

The Quarter Ahead

The theme for this quarter involves the way in which God's people worship Him. It begins with studies in the book of Isaiah. Lesson 1 shows how Isaiah was changed completely when he met God in the temple and truly began to worship. In the next lesson we see the prophet take what he had learned about God and challenge the people to genuine worship. He told them what it would be like in the kingdom when the entire world honors God in every way. Since that is not what the people were doing, lesson 3 shows how Isaiah admonished them for their worthless worship. They claimed to love God, but their hearts were far from Him.

The fourth lesson from the book of Isaiah provides another look at what conditions will be like in the kingdom of God. There the blessings of God will be poured out abundantly on His people who worship Him.

The second unit this quarter comes from the book of Ezra. He was a priest and scribe who led the people of God back from their captivity in Babylon. Lesson 5 describes how the first group who came back to the land set up the altar in Jerusalem and began to once again offer sacrifices in worship of God. Lesson 6 shows how the preparations were made for the reconstruction of the temple as a great center of worship. In lesson 7 we see how work on the temple resumed after several years of neglect. Ezra told how the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah came on the scene to encourage the people in their work. The temple was completed.

Lesson 8 discusses the actual journey of Ezra to the land and his example of

prayer in worship. He led the people in a fast to prepare them for the journey and to seek the protection of God as they traveled from Babylon to Jerusalem.

One of the reasons for Ezra's trip was to safely transport the temple treasures back to Jerusalem so that they could be used in worship. Lesson 9 explains the care with which they handled the vessels, which were holy unto the Lord.

The third unit this quarter includes lessons in worship from the life of Nehemiah. He also led a contingent of God's people back to the land about fourteen years after Ezra. His job was to rebuild the wall of the city, which had lain in ruins since Nebuchadnezzar's attacks over one hundred years before. Lesson 10 reveals how the safety of the wall made it possible for the people to worship God through a greater understanding of His Word as taught by Ezra. In lesson 11 we see how the truth they had learned from the Word of God brought conviction of sin. As a result, confessing sin and seeking forgiveness from God became an important element in the worship of God's people.

Lesson 12 describes the great day of worship in thanksgiving as the wall of Jerusalem was dedicated to God. The rejoicing of the people in worship was heard by all those who lived anywhere near the city. One more lesson on worship needed to be learned by the people. In lesson 13 we see how the people learned that worship should affect every part of life. Even our business dealings must honor God, for worship is as much what we do as what we say.

—Robert A. Allen.

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edness to the Spirit of Truth, each writing in his own style as enlightened by the Holy Spirit. At best we know in part only. "They received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Worship from the Heart

ROBERT A. ALLEN

Methods of worship have become the subject of many discussions in religious circles over the past two decades. Most of those discussions center on styles of music, but the issues concerning worship have far greater spiritual implications than only what kind of music a person prefers. Essentially, worship that pleases God must be worship that is the expression of a heart that is right with Him.

The forms of worship in the temple were clearly defined by the Law of Moses. The people were told exactly what offerings to make and when to make them. They were told when to hold feast days and what to do on those days. Even during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, after the Exile, those patterns of worship still prevailed, as is seen in the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:14).

We know that music was a large part of temple worship. Both singers and instrumental musicians were included in the activities of the Levites (cf. Neh. 12:27-28). The lyrics of many of the songs they used have been preserved for us in the book of Psalms. The music to which those lyrics were sung has not been preserved. We really do not know what temple music sounded like except that it included trumpets, cymbals, harps, and other instruments mentioned in Scripture.

The emphasis of the passages that discuss the worship of God's people is on the reality or genuineness of that worship rather than on the sound. The worship services were never a burden to the people when they were right with God. Instead, they were times of joy, as witnessed to by both Isaiah (cf. Isa. 12:3) and Nehemiah (cf. Neh. 12:43). At other



times the ritual sacrifices in the temple did become a burden to the people. When that happened, they did not please God. Isaiah told the disobedient people of his day that they might just as well stop bringing sacrifices because God was “weary to bear them” (Isa. 1:14). God was weary because they were being hypocritical. They were bringing sacrifices and pretending to honor God, but actually they were disobedient in every other area of their lives.

In order to honor God with our worship, we must first have hearts that are free from sin. If we offer praise with our lips but our hearts are wicked, He will know the condition of our hearts and ignore what we are saying. That means that true worship can come only from a heart that has been cleansed by the blood of Christ. An unsaved person who sings a gospel song may sing it beautifully, but that cannot be called worship. Only Christ can cleanse from sin, and only the cleansed heart is acceptable to a holy God. One of the requirements for

leading in worship during the dedication of the wall in Jerusalem was purification (cf. Neh. 12:30). Even the men who carried the treasures from Babylon back to Jerusalem had to be “holy unto the Lord” (Ezra 8:28). The simple act of transporting vessels that were dedicated to God required a clean heart and pure hands.

