava" (8:21), a place unknown to us today. There they pitched tents and stayed three days (vs. 15). By that time, Ezra had discovered that their company included no Levites. Levites had also been scarce on the earlier expedition of Zerubbabel.

Perhaps the Levites had become comfortable in the land of their captivity and were not inclined to get involved in the regimented work in the temple in a land now considered a Persian outpost. But so important were they for temple service and teaching that Ezra determined to recruit some before continuing the journey.

Eventually 38 Levites and 220 other temple workers joined the expedition (Ezra 8:16-20). But before the exiles continued their journey, Ezra proclaimed a fast; the purpose was "that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us" (vs. 21). "Right way" is, literally, "straight way." It implies a journey free of obstacles and delays. "Afflict" indicates humbling oneself before God, and this was accompa-

nied by earnest prayer.

Before the Captivity, only one fast was required of Israel—on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31). Voluntary fasting was also practiced by groups or individuals in times of impending or present calamity (cf. Judg. 20:26; I Sam. 7:6; II Sam. 12:16). But during the Captivity, the practice seems to have become more common (cf. Esther 4:3, 16; Zech. 7:2-5; 8:19). Perhaps this was because of the greater consciousness and fear of sin, which could lead God's people into the calamities their fathers had suffered before them.

In this case they prayed for a safe trip "for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance" (Ezra 8:21). "Little ones" properly refers to persons under the age of twenty, although it was also applied loosely to all the dependents a man had—wives, children, the aged, and the weak. This expedition included whole families, and any catastrophes would have fallen heavily on those who could not protect themselves.

They also prayed for the protection of their belongings. This included their household possessions as well as livestock they may have taken for food along the way. It also included the vast wealth they had accumulated to take back to Jerusalem to support the temple worship. The journey would be long, and even in Judah life would be precarious after these people got there. So it was imperative that they commit their way to the Lord as they departed.

**The reason for the fast (Ezra 8:22).** Ezra explained that they committed themselves to God's protection because he "was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way." "Ashamed" here means "embarrassed." He was embarrassed to ask the king for government protec-

tion, although it would have been available. Indeed, some would have considered it indispensable in light of the banditry along the way.

But Ezra felt he could not ask for such protection, for he had already boasted to Artaxerxes of God's care for His own. He had told him that the hand of God rested favorably on all who looked to Him but that His power and wrath worked against all who turned their backs on Him. This was a truth deeply embedded in Jewish theology (cf. Pss. 33:18-19; 34:15-16), and Ezra had declared it boldly before the king.

But now he feared that a request for a military escort would weaken the testimony he had borne. He had stated a truth about God; did he have the faith to put it into practice? The king would have reason to question the goodness and power of his God if he did not. So to protect the reputation of the Lord, Ezra refused to ask for the king's protection.

We can profit from Ezra's example. We boldly proclaim the truth that our God watches over His children and provides for their needs. But do we practice what we preach? Are we inclined to complain about what we lack, worry about our future, or rush into short-range solutions that deprive God of the opportunity to work for us? Do our neighbors see in us the evidence that an all-wise and loving God really exists?

Nehemiah did not choose the same course of action as Ezra. When he returned to Jerusalem, he had an armed escort to accompany him (Neh. 2:9). Was he therefore a man of less faith? Not necessarily, for the two situations differed greatly. Ezra went as a religious leader, and for him an armed escort might seem out of place. But Nehemiah went as a political official representing the king, and soldiers were sent as a matter of course. There

is no record that Nehemiah even requested them.

**The result of the fast (Ezra 8:23).** Ezra reported, “We fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us.” Fasting for Ezra and his group was not a mere ritual. They abstained from food because they were so earnest in prayer that they did not even miss it. “Besought” implies petitioning God to grant them their request, which in this case was safety in travel.

This was no minor matter for these exiles. The route they followed did not go directly westward, for that was desert. It followed the Euphrates River valley northwestward and then turned southwestward into the valleys of Syria and Palestine. In all they would travel about nine hundred miles. Although the Persians had established a postal system for their empire, they did little to build better roads. Thus, these people would travel rough roads that were often frequented by bandits awaiting unsuspecting travelers.

Looking back on the experience, Ezra reported that the Lord answered their petitions. Is fasting therefore a practice to be advocated by Christians? Does it make our prayers more effective? Fasting is rarely mentioned in the New Testament. Jesus recognized the practice but neither condoned nor condemned it. He warned, however, against making it a legalistic practice (Matt. 6:16-18) and said it was inconsistent for His disciples to fast when He was with them (Mark 2:18-22).

There are only two undisputed references to religious fasting in the book of Acts (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23), and the apostles did not command it in their epistles. Any fasting today, therefore, should be completely voluntary and an accompaniment to prayer so earnest that we become oblivious to food. God

honors prayer because of the spiritual condition of the supplicant, not because of a prescribed ritual he adheres to.

## THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

**31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way.**

**32 And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days.**

**The protection of God (Ezra 8:31).** For all his emphasis on fasting and prayer, Ezra was not lacking in practical wisdom. He took measures to guarantee that the wealth they were transporting was kept safe. This is a subject to which we will give attention in our next lesson. With these arrangements made, the travelers continued their journey. They “departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem.” They had left Babylon on the first day of the month (7:9), had spent three days by the river (8:15), and now embarked on a journey that would last until the first day of the fifth month (7:9). The entire trip thus lasted four months.

Ezra reflected with satisfaction, “The hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way” (Ezra 8:31). He used an expression here that he had used before—“the hand of our God”—which refers to the favor of God. He recognized it in the king’s favor (7:6, 28), in the prospering of his journey (vs. 9), in providing Levites (8:18), in doing good for His own (vs. 22), and here in delivering the migrants from danger. Nehemiah used the same expression (Neh. 2:8, 18).

The hand of God, apparently, did not clear the way so that no dangers appeared, for Ezra wrote of ambushes by enemies and bandits along the way. But the Lord delivered them whenever danger arose. This could mean that God kept would-be raiders from attacking Ezra's party or that He enabled the Jews to resist the attacks. Israel's history includes examples of both of these methods.

Whichever method God used, the outcome was truly remarkable. Here was a caravan of four to five thousand persons, including many women and children, who traveled unscathed through nine hundred miles of dangerous territory. Most of those in the party were not seasoned travelers and were unaccustomed to group discipline. Although some may have had weapons, these were not sufficient to fight off marauders. Only the grace of God, responding to earnest prayer, can account for their safety.

**The arrival in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:32).** Ezra gave no details of the journey. He simply recorded, "We came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days." The three days were probably given to much-needed rest after such an arduous journey. The caravan had started out in early spring; by the time it arrived, the hot, dry summer months had set in, making the final miles difficult.

The rest of the chapter records the completion of the task of those who arrived. They weighed out the gold and silver in the temple, confirming that it all had arrived safely (Ezra 8:33-34). They offered burnt offerings to the Lord (vs. 35). They delivered the king's edicts to the officials in the trans-Euphrates region of the empire (vs. 36). Finally, they gave their support to the Jewish people already there and to the house of God.

Ezra was a remarkable man. He

was a man of ability and influence, entrusted with a difficult task by the Persian king. He was a man of learning, educated in Israel's laws and able to teach them to others. And he was a man of faith, a godly man who knew he was doing God's will and trusted Him implicitly to enable him to carry it out. May we, like Ezra, walk with the Lord so that we may be assured that the hand of God will be upon us for good.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. What kind of person was Ezra in terms of his spiritual commitment to God?
2. Who gave permission for Ezra to lead a group in a return to Jerusalem?
3. Why did Ezra proclaim a fast by the river of Ahava?
4. What kinds of items needed protection on the journey? To whom did "little ones" refer?
5. Why had Ezra not requested a military escort for this trip?
6. How can our attitude toward our circumstances give evidence that a wise and loving God exists?
7. How far did the exiles have to travel and under what conditions? Why was their protection on the journey remarkable?
8. Is fasting commanded for Christians? What is its role for us?
9. What did Ezra mean when he said the hand of God was upon them?
10. How long did the trip from Babylon take? Why did the exiles stay three days in Jerusalem when they arrived?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Gifts for the Temple

Lesson: Ezra 8:24-30

Read: Ezra 8:24-30

TIME: 458 B.C.

PLACE: Ahava Canal

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers” (Ezra 8:28).