Once our hearts are clean and we are prepared for worship, consideration can be given to the form that worship will take. Isaiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah were interested in performing acts of worship that were in keeping with what God had commanded. They went back to the Law of Moses to discover the forms of worship that were to be used in the temple. They tried to follow the instructions carefully—something earlier generations of God’s people had often failed to do. The Feast of Tabernacles, which was observed during the time of Nehemiah, had not been kept with the same attention to detail since the days of Joshua (cf. Neh. 8:17).

With the arrival of the church age and the cessation of temple worship, the forms of worship have changed. We do not offer sacrifices because the once-for-all sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God has satisfied forever the wrath of God. We do not keep the feasts because they were given to the Israelites as a means of approaching God. We now approach Him through the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. We draw near to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22). So even though the forms have changed, the necessity of a true heart still remains.

One of the ways we can be sure our worship today is conducted in obedience to the Word of God is to make sure the words to our music are doctrinally correct. Because of the emotional impact of music on the mind, we often learn doctrine very quickly through the songs we sing. So it is important that the lyrics do not contradict the clear teaching of the Word of God.

Worship in the temple included music, but it was much more involved than that. The offering of incense pictured the prayers of thanksgiving ascending into the heavens before God. Prayer should be an integral part of both public and private worship. When we approach God in a devotional fashion through His Word, we should always pray for the illumination of the Spirit as we read.

We no longer offer animal sacrifices as a part of worship, but there is still a sacrifice that is appropriate to worship today. In fact, the Bible talks about the “sacrifice of praise” (Heb. 13:15), as well as the sacrifice of doing good and sharing what we have with others (cf. vs. 16). The offerings we give to support the work of the Lord serve that purpose and belong in our modern worship.

Confession of sin was part of worship during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Neh. 9:3). The impetus for confession came from reading and understanding the Word of God. It is important not to make a distinction between what we sometimes call the worship service and the preaching of the Word of God. A time of singing and praise may be very uplifting, but a time of preaching is just as much a biblical form of worship as the musical portion of the service. A heart that is worshipping God has an increased desire to know what God is saying in His Word and a growing incentive to be obedient.

Worship should never be allowed to bring division into the life of a church. True worship always unites the hearts of God’s people. Church leadership and musicians and parents and children should all join together in worship of the God they love. The result will be the type of “great joy” (Neh. 12:43) that was experienced by Israel on the day of the dedication of the wall. Their hearts were right with God, and what came out of their mouths was a testimony to the power and majesty of the God they served. That is true worship.

Holy, Holy, Holy

Lesson: Isaiah 6:1-8

Read: Isaiah 6:1-12

TIME: about 739 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

During this quarter the subject of worship will predominate. One of the first truths that needs to be understood is that worship involves more than a musical interlude in a church service. Our entire lives as believers should be hymns of praise to God. What we know about God should affect every area of life.

A CHANGE IN POLITICAL FOCUS— Isa. 6:1

A death in the family often forces a person to evaluate plans for the future. It is possible that Isaiah was related to the king of Israel; and when he died, Isaiah had to do some thinking. Up to that time in his life, he had looked to the king for guidance. Now God wanted Isaiah to seek guidance from Him.

Israel had been established as a theocracy, with God as their King. He had allowed them to have earthly kings, but He wanted Isaiah to remember that God was the rightful Ruler of the nation. He was the One who belonged on the throne. Isaiah's focus needed to shift from following political leaders to seeking guidance from the King of kings.

There is nothing wrong with a person becoming involved in the politics of a nation. Men and women who are

strong in faith are needed as political leaders. A focus on God will keep them from thinking that government has all the answers, however. No matter what career we choose, God should be the Ruler of our lives.

A CHANGE IN RELIGIOUS FOCUS—Isa. 6:2-4

Isaiah would not have been in the temple that day if he had not already been worshipping God. What changed on that memorable day was not his religion. What changed was his view of the majesty of God and the awe with which he worshipped God. Before this vision, he had not known God as He really was.

The angels were so overwhelmed by the preeminence of God that they proclaimed Him as the perfect One. No one could compare with His holiness, His justice, and His goodness. The entire created world worshipped Him. The angels did not call attention to themselves but instead focused all attention on the One who deserved the glory. He alone is worthy of their praise. God is greater than any earthly king.

Since all the rest of creation gives glory to God, men should do the same. Humans are the only part of God's cre-

ation that consciously rebels against Him. An understanding of the power and glory of God should compel worship just as it did in the life of Isaiah.

A CHANGE IN PERSONAL FOCUS—Isa. 6:5-7

When Isaiah began to see God for who He really was, it changed the way he looked at himself. God was holy, but Isaiah was a sinner. God's actions were righteous and just, but Isaiah's very words revealed an evil heart. God was surrounded by angels who honored and worshipped Him. Isaiah was surrounded by people who were separated from God and in the same sinful state in which he now saw himself. In order to worship God, something had to change.

The change Isaiah needed was cleansing from sin. He had recognized his sin manifesting itself in his words. God symbolized his cleansing by having one of the angels place a live coal on his mouth. The coal did not take away his sin; it was a picture of the burning away of sin that needed to take place in his heart. God was the One who removed the iniquity from the heart.

Cleansing from sin was often pictured by burning in the Old Testament. Sacrifices were burned on the altar to portray the punishment that should have been paid by the sinner. The lamb became a substitute and bore the punishment in the place of the one who offered it. All of these sacrifices pointed toward the coming of the perfect Lamb of God, who would offer Himself as the substitute for all men. He would bear the sin of mankind on the cross and by His death provide forgiveness.

Worship of God always begins with cleansing from sin. A person who is living in sin can sing and pray and even preach, but he cannot truly worship. Sin separates a person from our holy God. The Lord described such people when He told them, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings

from before mine eyes" (Isa. 1:16). They were bringing sacrifices and praying in the temple and observing the feasts, but their hearts were still full of wickedness. Conviction of sin that leads to confession and forgiveness must be the first step in worshipping God.

A CHANGE IN SOCIAL FOCUS—Isa. 6:8

A true sense of the worthiness of worshipping God changed Isaiah's focus on the world around him. When he saw his own sinfulness, he realized the condition of the rest of mankind. Their needs were spiritual in the same way that his needs were spiritual. They needed cleansing from sin just as he needed cleansing from sin.

Recognizing the evil that existed in the world did not cause Isaiah to condemn his people. Instead, it awakened in him a desire to be of service to God in the ministry of reconciliation. He was willing to give up any plans he might have had for the future in order to go to the people as a messenger from God.

This call of God and Isaiah's response changed the direction his life would take. Seeing the holiness of God convinced him that no greater plan for his life existed than to yield completely to serve this King on the throne. Worship became for him a lifelong endeavor. He was determined to serve God not just with his lips but with his entire life. The God who deserved all glory also deserved complete dedication.

Isaiah's experience reminds us that worshipping God involves more than singing one hour a week. True worship involves the heart, soul, mind, and strength. A person honors God in the motives of his heart. Praise is given to God in the mind through the thought life. Glory results from the actions of such an individual. The focus of his entire life changes when a person sees God and willingly accepts His will for his life.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the death of the king force Isaiah to reevaluate his future plans?
2. How do we know that Isaiah already worshipped before this day in the temple?
3. What did Isaiah learn from the angels around the throne?
4. How did Isaiah see himself after seeing God?
5. Why did God use a live coal to symbolize cleansing?
6. How did Isaiah's sinful condition affect his ability to worship?
7. How did seeing God change his view of the world around him?
8. What convinced Isaiah to yield to God's call on his life?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. In uncertain times, focus on God's sovereignty to find peace of mind (Isa. 6:1).
2. Fear not—God's holiness, His supreme attribute, controls all that He does (vss. 2-3).
3. The awesomeness of God is greater than words or even a picture can describe (vs. 4).
4. The more man understands God's holiness, the more he understands his own sinfulness (vs. 5).
5. God is always ready to forgive those who are ready to repent (Isa. 6:6-7; cf. 1 John 1:9).
6. Hearing God's call is one thing; heeding God's call is quite another (Isa. 6:8)! Do both.

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

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

If you have ever been to a football game, then you are familiar with cheerleaders. The goal of a cheerleader is to rev up the fans, encourage the team, and outcheer the other team's squad.

When Isaiah saw the Lord seated on His throne, he also saw seraphim calling out to one another. These companies of angels are God's cheerleaders. Perhaps in your younger church days, you dueled with your friends with the chant “I love Jesus; how about you?” Isaiah found himself in the presence of the King caught between angelic cheerleaders proclaiming that God is holy.

What does it mean to be holy? According to the dictionary, “holy” means to be “exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*).

Our God is certainly worthy of our complete devotion. Yet the seraphim do not stop at declaring that God is holy. They go further by making it known that the whole earth is full of His glory. The entire earth shows the beauty and the splendor of our God. If we refuse to give God the glory, thanksgiving, and honor due to Him, the rocks will cry out. In Luke 19, Jesus told the Pharisees, “I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out” (vs. 40).

Do you want a rock to cry out in your place? Are you willing to join the angels and declare that God is holy? You just have to understand that He is worthy of your adoration. Open up your mouth and make known among the people that He is holy. Shout that the whole earth is full of His glory!

—Kristin Reeg.

Sing and Shout!

Lesson: Isaiah 12:1-6

Read: Isaiah 12:1-6

TIME: about 735 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

Isaiah’s message from God to the people of Israel was a plea to return to the true worship of the Almighty. They did not respond to that plea, and God finally had to punish them. But even so, there was a future in store for them with God. Isaiah wrote of a kingdom where God would be worshipped by His people in the way He deserved to be worshipped.

PRIVATE WORSHIP—Isa. 12:1-3

During the kingdom, the people of God will be free from the attacks of other nations. God allowed nations to attack them because they had sinned against Him. When the entire world worships Him and honors Him, the need for punishment will no longer exist. Men will willingly choose to obey God, and in turn He will protect them from war. Their prayers will include remembrances of the wrath of God, but they will rejoice in their hearts that those days are gone.