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## *Introduction*

Wealth is a subject that is hard to keep in balance. On the one hand, its lure is universal, and many live their lives to accumulate as much as possible. Their love of money overrides every other consideration, and they throw themselves headlong into the pursuit of it. We know that this is utter foolishness, leading to the ruin of the greedy.

On the other hand, we Christians often go to the other extreme and refuse to mention wealth in the same breath as our faith. We have come to think of money itself as filthy lucre and the root of all evil. We fear to talk about the legitimate use of wealth in God’s work or the blessing He can bring into the life of one who is generous.

While Jesus, the prophets, and the

apostles warned often of the evils of greed, they also recognized the need for legitimate use of wealth in God’s work. Gold, silver, and rich fabrics were found in abundance even in the tabernacle, and the wealth poured into Solomon’s temple is almost beyond our comprehension.

It should therefore not surprise us that great wealth was again invested in the second temple in Ezra’s day.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. **ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY**—Ezra 8:24-27
- II. **GIVING A CHARGE**—Ezra 8:28-29
- III. **FULFILLING THE TASK**—Ezra 8:30

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### **ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY**

**EZRA 8:24** Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them,

**25** And weighed unto them the

silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered:

**26** I even weighed unto their hand

**six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents;**

**27 Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.**

In each of Nebuchadnezzar's three invasions of Jerusalem, his army had looted the temple (II Kings 24:13; 25:15; II Chron. 36:7, 18). The building was stripped of all its gold and silver articles before it was destroyed. Nebuchadnezzar had placed the golden and silver vessels in the treasure house of his god (Dan. 1:2), and later Belshazzar desecrated some by using them as common drinking cups (5:2-4). But Jeremiah had foretold that these precious articles would be returned (Jer. 27:19-22).

When Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return, he provided precious materials for rebuilding the temple. These included the very vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken away (Ezra 1:7-11). When that first migration under Zerubbabel reached Jerusalem, some of the prominent Jews also contributed sizable amounts of gold and silver to begin work on the project (2:68-69). Thus, considerable wealth was available when the new temple was dedicated.

When Ezra led a second group of exiles back to their homeland, Artaxerxes provided even more wealth to be used in temple worship (Ezra 7:15-20). This included silver and gold from the king, his counselors, and other sources in the province of Babylon, along with freewill gifts from the Jews themselves. This wealth was to be used not only to decorate the temple but also to purchase supplies needed for ongoing worship.

**The men chosen (Ezra 8:24).** Ezra realized the heavy responsibility he bore for the safe delivery of this treasure, so he divided it among men he

trusted. These were "twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them." At first this list seems to designate twelve priests, two of whom are named and ten unnamed. But earlier the two named men were listed as Levites, not priests (vss. 18-19). We should therefore take this to mean that Ezra chose twelve prominent priests (all unnamed) and twelve Levites, prominent among whom were Sherebiah and Hashabiah (vs. 24).

The law specified that the priests were to handle the sacred objects and the Levites were to carry them (Num. 3—4). Ezra, having studied the law thoroughly, knew this and no doubt tried to apply the rule as closely as possible to the present situation. As noted in earlier lessons, the postexilic Jewish leaders were especially careful to observe the details of the law. They wanted to avoid the looseness that had led their fathers into apostasy and captivity. Ezra, a priest and legal expert himself, was scrupulous in his adherence.

**The riches distributed (Ezra 8:25-27).** Having selected the guardians, Ezra "weighed unto them" (vs. 25) the riches. In that day, most wealth was determined by weight rather than coins or paper notes. He designated three separate categories of wealth to be weighed—"the silver, and the gold, and the vessels." The vessels (utensils), though gold and silver, were finished products that had an assigned use, not raw materials to be used as media of exchange.

This wealth had been donated as an offering to the house of God, to be used either directly (as the vessels would be) or to buy supplies for its ongoing observances. The donors included the king, his advisers, and the royal officials, or princes.

It may seem remarkable that Persian kings and nobles would give support

for a religion not their own, but they respected all the religions of their peoples and feared the disfavor of a god they may have slighted (cf. Ezra 6:10; 7:23). The riches Ezra weighed out also included what “all Israel there present, had offered” (8:25). This refers to all the Jews still living in exile, especially in the province of Babylon (cf. 7:16). It is possible that others besides Jews had contributed to this venture, but the major part came from them. It is known from other sources that some Jewish families had become wealthy during the Captivity and had much they could contribute (Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Broadman & Holman).

The practice of freewill giving had been established since the beginning of Jewish history. Freewill sacrifices were brought to the tabernacle and temple in addition to the prescribed offerings (cf. Lev. 22:18, 21; Deut. 12:6; II Chron. 31:4). In addition, special needs were supplied through freewill offerings. In this way the tabernacle was furnished (Exod. 25:1-8; 35:4-9) and the temple was repaired (II Chron. 24:8-13; 34:8-10). Freewill gifts also provided much of the money needed to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:4-6).

The riches Ezra weighed are now enumerated. First, there were “six hundred and fifty talents of silver” (Ezra 8:26). The talent was the largest unit of weight, corresponding to between seventy-five and one hundred pounds. Six hundred and fifty talents thus weighed close to twenty-five tons. The silver vessels weighed one hundred talents, or about three and three-quarter tons, and the gold weighed the same amount.

Other articles Ezra weighed included “twenty basons (bowls) of gold, of a thousand drams” (Ezra 8:27). The Hebrew word for “drams” is rare, but it probably refers to Persian coins called darics, first minted by Darius. They were oval coins of pure gold that por-

trayed the king on one side. A thousand darics would have weighed about nineteen pounds. Finally, there were “two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.” “Copper” translates a two-word phrase, one of which occurs only here in the Old Testament. It comes from a verb meaning “to gleam” and suggests that the vessels, which may have been of a bronze-copper alloy, were polished to an unusually high luster. Apparently these two objects were so bright that they resembled gold.

It is not possible for us to know exactly what these objects, taken together, would come to in today’s money. But they must have been worth millions of dollars. The vastness of this wealth has caused some to question the accuracy of the account. But the wealth of the Persian kings and their courts was renowned, and even ordinary people in their empire had considerable means. The vastness of this treasure helps us understand Ezra’s concern for security.

Ezra’s attention to detail here may seem excessive to us. He carefully selected guardians he could trust, weighed and recorded each part of the treasure, and kept all the figures to be compared with the weights taken later in Jerusalem. But he was taking into account his stewardship over a vast sum entrusted to him by many people, including government officials, and the sacred purpose for which it was intended.

Ezra’s integrity and care should be an example to church leaders today who handle funds. To safeguard what has been entrusted to them and to protect their own reputations, they need to distribute responsibility and document all transactions in writing. This will enable them to avoid charges or suspicions of wrongdoing.

## GIVING A CHARGE

**28 And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold**

are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers.

**29 Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.**

**The basis for the charge (Ezra 8:28).** Ezra charged the twenty-four chosen men with the task of keeping the treasure safe until they reached Jerusalem. He gave them this rationale: “Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers.” Their responsibility was extraordinary, for both they and the objects they carried were holy to the Lord.

The concept of holiness originates in the character of God Himself, who is completely separate from anything unclean or imperfect (Exod. 15:11; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). Therefore, anything or anyone set apart for His use is also considered holy. This applied to the tabernacle and its furnishings (Exod. 40:9) as well as the temple (Ps. 65:4) and the city of Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1). The priests were holy (Lev. 21:6, 8), as were the Levites (II Chron. 35:3) and the vessels used in worship (5:5).

Ezra therefore reminded these men that they were among those in Israel who had been set apart to serve the Lord. Their stewardship over the wealth was included in this service. This was doubly true because the vessels they were carrying were themselves sanctified to God’s service. And what about the other gold and silver? It was a freewill offering intended for divine worship, and therefore it too was to be considered holy.

In the Christian church, we do not have a separate class set apart to God and therefore holier than others.

Though we respect our clergy for their ministry of His Word, we are taught by Scripture that all those who have been redeemed by Christ’s blood are holy before Him (I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5). Everything we are, do, or have should therefore be considered sanctified to the Lord. We do not merely go to a sanctuary to worship; we *are* His sanctuary. So all we do should be considered worship (cf. Rom. 12:1; I Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20).

This means that the handling of wealth should be considered a holy activity. God has entrusted it to us, who are holy unto Him. So we are His stewards, responsible to handle it with care. This means that we should give generously to His work and to the needs of others (cf. Acts 20:25; II Cor. 9:7; I Tim. 6:18; Heb. 13:16). This principle should also govern such activities as shopping, furnishing our homes, caring for our property, and planning vacations.