The kingdom will be a time when salvation from God will be accepted by the entire nation of Israel. They will worship Him because of the salvation God has provided in their Messiah, Jesus Christ. Instead of unbelief, the people of God will worship in genuine faith. Their fear of God will be replaced

by rejoicing as He shows Himself strong on their behalf. Their fear of others will disappear as they realize that God alone is strong enough to rule.

When Christ returns to earth, He will set up a kingdom over the entire world (cf. Rev. 20:4-5). The kingdom will be characterized by universal peace. Hostility between nations will be unknown. Men will be free to turn all their resources toward increased prosperity. No one will need to be afraid of someone coming along to take away what rightfully belongs to him (cf. Isa. 65:22). It is the reign of Christ that will make this possible.

Music will be a part of worship in the kingdom as men praise God in song for His goodness and His blessing. These songs will come from the hearts of His people as they reflect on the peace with God they now have through the salvation provided by Christ. They will not be required to worship by some outside force but will instead willingly choose to sing because of the joy that springs up from within.

The kingdom will be a time of universal peace. Joy will be the experience of people around the world as wars cease and prosperity abounds. Christ’s reign will include all the world, including the

natural world. Animals will be at peace with each other (cf. Isa. 65:25). The natural world will rejoice along with mankind as it is released from the corruption caused by sin (cf. Rom. 8:21).

PUBLIC WORSHIP—Isa. 12:4

When the King comes to reign, the entire world will join in worshipping Him. Worship leaders will call upon others to join with them in public praise. No gods will be served in that day as everyone realizes the power and majesty of the King.

Instead of praying to false gods, the inhabitants of the kingdom will “call upon his name” (Isa. 12:4). All prayer will be directed toward the One who alone can answer prayer.

People in the kingdom will join in giving public testimonies of what God is doing in their lives. The public accomplishments of His reign over the earth will be evident in the environment, the economy, the prosperity, and the peace. People will realize that they have not brought about any of these results. All the credit belongs to Christ. So they will openly speak of His work and exalt Him for what they see taking place in the world around them.

Those who have placed themselves under the rule of Christ prior to the kingdom age should find it easy to testify to the work He is doing in their lives. We should be people who worship constantly, telling others of our faith and giving praise to God. Giving a testimony during a service at church is one way to give praise. Even more important is using the opportunities we have while at work or at school to tell others about Christ. He has saved us and given us eternal life, and we should constantly worship Him by speaking of His faithfulness to those we meet.

PUBLIC GLORIFICATION— Isa. 12:5-6

Music has always been a major part of worship. The psalms of David were

the first hymnbook of God’s people and were used in the worship Isaiah would have enjoyed in the temple. During the kingdom, music will also play a large part in the worship of God. People will “sing unto the Lord” (Isa. 12:5). They will be so full of rejoicing over the abundant kingdom blessings that they will overflow with musical praise.

The music of the kingdom will not be limited to a building or a section of the country. Instead, the glory of God will be known throughout the entire earth, and all peoples on the earth will participate in worship. Music will be one of the great activities of the kingdom. Singing God’s praises will occupy the minds and hearts of His people to such a degree that they will dedicate themselves to worshipping with song.

Worshipping God with music can be a great source of blessing to God’s people in the present age as well. Music impacts us emotionally, and the words of our music teach as well. Many have observed the fact that when something is set to music, it fastens itself into our consciousness and becomes almost impossible to forget. That makes music a wonderful way to learn the truth of God’s Word. Lyrics that teach Bible doctrine and honor God will stay with us and encourage us during the most difficult times we face in life.

Often a parade, with cheering and shouting, provides the means for people to show honor to returning soldiers or athletes or astronauts. That kind of shouting and cheering will be one of the ways in which the King is honored during the kingdom. He will come to dwell among His people here on earth, and they will welcome Him with parades and adulation beyond anything the world has ever seen. A recognition of His absolute holiness will set Him apart from all previous kings, and the entire earth will rejoice.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why will mankind dwell safely during the kingdom age?
2. Why is salvation the theme of kingdom worship?
3. How will Christ bring peace to the entire world?
4. What will happen to false religions during the kingdom?
5. Why will the entire world join in worshipping Christ?
6. What will people want to talk about in the kingdom?
7. Why should we be glad to share the work that Christ has accomplished in our lives?
8. What will be the theme of music during the kingdom?
9. How will the entire world choose to honor Christ the King?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. What God promises will surely come to pass; you can count on it (Isa. 12:1)!
2. Our faith is only as sure as the object of that faith (Isa. 12:2; cf. Ps. 20:7).
3. Spiritual thirst can be quenched only by spiritual water (Isa. 12:3; cf. John 4:10; 7:37-38).
4. True praise always includes heartfelt thanksgiving (Isa. 12:4; cf. Ps. 100:4; 1 Thess. 5:18).
5. Christian praise should be a testimony from our hearts to the world around us (Isa. 12:5).
6. Real joy comes from knowing and focusing on our great God's character (vs. 6).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

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

Have you ever watched television on mute? It can be difficult to figure out what is going on unless you have the closed captioning at the bottom of the screen.

When we refuse to open our mouths and give voice to the display of God's goodness in our lives, it is like making other people watch our relationship with God on mute. They may be able to tell from some of our actions that we are Christians, but “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt. 12:34). Sometimes we keep our Christianity only in our minds and do not tell anyone about what God has done for us.

The Prophet Isaiah urged the people of Israel, “Sing unto the Lord; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth” (Isa. 12:5). While it is possible to sing a song in your head, it is much more fun to sing it out loud, even if you are off-key! Have you ever noticed that when one person starts singing a song, others often begin to join in? Our praise of God can be just as infectious!

Sometimes it helps to remember who God is in order to give Him the praise He deserves. For example, if you ever feel lonely, call upon Immanuel, God with us. If you suffer from an ailment, call upon Jehovah Rapha, our Healer. If you have a need, call upon Jehovah-jireh, our Provider. If you have sinned, call upon the Saviour; He will wash away your stains with His blood.

When we recall the wondrous works He has done for us, we need to share our testimonies with others. Whether you tell it or sing it, let us hear from your mouth how great and awesome our God is!

—Kristin Reeg.

Meaningless Worship Condemned

Lesson: Isaiah 29:9-16

Read: Isaiah 29:1-24

TIME: probably 711 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

God called Isaiah to minister to people who still maintained the proper outward forms of worship but had lost the true meaning of worship. They still offered sacrifices and incense, but their hearts were empty. He knew this and told them exactly how they had lost any spiritual content in what they called worship.

WORSHIP WITH NO SENSE OF CONVICTION—Isa. 29:9-10

God gave the Law of Moses and its sacrifices to remind people of their sin. The constant offering of lambs and doves should have convinced them of the necessity of having another take the punishment they should have borne themselves.

The people in Isaiah's day were completely oblivious to any sin or conviction of wrongdoing. They were like people who were so drunk they did not know where they were going. They had lost their way spiritually.

Because of their sinful choices, God had allowed them to continue in their sin. That meant that they did not have any spiritual insight. They could not even see

that what they were doing was wrong.

People who worship without any sense of conviction often become immune to the Word of God. They have heard the Word so often that it no longer speaks to their hearts. They refuse to see the truth because their hearts have been spiritually blinded. What happens then is that they are content to observe the outward rituals of worship without ever allowing what they learn from God's Word to change them.

WORSHIP WITH NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD—Isa. 29:11-12

When He first called him to preach, God had told Isaiah that the people would listen to him but would not understand (cf. Isa. 6:9-10). In an attempt to help his listeners understand, Isaiah compared them to some very unusual students.

The first student decides to study a particular subject and purchases a textbook. But he never opens the book or reads it. He never learns because he refuses to open the book and study the

very subject he says is important to him.

Those who claim to believe in God but never read their Bibles are just like that student. They draw their conclusions about God out of what they already think instead of learning how God has revealed Himself in His Word. The Bible is available to them, but they do not avail themselves of the truth God has given.

The second student also receives a textbook, but he makes the excuse that he cannot understand it. He may say that he cannot read, or he may excuse himself by saying that it is just too difficult to know what the Bible says. Actually, God has revealed Himself in His Word in a way that everyone can understand if they apply themselves to study. One of the important elements of corporate worship is preaching, which is essentially a time of explanation of the Scriptures. A person who attends church regularly should be growing in his understanding of God and His truth.

WORSHIP WITH OUTWARD CONFORMITY BUT NO INWARD CHANGE—Isa. 29:13-14

Offering a sacrifice at the temple was a very public event in the days of Isaiah. People knew when their neighbors took a lamb or a dove to the priests for sacrifice. Because it was public, the pressure to worship often came from a desire to keep up appearances in the community. People did what was expected of them in order to look respectable instead of sacrificing from a desire to please God. But God knew their hearts. He knew that they were not obeying Him in anything but the outward rituals in the temple.

Because of their hardened hearts, God had turned their wisdom into foolishness. The leaders who they thought were so wise were actually leading them astray. The men who should have had insight into the best direction for the nation had lost the ability to think clearly because they had forsaken the ways of God.

The attitude of outward conformity

without any inward change is a real danger for believers today as well. Church becomes nothing more than a way to maintain status in a religious society. People think well of us if we just show up on Sunday; so we start thinking that what we do the rest of the week does not matter. But God knows our hearts.

When we walk away from the wisdom found in the Word of God, we begin to listen to those who have no real grasp on the truth. They tell us what we want to hear, and that becomes a substitute for what God wants us to know and believe.

WORSHIP WITH NO NEED FOR GOD—Isa. 29:15-16

Empty worship quickly becomes a way in which people start to hide from God. All of their religion becomes surface, without affecting who they really are or what they really believe. Their thoughts and characters are still wicked even though they claim to love God.

Such a person may think he is deceiving everyone, but he cannot deceive God. He knows that the person's public worship is just a sham.