**The nature of the charge (Ezra 8:29).** Ezra exhorted his assistants, “Watch ye, and keep them.” “Watch” carries the connotation of staying alert. There was to be no lapse in vigilance. “Keep” means that they were to carefully guard their treasure. They had to make sure it was not stolen—either by attacking bandits or by dishonest persons in the caravan. This was their task until it was safely deposited in the temple chambers.

But before the wealth could be deposited, it had to be weighed again when the journey ended. The two weights could then be compared to confirm that the guards were delivering exactly what had been entrusted to them. This would both hold them accountable and protect them from unjust suspicions.

Ezra made sure there would be plenty of witnesses when the gifts were weighed (Ezra 8:29). They included “the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Is-

rael.” The latter phrase refers to the heads of the Jewish households. In verse 33 the actual names of two priests and two Levites who did the weighing in Jerusalem are given.

### FULFILLING THE TASK

**30 So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God.**

Our lesson text ends with a statement that the mission assigned was eventually fulfilled. The twenty-four assistants Ezra had chosen accepted and fulfilled their responsibilities. They took “the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels.” This means that they accepted the three kinds of items whose values had been determined by weight. How they determined to protect them is not stated, but they willingly submitted to Ezra’s charge.

Their duty did not end until they had brought the treasure into the temple of God in Jerusalem. They, along with Ezra, had a clear-cut understanding of the purpose for this wealth. It was not enough that it safely reached Jerusalem. It was dedicated to sacred use, and the mission was not completed until the donations reached the temple. No doubt the people of Judah could have found other legitimate uses for this money, for many were poor. But it was dedicated to God’s service (cf. Ezra 7:15-19, 23, 27).

Our study leaves us a fine example of men who had a clear sense of stewardship over the material goods entrusted to them. Ezra set the pattern through godly leadership. His zeal for the worship of God led him to accept the challenge and take practical precautions. He had the wisdom to delegate responsibility to others and to inspire them with a sense of holy

mission.

But godly leaders must also have godly and loyal followers. Ezra’s mission succeeded because the chosen priests and Levites carried out his instructions. They shared his zeal and submitted to his authority. They displayed integrity and honesty. They were courageous in protecting what was under their charge. And they recognized, above all, that both they and the riches they guarded were holy, belonging exclusively to God. That kind of dedication is still needed to further the work of Jesus Christ’s church today.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. What wealth did Artaxerxes decree should be taken to Jerusalem? How was it to be used?
2. Whom did Ezra choose to care for the wealth during the journey?
3. Why was it necessary to weigh valuables in Ezra’s day?
4. Why did the Persian king contribute to the Jewish religion?
5. In what ways did Old Testament Jews practice freewill giving?
6. How valuable was the treasure Ezra transported?
7. Do you think Ezra was excessive in the precautions he took with this treasure? Explain.
8. In what sense were both the treasure and its guards holy?
9. In the church today, are some persons, places, or objects holier than others? Explain.
10. Why was it necessary to weigh the wealth at both ends of the trip?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# The Festival of Booths

Lesson: Nehemiah 8:13-18

Read: Nehemiah 7:73—8:18

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“All the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: . . . And there was very great gladness” (Nehemiah 8:17).

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## *Introduction*

Does studying God’s Word produce any change in our behavior? Do we see any purpose in Bible study beyond its mere completion? Some people leave their weekly session of Sunday school and worship believing they have fulfilled their duty to God and can now get back to living life “in the real world.” Even some who have a schedule of daily devotions consider these the extent of their spiritual duty. They read a text, say a prayer, and go about their daily rounds without giving further thought to what they have read.

At worst, this is legalism—expecting to gain God’s favor through external observances. At best, it is merely an

academic exercise—mastering facts to be able to exhibit superior knowledge. Yet the Bible was given so that we might become more like its Author. It is intended to turn us away from sin (Ps. 119:11), make us wise unto salvation (II Tim. 3:15), and equip us for good deeds (vss. 16-17). It does this by revealing God’s nature, our nature, God’s will, and His power to accomplish it for His glory.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. THE INCENTIVE FOR THE FESTIVAL—Neh. 8:13-15
- II. THE CELEBRATION OF THE FESTIVAL—Neh. 8:16-18

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE INCENTIVE FOR THE FESTIVAL

**NEH. 8:13** And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the

words of the law.

14 And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:

15 And that they should publish

**and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written.**

The events covered in this week's lesson occurred almost a century after the first Jewish exiles returned to Judah under Zerubbabel (538 B.C.). Though much of Jerusalem continued to lie in ruins, the temple was rebuilt (516 B.C.), and the first generation of those who returned recommitted themselves to the Lord.

Ezra led a second migration back to Judah in 458 B.C., after a new generation had arisen. He hoped to beautify the temple and initiate reforms. Though he had some success, he faced difficult times, as surrounding peoples both opposed the Jews externally and infiltrated their ranks through intermarriage.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem thirteen years after Ezra (445 B.C.), armed with political authority and royal permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. In spite of intense external opposition, he organized the Jews into a unified force to rebuild the wall and protect the workers. In a mere fifty-two days, the wall was finished (Neh. 6:15). Nehemiah then organized a city government (7:1-3) and devised a plan to repopulate Jerusalem (vss. 4-5).

**The study of the law (Neh. 8:13).** At this point Nehemiah gathered all the people to Jerusalem to renew their commitment to God's laws. On the first day of the seventh month, the beginning of the Jewish new year, Ezra read from the law, and the Levites assisted him in explaining it to the assembled crowd (vss. 1-8). Though many were moved to tears by this, the leaders encouraged them to rejoice instead (vss. 9-12).

The next day a more select group assembled for further study of the law (Neh. 8:13). Gathered to receive Ezra's teaching were "the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites." The heads of households in Israel were responsible to guide their families in God's way (Deut. 6:6-9), so it was important for them to have a thorough understanding of His Word. And since the priests and Levites were the professional teachers of the law, it was imperative that they understand it thoroughly themselves.

The teaching of the day before had whetted the appetite of these leaders for something more thorough. They no doubt came with questions and with a desire to please the Lord in every respect. They needed to see how God's principles could be applied to the lives of those under their care. We too need to so "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matt. 5:6) that we will seek every opportunity to digest God's Word.

**The command regarding a festival (Neh. 8:14-15).** From this study of the law they discovered "that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month." This was not just Moses' rule; it was part of "the law which the Lord had commanded by Moses." Moses was the lawgiver only in a secondary sense. Repeatedly it is said that "the Lord spake unto Moses, saying" (Lev. 23:1, 23, 33; 24:1). Thus, every statute Moses gave came from God.

This particular command was that Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month. This was actually the third observance of the seventh month. The first was the Feast of Trumpets on the first day, a new year commemoration. A second observance was the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, on the tenth day. The third was the Feast of Tabernacles (more accurately called the Feast of Booths),

celebrated from the fifteenth through the twenty-first days of the month.

The Feast of Booths was the third of three mandatory Jewish festivals, the other two being Passover and Pentecost (Exod. 23:14-17). Occurring during our October, it was chiefly a harvest festival (Exod. 23:16; Lev. 23:39; Deut. 16:13). It also commemorated historically Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, when they lived in booths (Lev. 23:42-43). On the first and eighth days of the festival, solemn assemblies were held; the other days were given to sacrifices and rejoicing (vss. 33-36).

The feast was preceded by a proclamation that the people should cut branches they could use to make booths. The original command was to cut "the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook" (Lev. 23:40). Nehemiah's generation adapted this to their present situation, ordering the people to go up into the hill country and get whatever branches they could find there.

The trees mentioned in Nehemiah 8:15 include, first, the olive, the most commonly cultivated tree in Israel. Valued primarily for its fruit and oil, the olive tree also provided plentiful branches and leaves for this occasion. The second mentioned is the "pine," though the exact meaning of the term is uncertain. It may refer to a variety of fir tree.

The myrtle is an evergreen shrub valued for its fragrant leaves and flowers. Its branches have always been favorites at this festival. The palm here is the date palm, which grows to great heights. It has no limbs, but its leaves grow in compound six-foot bunches. The last are shade trees, thick with leaves, and could include any of several varieties or species.

All these were to be used "to make booths, as it is written" (Neh. 8:15). "As it is written" refers only to the original

command to construct the booths (Lev. 23:42), for Scripture nowhere gives detailed instructions as to how they were to be made. Since the people were to dwell in them for seven days, we assume they had to be large and substantial enough to accommodate families for that length of time.

Modern Jewish celebrants interpret the living requirement loosely. For them it is fulfilled by eating all their meals there, although some prefer to spend more time there if the weather permits. The sides can be made of any material, including canvas or plastic, but the covering must be made of materials that have grown from the ground. These include branches, bamboo poles, cornstalks, or even pieces of wood. But they must be left loose, spaced sparsely enough to be able to see the sky.

## THE CELEBRATION OF THE FESTIVAL

**16 So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim.**

**17 And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.**

**18 Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.**

**The booths constructed (Neh. 8:16-17).** The proclamation went out, and the people complied with its di-

rections. Since the decision to celebrate the festival was made on the second day of the month (cf. vs. 13), they had about two weeks to prepare for it. The celebration was to take place “in the place which the Lord shall choose” (Deut. 16:15), and that was now Jerusalem. Most of the people lived outside the city at this time (cf. Neh. 7:4; 11:1-2), so they had to travel and build their booths there.

Those who lived in the city made booths on the roofs of their houses. Houses in the Near East typically had flat roofs (cf. Josh. 2:6; II Sam. 11:2; Mark 2:4; Acts 10:9), and these were large enough to accommodate a booth. Some were also built “in their courts” (Neh. 8:16). Houses were built around open courts, and these too provided space for temporary booths.

Some were set up in the outer courts of the temple of God. The second temple had now been completed, and it had two courts. The inner court was restricted to priests, so they and their families could build their booths there. The outer court was open to the general populace, so families coming from the countryside could utilize this space.

Pilgrims also set up their booths in the square by the Water Gate and by the Gate of Ephraim. The Water Gate was located on the eastern side of Jerusalem, overlooking the Kidron Valley and the Gihon Spring. In times of siege, the waters from Gihon were diverted into the city through a tunnel that Hezekiah dug (cf. II Chron. 32:3-4). But in times of peace, the people went out the Water Gate and brought water up from the spring.

The square in front of the Water Gate must have been spacious, for it was there that Ezra addressed the gathered people of Judah (Neh. 8:1, 3). So it also could accommodate many booths at the time of the festival. Until the repairs under Nehemiah, this part of the city

had been in serious disrepair (cf. 2:14); now it was completely restored (3:26; 12:37).

The Gate of Ephraim was on the north side of Jerusalem. It was so named because it led out toward the territory of Ephraim. Located four hundred cubits (six hundred feet) from the Corner Gate (II Kings 14:13; II Chron. 25:23), it, like the Water Gate, faced a broad square on which booths could be built.

The festival was celebrated by “all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity” (Neh. 8:17). None of the returned exiles excluded themselves. They “made booths, and sat under the booths.” All of them fulfilled what the law commanded. Nehemiah noted that “since the days of Jeshua (Joshua) the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so.” The celebration in Joshua’s time is nowhere recorded except here, but it makes sense in light of Joshua’s emphasis on obedience.

Does this mean that the Festival of Booths had never been celebrated from Joshua’s day to Nehemiah’s? Surely not, for it was observed at the time Solomon dedicated the temple (I Kings 8:65-66; II Chron. 7:8-10) and in the first year of the exiles’ return when the altar was built (Ezra 3:4). In addition, we cannot fathom it not being celebrated by such godly kings as David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

Nehemiah may have been referring to the spirit in which the feast was celebrated: “there was very great gladness” (Neh. 8:17). With the temple, city, and walls rebuilt and with a new zeal for the commandments of God, the people had reason to rejoice as previous generations had not. He may also have been stressing the universal participation, for “all the congregation” became involved. The extent of the celebration may have exceeded any

other since Joshua's day.

But most likely the thing that distinguished this observance was the fact that all Israelite families actually built and lived in booths. As noted before, this festival had a twofold significance—giving thanks for the harvest and remembering God's care in the wilderness. Perhaps over the years the harvest aspect had come to be emphasized, while living in booths as in the wilderness had been minimized.

Now, however, they had a special reason for stressing their sojourn in the wilderness. Just as Israel in Joshua's day had newly arrived in the Promised Land, so they had recently returned to that land from captivity. As the booths in Joshua's generation had represented a temporary stay in the desert, so now they represented the temporary exile to foreign lands. God had sustained them in both places, and for this there was great rejoicing.

**The law read (Neh. 8:18).** This festival entailed more than just living in booths and celebrating the harvest. It included solemn assemblies at the beginning and end and prescribed offerings for each of the intervening days (Num. 29:12-38). In fact, more sacrifices were offered at the Feast of Booths than at any other festival.

In addition, at this festival Ezra read from the law of God every day, from the first day of the feast to the last. This reading was not prescribed for every observance but for every seventh year (Deut. 31:10-13). At that time men, women, children, and foreigners were to be gathered to hear the law. The purpose was not only that they learn what it said but also that they "fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law" (vs. 12). It was especially important that children learn it (vs. 13).

The Jews thus "kept the feast seven days" (Neh. 8:18). The law specified that the festival last seven days (Lev.

23:34). The eighth day was technically not part of it but was added as a time of "solemn assembly" (vs. 36). A closing ceremony reminded the people that all their celebrating was in the context of worshipping the Lord.

We are not commanded to keep such a festival today. But we can learn from it—especially that God cares for us in all situations. As a harvest festival, it reminds us that all the bounty we enjoy comes from Him. And as a remembrance of the wilderness years, it assures us that even in lean times He supplies our needs. For both we should give thanks.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. What events led the returned Jewish exiles to want to observe the Festival of Booths?
2. When was this feast held? What did it commemorate?
3. What kinds of branches did the people cut? How were they used?
4. How long were the booths to be in place?
5. Where on their own property did the people put up their booths?
6. Where throughout Jerusalem were booths constructed?
7. Had the Festival of Booths not been celebrated since Joshua's day? Explain.
8. How were the circumstances of this festival similar in the days of Joshua and those of Nehemiah?
9. What occurred at this festival besides living in booths?
10. What can we learn about God's care from this Jewish festival?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Corporate Confession of Sins

Lesson: Nehemiah 9:2, 6-7, 9-10, 30-36

Read: Nehemiah 9:1-37

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“Thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly” (Nehemiah 9:33).

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## *Introduction*

We live in a day when self-esteem is highly valued. We are urged to think the best of ourselves in order to achieve our full potential. Counselors are busy helping clients to overcome a poor self-image and to believe in their worth. The Christian faith is often castigated for teaching that all are sinners, which allegedly keeps people from realizing their potential. Indeed, the whole idea of sin against God is scorned as a religious invention to oppress people.

With due recognition that some do need to overcome a poor self-image, we find the fact of sin a dark reality in ourselves, our society, and all human history. Scripture from beginning to end is concerned with human sin and God’s solution for it. It teaches that the first step

toward true self-esteem is repairing a broken relationship with God caused by sin. Christ died for sin, but we must acknowledge that our sin makes us hopeless without His salvation.

Thus, confession of sins is essential to enjoying God’s favor and spiritual blessings. The returned Jewish exiles in Nehemiah’s day realized this.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. **THE OCCASION FOR CONFESSION**—Neh. 9:2
- II. **GOD’S GRACIOUS CHOICE OF ISRAEL**—Neh. 9:6-7, 9-10
- III. **GOD’S DEALINGS WITH A DISOBEDIENT PEOPLE**—Neh. 9:30-36

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### **THE OCCASION FOR CONFESSION**

**NEH. 9:2** **And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.**

The seventh month had been eventful for the postexilic Jews. On the first day, Ezra and the Levites had read and explained the law of God to them (Neh. 8:1-8). A Scripture study the next day convinced the leaders that they should

announce a Festival of Booths for later in the month (vss. 13-14). This feast was held amid great rejoicing from the fifteenth to the twenty-second day (vss. 16-18).

Now, on the twenty-fourth day, they convened again for a time of fasting and confession (Neh. 9:1). This solemn event was limited to “the seed of Israel” (vs. 2). They “separated themselves from all strangers” because their confession revolved around the covenant relationship God had exclusively with Israel. They stood and confessed not only their own sins but also “the iniquities of their fathers.” Though their ancestors had been responsible for their own sins, these people acknowledged them as well, knowing that national guilt had brought them to their present situation.