Church attendance, singing in a music group, and even public prayer can be done by a person whose heart is not right with God. To come to the temple with a sacrifice and then go out and steal or take bribes or refuse to care for the orphans and widows was reprehensible to God (cf. Isa. 1:23).

The person who thinks religious activity will somehow excuse evil behavior has turned things upside down. Good works do not make a person righteous; instead, sinful works make even the good that men do evil. Their motive for doing good comes from a selfish heart.

Because of their rebellion, they forget that God is the one who knows them better than they know themselves. He is the Creator, and yet they are claiming that He does not understand the truth about them.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the purpose for the law and sacrifices?
2. Why did God deny the people any spiritual insight?
3. What was the attitude of the people toward the very Word of God that Isaiah provided?
4. Why did they listen to those who made foolish choices?
5. What motivated their worship in the temple?
6. Why is it important for a study of the Word of God to be an integral part of worship?
7. How do people try to hide from God under a facade of religious ritual?
8. How should worship impact our deeds as well as our words?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Spiritual blindness can be both the choice of man and the judgment of God (Isa. 29:9-10; cf. 6:9-10; Mic. 3:6).
2. Only God can reveal and conceal spiritual truth (Isa. 29:11-12; cf. Matt. 16:17; II Cor. 4:4-6).
3. God is not fooled by outward actions that have no inward reality (Isa. 29:13; cf. I Sam. 16:7).
4. True wisdom is always a gift from God (Isa. 29:14; cf. Jas. 1:5).
5. A person might run from God, but he can never hide from God (Isa. 29:15; cf. Ps. 139:7-12; Jonah 1:1-4).
6. It is ludicrous for the created to sit in judgment of the Creator (Isa. 29:16; cf. Rom. 9:20-21).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

“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).

Have you ever paid someone a compliment because you felt it was the “right” thing to do? You may not have believed the words that were coming out of your mouth, but you said them anyway.

For some people, the Christian life is nothing more than a two-hour commitment once a week. They will sit in the pews, sing the songs, and agree with the sermon; but they leave the sanctuary unchanged. They give God lip service, not allowing the Lord to prick their hearts and rarely feeling the need to repent.

Sometimes we can get so caught up with religious rituals that we deceive ourselves into believing we are living a righteous life when in truth we are only following the traditions established by mankind. We are often more afraid of offending people because we did not wear hose with our skirts or ties with our shirts than we are about offending God by lying, stealing, or coveting.

Too often we have divided hearts. We say we want to serve and love God, yet our actions show no evidence of faith. David cried out in Psalm 86:11, “Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name.” We need the Lord to unite our hearts.

If you really want to give God the honor due His name, pray this simple prayer: “Lord, I ask that You would forgive me for giving You mere lip service. I ask that You would cleanse my heart of all that keeps me from You. Draw near to me, Lord, and give me an undivided heart so that I may fear Your name.”

—Kristin Reeg.

The Glorious New Creation

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

Read: Isaiah 65:1-25

TIME: about 700–695 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

The people to whom Isaiah preached did not experience the blessings of God. Their hearts were not right with Him, and punishment ensued. But Isaiah prophesied of a day when people’s hearts would be right with God. He told them of a kingdom ruled by Christ Himself, where all of the blessings of God would be poured out and all of the promises of God would be fulfilled.

ECONOMIC BLESSINGS IN THE KINGDOM—Isa. 65:17-18

Following the Great Tribulation and the defeat of the antichrist, God will usher in a period called the kingdom. The kingdom will be the climax of the history of mankind. Christ will return in person to reign as King, and all those who enter into the kingdom will trust Him. Since the hearts of men will be right with God, the curses that came upon His people during the days of Isaiah will disappear. There will be prosperity that comes from a universal obedience to the will of God.

The kingdom will be a time of universal rejoicing. All those things that caused suffering and sorrow will fade away. War will be replaced by peace under the strong rule of the King of

kings. Famine, which is often caused by war, will be replaced by plenty. The evil effects of sin on the human race will be mitigated, and disease will be overcome. The goodness of God in the land of the living will be the experience of all earth’s inhabitants.

The capital city of the kingdom will be Jerusalem. This city, which has known so much war and suffering, will become the center of worship and joy because it will be the residence of the King. People will come from all over the world to worship the King. As a result, Jerusalem and its people will rejoice.

SOCIAL BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM—Isa. 65:19-20

Society often brings upon itself its own distress. Sinful people oppress others and create slums. Tyrants persecute even those of their own nation, and the result is famine and poverty. Thievery, drug abuse, slavery, and piracy bring sorrow and destruction into the culture. White-collar crime devastates the economy.

All of these social ills are ultimately the result of sin. When the kingdom begins, all of those who are under the rule of the King will have accepted Him by

faith. He will be present on earth to encourage obedience and discourage crime. Society will experience a golden age in which people will treat each other with kindness because of their love for Jesus Christ.

Sin and its consequences also have a devastating effect on human life. During the kingdom, men and women will live much longer than today. Children will not die in infancy. Murder and war will not shorten the life span of the human race. Disease will not be allowed to devastate entire segments of the population, as sometimes happens today.

The fact that sin is still present in the kingdom reminds us that this is not yet the eternal, heavenly state. Those born during the kingdom will still be born in sin because of the curse of sin upon the entire race. Some of them will accept Christ and become worshippers. Some of them will reject Him and face judgment. Isaiah suggested that in mercy they will be given a hundred years to come to Christ before being “accursed” (Isa. 65:20). Those who accept Christ and live in accordance with His will will live long lives and possibly live through the entire one thousand years of the kingdom. That would certainly be the fulfillment of God’s promise of long life to those who trust in Him.

SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS IN THE KINGDOM—Isa. 65:21, 23

The blessings of the kingdom will stem directly from the presence and rule of the King. He will bring peace because He is the Prince of Peace. No one will need to be afraid of losing property because of thievery or injustice. Gardens and crops will be enjoyed by the person who planted them. A man who builds a house will be able to live there in peace.

The reason these material blessings are also spiritual is simply that people will recognize the mighty hand of God over all. He will enforce the peace, so people will worship Christ and give Him

honor for the peace they enjoy.

Men will still work during the kingdom, but their work will always be profitable to them. No one will be allowed to amass wealth by fraud or cheating. Men and women will be paid what their labor is worth. Employers will treat people justly. Spiritual standards will prevail and be the norm for the workplace. Parents who have children during the kingdom will pass on to them the spiritual principles they have been taught. The subjects of the kingdom will appreciate the blessing of the Lord and desire it for their descendants as well. They will share with their children the necessity of faith and a transformed heart. Not all of them will accept Christ, but the vast majority of children born during the kingdom will listen to their parents and continue to make faith the predominant characteristic of the kingdom age.

PHYSICAL BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM—Isa. 65:24-25

The needs of the kingdom subjects will be met by the King himself. Even before they share those needs with Him, the answer will be on its way. The environment itself will be transformed to provide the best for God’s people. Christ’s concern will be evident in the provision of every physical blessing mankind desires.

Those blessings will be available to both mankind and the natural world. The violence involving predators and prey will change so that animals will live at peace with each other. Carnivores will become plant eaters as death becomes rare even in the natural kingdom. It was the curse of sin that brought about death in the Garden of Eden. The reversal of that curse as the entire world joins in worship of the King will change nature itself into a peaceable kingdom. Under the rule of the King, no one will be allowed to hurt others.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How will the defeat of the anti-christ make way for the kingdom?
2. Why will the peace of the kingdom provide prosperity as well?
3. How does sin often shorten a person's life span?
4. Why will people see even the material prosperity in the kingdom as a spiritual blessing?
5. How will work become a source of joy under the rule of Christ?
6. What will change in the workplace when godly standards become prevalent?
7. How will parents insure God's blessing for their children?
8. In what ways will the blessings of the kingdom age extend even to the natural world?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. God's millennial kingdom will outshine everything man has formerly known (Isa. 65:17).
2. God wants His people to be joyful and truly happy (Isa. 65:18; cf. Phil. 4:4).
3. God finds joy in blessing His people (Isa. 65:19).
4. He who gives man life is quite able to expand its duration (vss. 20-21).
5. God is eager to bless His children, even without their asking (vss. 23-24).
6. God always protects His people, whether through providential or supernatural means (vs. 25).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

“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).

Can you even fathom that one day God will create a new earth? All that we know of this earth—our very way of life—will be erased, like footprints at the water's edge. But God does not stop with just a new earth; He will create new heavens as well! The stars and planets will be recreated; they will be brand-new! We will not remember the former heaven or earth, because the glory of the new will be so much greater than the former.

Isaiah prophesied that when God creates the new heavens and earth, “the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in [Jerusalem], nor the voice of crying” (Isa. 65:19).

The Apostle John confirmed this in Revelation 21:4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Did you know that when we are in Christ, we too are new creations? “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Cor. 5:17). When that happens, we do not live the same way we did before. Some people stop drinking, smoking, gambling, cheating, or lying. Other people find it hard even to recall their lives before Christ because they have changed so much.

While we long for the new heavens and earth, we must recognize that every day that we are in Christ we are becoming new. Let us rejoice and be glad, for we are His beloved creations.

—Kristin Reeg.

Joyful Worship Restored

Lesson: Ezra 3:1-7

Read: Ezra 1:1—3:7

TIME: 537 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and took the Jews captive, the temple worship ceased. No longer were daily sacrifices offered in the temple, which was now in ruins. Godly men like Daniel would pray in the direction of the temple as if the smoke of the sacrifice were still rising, but no priests were there to offer the incense. In foreign lands the synagogue began to replace the temple as a place of meeting.

At the end of seventy years of captivity, the people of God began to return to the land. One of their first acts was to make possible the worship of God in the manner in which Moses had commanded.

WORSHIP AT THE ALTAR— Ezra 3:1-3

Cyrus, the king of Persia, had granted permission for Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. When they arrived in their former capital city, the first thing they chose to do was to set up an altar. They wanted to be able to restore the means of worship commanded in the Law of Moses. It told them to offer sacrifices each morning and each evening. They had returned from the Captivity in obedience to what

they believed God wanted them to do. Now they wanted to follow that decision by worshipping in obedience to the Word of God as well.