Is it not strange that a feast of great rejoicing should be so closely followed by fasting and sackcloth? Should they not have done this on the Day of Atonement, which normally was held on the tenth day of the month? The people actually had mourned and wept when they first heard the law read (Neh. 8:9). But the leaders had told them that rejoicing was more appropriate, and they followed this by scheduling feasts of gladness (vss. 10-18).

But now that the Festival of Booths was over, their attention once again turned to the sins that the reading of the law had disclosed. This day of confession was not a regular Jewish observance; it was an extra observance called forth by their special circumstances.

## **GOD’S GRACIOUS CHOICE OF ISRAEL**

**6 Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.**

**7 Thou art the LORD the God, who**

**didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham.**

**9 And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;**

**10 And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day.**

A fourth of the day was spent in reading from the law, and another fourth was given to confession and worship (Neh. 9:3). Several Levites (vss. 4-5) led the people in these devotions and directed them to pray the prayer of confession that makes up most of this chapter.

**God’s creation and providence (Neh. 9:6).** The prayer surveys Israel’s history to show how the Lord dealt with a perennially unfaithful people. But before focusing on Israel, it portrays the nature of God Himself. Recognizing the exaltation of His name (vs. 5), it focuses on His uniqueness as the only God and on His marvelous creative works.

Harking back to the declaration of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Thou, . . . art Lord alone” in Nehemiah 9:6 expresses the central feature of the Jewish faith. “Lord” is “Yahweh,” the covenant name of Israel’s God; there is none besides Him. He has created all things, including “heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host.” “Heaven” here refers to the skies that surround the earth. “Heaven of heavens” refers to the highest heaven, the farthest point in deepest space. “Host” is, literally, “army,” here probably referring to the heavenly bodies (cf. Isa. 40:26).

The Lord has also created “the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein” (Neh. 9:6). He has made the entire universe (Gen. 1:1). In addition, this prayer acknowledges God’s preservation of all that He has made. His providence sustains all of cre-

ation, ensuring that every part functions in harmony with the rest. As a result, He is worshipped by all the hosts of heaven, most likely a reference to the angels (cf. Pss. 103:20-21; 148:2).

**God's choice of Abraham (Neh. 9:7).** Yahweh, this solitary Creator God, "didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham." This choice was the basis for all of God's mighty deeds in the history of Israel. Ur was the prominent Sumerian city-state in lower Mesopotamia that later was inhabited by the Chaldeans. From there Abraham migrated along with His family and, sustained by God's promises, eventually settled in the Canaan (Gen. 11:31—12:5).

This man's name was originally "Abram" (Neh. 9:7), which means "exalted father." But the Lord changed it to "Abraham, that is, "father of a multitude," signifying His plan to make him the father of many nations (Gen. 17:4-5). The prayer then recounts the covenant by which God promised him and his seed the land of Canaan—a covenant He had faithfully fulfilled (Neh. 9:8; cf. Gen. 15:18-21).

**God's deliverance of His people from Egypt (Neh. 9:9-10).** The prayer of confession next recounts what the Lord did to rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Exodus was the signature event that marked them as the chosen people of God. He saw their affliction as mistreated slaves in Egypt and listened to their cries. "Their cry by the Red sea" could refer to their plight after they had left Egypt (Exod. 14:10-12), but it probably means their cry in Egypt, which is located next to the Red Sea (3:7, 9).

In answer to their cry, the Lord showed "signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land" (Neh. 9:10). These included ten plagues of increasing severity that put to shame the magicians of Egypt and discredited their false gods. These signs

affected Pharaoh and his family, his "servants" (court officials), and the whole population. None were exempted, and they finally begged Pharaoh to let Israel go before Egypt was completely destroyed (Exod. 10:7).

God had multiplied His signs against the Egyptians because He knew how arrogantly they had mistreated the Israelites. This pride had led them to increase Israel's burdens, to reduce their raw materials for making bricks, to refuse to let them go and worship, and to despise the name of their God. The Lord had not let Egyptian pride go unpunished. Through His judgments He had made a great name for Himself. He had proved that He was the one Almighty God who had chosen and redeemed Israel for Himself.

This reputation had spread far beyond Egypt. Rahab testified many years later that God's deeds for Israel had struck terror into all the surrounding peoples, and she recognized Him as "God in heaven above, and in earth beneath" (Josh. 2:11). Now those of Nehemiah's generation testified that the Lord's name was still exalted.

## **GOD'S DEALINGS WITH A DISOBEDIENT PEOPLE**

**30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands.**

**31 Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God.**

**32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people,**

since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

**33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:**

**34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.**

**35 For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.**

**36 Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it.**

**A recognition of past mercies (Neh. 9:30-31).** The prayer of confession continues to recount the Lord's unfailing provision for Israel in spite of their sinfulness. The parting of the Red Sea (vs. 11), the direction by the pillar of cloud and fire (vs. 12), the giving of the law (vss. 13-14), and the preservation of their lives in the desert (vss. 15-21) all proved His love. So did His blessings after they entered Canaan (vss. 22-29). But they had requited Him with repeated rebellion.

God dealt with His people with a combination of forbearance and discipline. For many years He withheld judgment, admonishing them through His prophets (Neh. 9:30). Had they been sensitive to His grace, they could have been forgiven. But they hardened themselves against the prophets' pleas, and the Lord finally turned them over to "the people of the lands" that surrounded them (cf. II Kings 17:13; II Chron. 36:15-17).

"Nevertheless," the prayer continues, "for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them" (Neh. 9:31). God would have been

justified in doing so (Exod. 32:10; 33:5), but even as He delivered them to captivity in a foreign land, He refused to wipe them out (Jer. 30:11; 46:28). The reason was that He is merciful and gracious. Though His holiness was greatly offended by their sin, His grace refused to abandon those to whom He had committed Himself (cf. Ezek. 36:16-24).

**A plea for present mercy (Neh. 9:32).** To this point, Israel's prayer has been a survey of God's faithfulness to an unfaithful people. But "now therefore" marks a transition to their present circumstances. Because of His record of merciful dealings with their fathers, they pleaded for His mercy in their present need. They could still address Him as "our God," but they did not take this privilege lightly. They knew He was "the great, the mighty, and the terrible God." "Terrible" (1:5; 4:14) means "awesome."

Because of His greatness and might, the Lord inspired reverence and fear. Yet for all this, He kept His covenant of mercy and unfailing love. He had been loyal to His covenants with Abraham, though His people had fallen short.

Thus, they pleaded that He not regard all the trouble that had befallen them as a trifling matter. This trouble was so comprehensive that it fell upon kings, princes, priests, prophets, fathers, and people. None had escaped it. And it also had lasted a long time—since the days of the Assyrian kings right up until this day of their confession. The first Assyrian inroads had begun some four hundred years before Nehemiah's time. Eventually Assyria toppled the ten northern tribes and threatened Judah.

**An acknowledgment of justice (Neh. 9:33-35).** Though these people prayed that God would not trivialize their centuries of suffering, they freely admitted that their troubles were deserved. "Howbeit," they prayed, "thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly."

Though they had not participated in the sins of their fathers, they acknowledged their national identity with them.

They further acknowledged that their leaders in the past had not kept God's law. These included their kings and princes, the political leaders. Unlike rulers in surrounding nations, Israelite kings were not the religious heads of their people. They were neither gods nor spokesmen for them. To the contrary, like everyone else they were bound by God's law. And when they tried to ignore or overrule it, they were accountable to God and brought judgment upon themselves.

The priests, on the other hand, were legitimate spiritual leaders who represented the people before God and taught them His law. But often they failed in this, going through their rituals while living in sin (1 Sam. 2:22-29; Ezek. 22:26). Similarly, the "fathers" (Neh. 9:34)—heads of households who had the responsibility of teaching their children (Deut. 6:6-7)—neglected to do so and, in fact, through their actions often taught them to sin. As a result, the laws they had broken became a testimony against them.

The Israelites had failed to appreciate God's rich blessings. "They have not served thee in their kingdom" (Neh. 9:35) refers to the independent national government they had enjoyed under Saul, David, and Solomon. "Thy great goodness that thou gavest them" speaks of their many material blessings. "The large and fat land which thou gavest before them" describes the size and fertility of Canaan. They did not serve God in this setting or turn from sin.

**An acknowledgment of humiliation (Neh. 9:36).** Now they were back in that spacious and fertile land, but things were not the same as before. This was the land God had covenanted to give to their forefathers, but the descendants did not really possess it. They were "servants in it," mere tenants of foreign rulers in what should have been their own land. They

lived there at the pleasure of the Persian kings, obeyed their laws, and paid taxes to them.

They recognized that this was due to the nation's sins (Neh. 9:37). But to have foreign dominion over their bodies, livestock, and produce was a far cry from what God had intended. They admitted, "We are in great distress." Yet they used their plight as the occasion for reform. They drew up a covenant, pledging themselves to return to the ways of the Lord (9:38—10:39).

Confession is difficult. It requires humility to admit that we have sinned and invited God's displeasure, but it is essential if we wish to mature in our faith. And when we have done it, we have the assurance of His cleansing and forgiveness.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. What was the most likely reason for postponing confession until after the Festival of Booths?
2. What attributes of God did the Jews stress in their prayer?
3. Why did the Lord change Abram's name to "Abraham"?
4. How was God's name exalted by His signs and wonders in Egypt?
5. What past mercies of God did the Jews recount in their prayer?
6. Why did God not completely destroy Israel for its sins?
7. Why did the Jews confess their forefathers' sins as well as their own?
8. How had past leaders failed to fulfill God's expectations?
9. What rich blessings had Israel failed to appreciate?
10. Why were the Jews still distressed after returning to their homeland?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Dedication of the Wall

Lesson: Nehemiah 12:27-36, 38, 43

Read: Nehemiah 12:27-43

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“That day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: . . . so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off” (Nehemiah 12:43).

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## *Introduction*

Dedication is a well-known concept in our world. Books and musical compositions are dedicated to special persons. Memorials are dedicated to the memory of statesmen, reformers, and fallen heroes, as well as in remembrance of famous battles. Tombs are dedicated to unknown soldiers.

Dedication ceremonies mark the opening of highways, tunnels, and bridges. Ships and aircraft are dedicated in special observances, as are innovative cars and other inventions. Buildings and properties are dedicated: medical centers, libraries, museums, schools, office buildings, and even athletic fields. Each of these is dedicated to the public for its use.

“Dedication” is a common religious

word as well, in the sense of presenting something to God. We observe parents’ dedication of their babies and missionary candidates’ dedication of themselves. We dedicate to Him new houses of worship and new organizations to further His work.

Dedication observances were practiced in ancient Israel as well.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. PREPARATION FOR THE DEDICATION—Neh. 12:27-30
- II. PROCESSIONS IN THE DEDICATION—Neh. 12:31-36, 38
- III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEDICATION—Neh. 12:43

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### PREPARATION FOR THE DEDICATION

**NEH. 12:27** And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedi-

cation with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.

**28** And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about

**Jerusalem, and from the villages of Netophathi;**

**29 Also from the house of Gilgal, and out of the fields of Geba and Azmaveth: for the singers had builded them villages round about Jerusalem.**

**30 And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall.**

**The participants gathered (Neh. 12:27-29).** Nehemiah had left his position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes and returned to Judah with the primary goal of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. Though the temple had been rebuilt years before, the city lay exposed to invasion, and few people would even live there. In spite of strong opposition from surrounding peoples, the protection of God and the skilled leadership of Nehemiah enabled the Jews to finish the wall in just fifty-two days.

Now it was publicly dedicated to the Lord. To prepare for this, the Levites were sent for from all the various places they were living. The Levites did not have a tribal inheritance but were scattered throughout the territories of the other tribes of Israel. Originally, forty-eight cities were designated for their use (Num. 35:2, 7), but after the Captivity this rule could not be followed. Some of them now lived in Jerusalem (Neh. 11:18), but many still lived in the countryside and came to the city only as their temple duties required.

Since this dedication was to be a joyful time of singing, Levitical musicians, both singers and instrumentalists, were sought. Three instruments are named at this point: cymbals, psalteries, and harps. All three were regularly used for religious ceremonies (I Chron. 15:16, 28). "Psalteries" were large harps with twelve strings. "Harps" were lyres, smaller than psalteries and having ten strings.

All these musicians would contribute to the gladness and thanksgiving of the

day. "Thanksgivings" in Nehemiah 12:27 renders a Hebrew word that is later translated "companies of them that gave thanks" (vs. 31, cf. vs. 38). We might translate it "thanksgiving choirs." The people of Judah had reason to give thanks. The wall had been completed, their enemies had been thwarted, and Jerusalem was again habitable. They had worked hard and been vigilant, but the Lord had superintended the whole project.

The musicians gathered from outlying areas. "The sons of the singers" (Neh. 12:28) were those whose families had long served in this temple ministry. David had established these families after bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (I Chron. 25:1-7), and throughout the centuries following they had continued the tradition. Even during the Captivity they had remembered their calling, and those who returned were able to practice it again (cf. Ezra 2:41-42; Neh. 7:44). Thus, this was an especially important occasion for them.

Some of them came "out of the plain country round about Jerusalem" (Neh. 12:28). This was the rural area in southern Israel extending westward from the Jordan River in a rather wide plain. Others came "from the villages of Netophathi" (or "of the Netophathites"). Netophah was a town south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Even before the Captivity some Levites lived there (I Chron. 9:16), and it was repopulated after the Captivity by a small number of inhabitants (Ezra 2:22; Neh. 7:26).

Still others came from "the house of Gilgal" (or "Beth-gilgal") (Neh. 12:29). This was probably the place near Jericho where the Israelites had first encamped after crossing the Jordan (Josh. 4:19-20) and where Saul was later crowned king (I Sam. 11:15). There was another Gilgal farther west, located northwest of Beth-el, where Elijah and Elisha had a school of prophets (II Kings 2:1; 4:38), but that is

not as likely a location for the residence of Levitical musicians after the Exile.

The Levites gathered, finally, from the region of Geba and Azmaveth. Geba was in the tribal lands of Benjamin, about six miles north of Jerusalem. It had been designated by Joshua as a town for priests (Josh. 21:17; I Chron. 6:60) and was one of the areas newly repopulated after the Exile (Ezra 2:26; Neh. 11:31). Even closer to Jerusalem was Azmaveth, five miles to the northeast, on the border of Judah and Benjamin. It was the home of a small number of exiles (Neh. 7:28).

Thus, the Levitical singers gathered from villages they had established and settled in around Jerusalem. They were not far from the city, but they were scattered to the south, east, and north.

**The participants purified (Neh. 12:30).** Before the time of rejoicing occurred, the priests and Levites performed works of purification—first for themselves, then for the people, the gates, and the walls. Since Israel worshipped a holy God, ceremonial purification was essential before worship could take place. Uncleanness contracted through contact with a corpse, the birth of a child, certain diseases and running sores, and various other causes had to be removed (Lev. 22:4-9). Physical objects used in worship also had to be cleansed.

Our text does not tell us what this purification included. Judging from other instances, it may have involved fasting, making sacrifices of sin and burnt offerings, abstaining from marital intercourse, bathing, and putting on clean garments. The gates and walls may have been sprinkled with the blood of sacrifices.

The New Testament does not lay on Christians any requirements for ritual purification. However, we are reminded often that our God is holy and that our lives should therefore be pure from the defilement of sin (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Titus 2:11-14; I Pet. 1:15-16; II Pet. 3:11). If we do allow ourselves to be defiled, sincere

confession will bring God's cleansing (I John 1:9). Beyond this we are to cleanse and purify hands, heart, and mind (Jas. 4:8) and recommit ourselves to a holy life (II Cor. 7:1).

## **PROCESSIONS IN THE DEDICATION**

**31 Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great companies of them that gave thanks, whereof one went on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate:**

**32 And after them went Hoshai, and half of the princes of Judah,**

**33 And Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam,**

**34 Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah,**

**35 And certain of the priests' sons with trumpets; namely, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph:**

**36 And his brethren, Shemaiah, and Azarael, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethaneel, and Judah, Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe before them.**

**38 And the other company of them that gave thanks went over against them, and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall.**

**Location of the procession to the right (Neh. 12:31).** Nehemiah now wrote of his personal involvement in the dedication: "Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall." This refers to the leaders of all the Jews at that time, since after the Exile "Judah" was used of the entire Jewish state, not just the tribe by that name (cf. Ezra 10:7; Neh. 5:14; 6:7; 12:44). Nehemiah led these men to the top of the wall to

participate in the festal processions.

Some have questioned whether the choirs could have walked “upon the wall” (Neh. 12:31) and suggested the translation “alongside the wall.” But archeological excavations that have uncovered a portion of this wall have revealed that it was almost nine feet wide at that point (Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Broadman & Holman). This would have been wide enough for these processions.

Nehemiah appointed two large assemblies of vocalists to give thanks—that is, two thanksgiving choirs. One was to proceed to the right and the other to the left. Since right and left to the Jews were determined while looking eastward, the right was toward the south, proceeding on the wall clockwise. The second choir then went to the left (northward). The two were to circle the wall until they met.

Although the starting point is not designated, it was probably in the vicinity of the Valley Gate, along the southern segment of the western wall. Going opposite directions, they eventually met on the eastern side of the city and together entered the temple area (cf. Neh. 12:40). The first choir thus went southward toward the Dung Gate, at the southern extremity of Jerusalem.

**Leaders of Judah involved (Neh. 12:32-34).** As to the order of the march, “after them” seems to indicate that a group of singers went first, giving thanks (cf. vs. 31). Then followed “Hoshaiah, and half of the princes of Judah” (vs. 32). We know nothing additional about Hoshaiah, but since his name appears first, he must have been a prominent official.

Included in the group led by Hoshaiah were Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah (Neh. 12:33-34). Since the “Judah” in verse 32 designates all the Jews, these leaders could have come from any of the twelve tribes, even Levi. It is

not likely that the Ezra here was the priestly scribe, since he is mentioned separately in verse 36. Neither are the “Judah” and “Benjamin” of verse 34 tribal names; they are names of a list of individuals. We have no further indication of who these men were.

**Priestly musicians involved (Neh. 12:35-36).** Following the singers and the princes of Judah came “certain of the priests’ sons with trumpets.” The trumpets they were playing were long, silver instruments like those used in the wilderness to call the people together to break camp (Num. 10:1-8), to call Israel to battle, and to announce their festivals (vss. 9-10). Blowing these trumpets was always the prerogative of the priests (vs. 8).

Leading this group was “Zechariah the son of Jonathan” (Neh. 12:35), whose lineage is here traced back to Asaph, one of the most prominent musicians during the reigns of David and Solomon (I Chron. 16:4-5; II Chron. 5:12). Asaph apparently established a school of music, or musicians’ guild; the term “sons of Asaph” became synonymous with being musicians (I Chron. 25:1-2).

Accompanying Zechariah were “his brethren” (Neh. 12:36). “Brethren” here may mean members of the same musical group. Eight men are named, and they are said to be playing “the musical instruments of David the man of God.” Thus, some had other instruments besides trumpets (cf. I Chron. 15:16; II Chron. 29:26). David was esteemed as a man of God because of his devotion to Israel’s true worship of the Lord.

Following the singers, but in front of the rest of the procession, was the Ezra we know as a scribe. His position shows the respect in which he was held for his spiritual leadership. Ezra had seen the Jewish province through a severe spiritual crisis (Ezra 9—10) and more recently had led in a renewal of devotion to the law (Neh. 8). So

while Nehemiah was the governor, Ezra was the spiritual leader and deserved this honored position this day.

**Location of the procession to the left (Neh. 12:38).** The choir going right circled the southern edge of the city, passed the Fountain Gate, and proceeded up the east side to the area of the Water Gate (vs. 37). At the same time, a second choir moved in the opposite direction, circling the northern end of the wall to the east side (vs. 38). “I after them” indicates that Nehemiah had a position in this procession analogous to Ezra’s in the other one. He walked behind the initial group of singers but ahead of “the half of the people upon the wall.”

The procession went to the Broad Wall. This may refer to a wall built by Hezekiah extending to the west. Its name may have come from its unusual thickness (twenty-three feet). From there the choir moved around the north side of Jerusalem to the east. The two groups then went into the temple together.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEDICATION**

**43 Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.**

The dedication consummated in the temple service. The singers of the choirs “sang loud” (Neh. 12:42), an expression that means they caused their voices to be heard. Priests then offered “great sacrifices” (vs. 43), a number suitable for the occasion. They also rejoiced in all that had occurred.

What had caused this overwhelming joy? First, with the wall completely repaired, their city had security from its enemies. Second, they had the satisfaction of knowing they could undertake a major project together and complete it. Thus,

their morale was raised as they contemplated the future of their province.

But most significantly, God Himself had given them cause for great joy. They realized that while Nehemiah’s leadership and their hard work had sustained them, it was the Lord who had made everything come together. They could rejoice because they had a powerful God who worked on their behalf. The women and children joined the heads of households in rejoicing so that the joy of Jerusalem could be heard from far away.

God has done great things for us as well. Let us, like this Jewish community, make sure His name is magnified in our communities as we rejoice in His grace.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. How were the Jews able to complete the rebuilding of the wall in such a short time?
2. Why was it important to have Levites at this dedication?
3. Where were the places from which the Levites came in relation to Jerusalem?
4. Why did the Jews have to undergo ritual purification before this event?
5. What kind of purification do Christians need? Why?
6. Explain how the two thanksgiving choirs were to proceed as they walked on the wall.
7. What kinds of instruments did priests and Levites use?
8. What roles did Ezra and Nehemiah have in this dedication?
9. Where did the dedication end? What was done there?
10. Why was this a time of great joy for the Jewish community?

—Robert E. Wenger.

# Sanctifying the Lord's Day

Lesson: Nehemiah 13:15-22

Read: Nehemiah 13:4-31

TIME: about 420 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—"I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day" (Nehemiah 13:22).

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## *Introduction*

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). We all know these words of Jesus and acknowledge their truth; but how difficult it is to live by them! How many people live as though economic considerations override all other motivations in life?

The commercialization of our society takes many forms. The advertising industry thrives by convincing people that they simply *must* have certain goods. Religious holidays become nothing more than lucrative seasons for increasing profits. And Sunday, no longer a day of worship, has become the primary shopping day for many.

In His dealings with Old Testament Is-

rael, God incorporated the Sabbath principle to remind His people that work and accumulation are not the most important pursuits in life. The weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath Year, and the Year of Jubilee all taught them that, in the midst of needed rest and restoration, God would continue to supply their needs.

Sadly, greed often led Israel to ignore the Sabbath. This week's lesson finds Nehemiah having to deal with this perennial problem.

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. THE PROBLEM—Neh. 13:15-16
- II. THE REMEDY—Neh. 13:17-19
- III. THE SEQUEL—Neh. 13:20-22

## *Exposition: Verse by Verse*

### THE PROBLEM

**NEH. 13:15** In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought

into Jerusalem on the sabbath day; and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals.

16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's term as governor of Judah had been productive, and by the end of twelve years the province seemed stable and spiritually focused. But Nehemiah had to return to the king of Persia at that time (Neh. 13:6) because he had been granted a fixed leave of absence (cf. 2:6; 5:14). He probably took up his duties again as the king's cupbearer, but after a time he got permission to return to Judah.

The period of his absence, though unspecified, could not have been long—not more than a few years. But when he returned, he found conditions in disarray. For one thing, Eliashib the priest had converted some storage chambers in the temple into a residence for a former enemy, Tobiah the Ammonite (Neh. 13:4-7). Nehemiah, furious at this, threw out Tobiah's possessions and restored the chambers to their rightful use (vss. 8-9).

A second problem he had to deal with was neglect of the needs of the Levites, who were supposed to be supported by the people's tithes. The gifts had not been given, and the Levites were forced to neglect the temple worship and farm their lands to support themselves (Neh. 13:10). After rebuking the rulers of Judah, Nehemiah restored the tithes and appointed men to oversee their collection and distribution (vss. 11-13).

**Jews working on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15).** The lapses Nehemiah discovered were inexcusable, for the Jewish leaders had earlier signed a solemn oath to obey the law and honor the temple worship (10:1-39). But they violated it in yet a third way: they desecrated the Sabbath. The people were working and doing business on the Sabbath as on every other day.

God, citing His own example of resting after six days of creative work, had commanded that the Israelites set apart the Sabbath as holy (Exod. 20:8-11). He had even made provision so that they

did not have to gather manna on the Sabbath (16:22-26). Yet Nehemiah found them treading wine presses, harvesting grain, loading donkeys, and bringing produce to sell in Jerusalem on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15). This was in spite of their earlier oath (cf. 10:31).

Most of this work was being done for commercial purposes, for Nehemiah reported that he warned those involved against continuing to sell food on the Sabbath Day. Some may have been farming merely to meet the needs of their own families, but even this betrayed a lack of faith in the Lord. He had promised to provide on the other six days enough to compensate for what they did not harvest on the seventh.

**Foreigners trading on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:16).** The produce the Jews brought to Jerusalem was for more than just local consumption. Foreigners were there to trade other products for it. "There dwelt men of Tyre also therein," Nehemiah observed. Tyre (along with Sidon) was one of the two famous Phoenician trading cities of ancient times. From its harbor along the Mediterranean, merchant ships sailed forth to the far reaches of the known world, bringing back exotic products from both east and west (Ezek. 27:12-25).

Situated just to the north of Israel, Tyre had cordial relations with both David and Solomon, supplying materials for Solomon's temple and acting as a hub in his commercial empire. In Nehemiah's day, Tyre was past its prime and, like Judah, part of the Persian Empire. But it still made its living by trade, as is evident in our passage.

Sabbath observance was unique to the Jews, so we can understand why foreigners had no scruples against trading on that day. The Tyrians brought their fish and other merchandise to Jerusalem to trade for the Jews' agricultural products. Indeed, they settled there, apparently establishing commercial headquarters to better conduct their trade.

It was not wrong for the Jews to trade with these foreigners. What was wrong was letting foreigners impose customs on them that were contrary to their law. Fearful of losing business, they violated the revealed will of God. Their priorities were material, not spiritual. And their failure serves as a warning to Christians today, who are called to be in the world but forbidden to descend to its thinking and ways.

## THE REMEDY

**17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?**

**18 Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.**

**19 And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.**

**Rebuking the nobles of Judah (Neh. 13:17-18).** Nehemiah was a remarkable leader. He did not look for trouble, but when it came, he faced it directly, fortified by convictions of God's will. He had already rebuked those trading on the Sabbath (vs. 15); now he confronted members of Judah's nobility. These men should have been vigilant against evil, but they were often part of it themselves (cf. Ezra 10:14; Neh. 5:7; 13:11).

Nehemiah challenged them: "What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?" (Neh. 13:17). They may have thought Sabbath business was essential to Judah's economy, but he called it evil, for it took what God said was holy (Exod.

20:8) and made it common.

But was Sabbath desecration that serious? Was it not just a minor breach of the law? Nehemiah let them know it was not: "Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city?" (Neh. 13:18). From the beginning the Israelites apparently had difficulty keeping this law. Pollution of the Sabbath was one reason the Exodus generation could not enter the land (Ezek. 20:11-16).

In Leviticus Moses had foretold Israel's exile from the land, when Canaan would finally enjoy the Sabbaths its people had neglected (Lev. 26:33-35, 43). Shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah had warned of the doom that awaited those who refused to honor the Sabbath (Jer. 17:21-27). And after Judah finally went into Captivity, the chronicler observed that their absence would finally enable the land to enjoy its Sabbaths (II Chron. 36:20-21). Moses' warning had been fulfilled.

Nehemiah knew these Scriptures and had a good understanding of why the Babylonian catastrophe had occurred. But the shortsighted leaders of Judah did not. Ezra probably had died by this time, and the priestly leadership that remained was not having a strong impact (cf. Neh. 13:4-5). So it remained for this governor, Nehemiah, to correct the disastrous direction they were going.

He said that in spite of all the evil God had visited on their fathers, they were stirring up more wrath for Israel by polluting the Sabbath. God had been gracious to this remnant, but they had not learned anything from their history. The path they were following could only bring more divine retribution.

As much as we hate to admit it, our spiritual memories are short. Because we still have a sinful nature, we easily forget the lessons of God's blessing and discipline and wander again into sin. The only remedy for this is to absorb the mind of God through His Word

and to pray that the Holy Spirit will enable us to apply it to our lives (cf. Ps. 119:11).

**Closing the gates on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:19).** Nehemiah was not only a godly man who could remind his people of the will of God but also a practical leader who used his authority to enforce it. Having shamed the rulers for their disobedience, he made sure commercial activity on the Sabbath stopped. He ordered that the city gates be shut before the Sabbath began and remain so until it ended.

The Jews reckoned their days from sunset to sunset, so the Sabbath began when the sun set on Friday and ended when it set on Saturday. Nehemiah commanded that at the time when evening shadows began to fall on the gates of Jerusalem—even before the sun set—the gates be shut and that they remain so for the next twenty-four hours.

He also stationed some of his servants by the gates to ensure that no merchandise was brought into the city on the Sabbath. These servants were subordinate officials who served under the governor (cf. Neh. 4:16, 23; 5:10, 16). These men refused to allow anyone with a load of merchandise to enter the city. Nehemiah reasoned that when admonition and persuasion did not produce results, coercion would.

## THE SEQUEL

**20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.**

**21 Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath.**

**22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my**

**God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.**

**Discouraging merchants (Neh. 13:20-21).** Even closing the gates did not end the problem: on at least two occasions the merchants and vendors of various goods camped outside Jerusalem. Perhaps they initially came expecting the gates to be open and finding them closed decided to wait until they opened in the morning. When that did not happen, they could still hope the people of Jerusalem would come out to them.

It is not clear whether the people of the city were permitted to leave on the Sabbath. But even if they were not, foreign merchants could meet Jewish farmers and craftsmen from the countryside and exchange goods outside the gates. Either way, their presence defeated Nehemiah's purpose for having the gates closed.

After two weeks of this, Nehemiah decided it must stop. So he issued a warning. Demanding to know why they were camping by the wall, he informed the merchants that if they did so again, he would take action against them. As governor, Nehemiah had the authority to remove them by force. He always approached problems straightforwardly (cf. Neh. 5:6-7; 13:7-9, 10-11, 25), so there is no doubt that he would have carried out his threat. The offenders understood this, and from that time on they no longer showed up on the Sabbath.

This sequence of events surrounding Jewish Sabbath observance teaches us much about the human heart. God gave Israel this law for their good: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Yet many Jews failed to believe this and violated the command. Even when rebuked, they continued to violate it until they were forced to obey. So even in their obedience, their hearts were wicked and their wills unbent.

Lawkeeping thus does not make us righteous before God. Those who keep His commands willingly do so because they already have been transformed by His grace. Those who do it legalistically to gain His favor will never succeed (cf. Gal. 2:16). And for still others, the presence of a command is simply an incentive to disobedience (cf. Rom. 7:7-8). God had valid purposes for the law, but being the means of salvation was not one of them.

**Appointing Levites as guards (Neh. 13:22).** Nehemiah had earlier stationed some of his own subordinates to guard the gates on the Sabbath. He had probably done this to keep the regular gatekeepers from accepting bribes from merchants. Now he went further: “I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day.” Every seventh day, the gates were in the hands of the recognized religious leaders of the nation.

This was no minor responsibility; it was a spiritual duty that required ceremonial purification, just as temple duties did. Nehemiah did this so that the nation would again keep the Sabbath set apart, recognizing it as holy before God. It had been treated as common. Now the presence of Levites would send a message that it was to be kept holy.

Nehemiah ended his report with a brief prayer: “Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy” (Neh. 13:22). Several prayers occur throughout this book. In 4:4 Nehemiah prayed for God’s judgment against Israel’s enemies. In 5:19 he asked God to remember him for his good deeds for the Jews. Then, three times in chapter 13 (vss. 14, 22, 31) he asked Him to remember him for good and to prosper his reforms.

This prayer may seem self-serving—asking God to reward his good deeds. But in reality it was a plea that He act

justly and uphold what Nehemiah had done in good faith, even though his work had sometimes been unpopular. He did not want God to allow his efforts to be undone through the faithlessness of the people.

New Testament Scripture does not require Christians to observe the Jewish Sabbath, for every day should be holy for us. Nevertheless, the early church established the first day of the week to remember Jesus’ resurrection by rest and worship (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2). This tradition, combined with God’s original principle of resting one day of every seven, should guide us.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. What made the infractions of the law that Nehemiah found upon his return from Persia so serious?
2. What practices did Nehemiah find happening on the Sabbath?
3. Why did the Jews still have dealings with Tyre in Nehemiah’s time?
4. Was it wrong for Jews to trade with foreigners? Explain.
5. How serious was Israel’s desecration of the Sabbath in the eyes of God?
6. How do we know Nehemiah’s rebuke of the nobles did not solve the Sabbath problem?
7. Whom did Nehemiah initially station at the gates of Jerusalem to enforce Sabbath observance?
8. How did merchants react to Nehemiah’s closure of the gates?
9. Does the law change the human heart? Explain.
10. What did Nehemiah request in his prayer?

—Robert E. Wenger.