Disobedience to God had been the cause of the trouble Israel faced as a nation. They had gone into captivity because they did not keep the law. Obedience to the Word of God should be the experience of every person who claims to worship God. It is wrong to make a false claim in the matter of worship. It is wrong to say that we love God but refuse to obey Him. In such a case, our actions speak much louder than our words.

The people were united in this decision under the spiritual and political leaders God had given them. One of the reasons lay in the fact that they were living in the midst of several enemy nations. They knew that God was the only one who could protect them from those enemies. In order to approach God reverently and regularly, they needed the altar.

Often a person will recognize a need for God when faced with trouble that seems insurmountable. That is certainly not the only time we should pray, but if the trials of life push us toward a closer fellowship with and dependence upon God, we have made the right

choice in light of those difficult times. Sometimes trouble causes a person to blame God and walk away from Him, but that was not the case with the remnant. They wanted to stay close to God because they knew that they needed His protection.

WORSHIP AT THE FEASTS— Ezra 3:4-5

In addition to regular worship at the altar, Moses had commanded the people of God to commemorate certain days in honor of God. In that way they would be reminded of what He had done for them in the past and encouraged to trust that He would do the same for them in the days that lay ahead. The mercy of God in the past gave them hope for the future.

The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the years of wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus. Those were difficult years, but they were also times when God worked miracles to preserve His people. He provided manna daily and gave them water from the rock. They were able to move through the wilderness and defeat any enemies who attacked. Because of that, the Feast of Tabernacles was a very appropriate feast to reinstitute upon their return to the land. They too had been captives in a foreign land, and God had brought them out by the power of His hand.

The daily sacrifices had been commanded by Moses, but the freewill offerings came because of the worshipful attitudes of their own hearts. It was not a command but a choice. They were so thankful for all God had done that they wanted to do even more than He required of them.

Since in the church age we do not live under the law, we give freely whatever we give to God. All offerings are freewill offerings. The privilege of honoring Him with a portion of our income continues to be an integral part of worship even though we do it out of love rather than by commandment. Surely

our love for Christ should compel us to do even more than what was required of men under the law. Their example in giving freewill offerings can be a wonderful encouragement to us.

WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE— Ezra 3:6-7

It was important to reinstitute the sacrificial system so that they could once again approach God. The altar made possible the confession of sin and the assurance that God had accepted the offering in place of their own death. But the building of the altar was only the beginning. They had come back to rebuild the entire temple, and that became the next order of business for the remnant.

The foundation of the temple could not be laid until adequate provision of building materials had been arranged. The restoration of the altar and their desire to please God encouraged them as they started to assemble the necessary supplies. Some of the people were masons, working with stone; some were carpenters, working with wood. They were given money so that they could purchase the items needed for the temple.

Most of the supplies came from Lebanon, a country just to the north of Israel. Lebanon was known for its beautiful cedar trees. The money came from an authorization by King Cyrus when he allowed them to return.

The people of Israel knew that God had allowed Nebuchadnezzar to carry them away into captivity because of their rebellion. They also knew that God had worked in the heart of Cyrus to grant permission to return and even to fund the rebuilding of the temple. Those two events assured them that God was the one who was in control even of the decisions made by great kings. In the days before the Captivity, they had forgotten His power and worshipped false gods. Now they were convinced that God alone was to be worshipped.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did God's people build an altar first after returning?
2. Why did they now want to obey everything God told them?
3. How did fear of the enemy encourage a greater trust in the Lord God?
4. Why was the Feast of Tabernacles appropriate at the start of the worship season for the remnant?
5. What was the significance of the freewill offering?
6. Why does the offering continue to be part of our worship today?
7. What preparations had to be made before the foundation of the temple could be laid?
8. Why did Cyrus provide money for the rebuilding of the temple?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. The work of God often requires that the people of God be fully united (Ezra 3:1).
2. Spiritual leaders should always be the first to take up any spiritual work (vs. 2).
3. Never allow fear of others to keep you from doing God's will immediately and fully (vs. 3).
4. Obedience to God requires full compliance, even in the smallest details (vss. 4-5).
5. Worship that pleases God is worship offered according to His plan (vs. 6).
6. How we use our resources often indicates what or whom we truly worship (vs. 7).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

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

In the beginning of the book of Ezra, Cyrus king of Persia stated, “The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (1:2). So a large number of Israelites traveled to Jerusalem to build the temple of the Lord.

The Lord had given a commandment through Moses, saying, “Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God . . . in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles: and they shall not appear before the Lord empty” (Deut. 16:16). The Feast of Tabernacles lasts seven days and is held in the seventh month of the Jewish calendar (September or October by our calendar). This feast is to thank God for the harvest, for His deliverance of the people of Israel out of Egypt, and for His provision throughout their wanderings in the desert.

Even though the foundation of the temple had not been laid yet, the Israelites took the necessary time away from their labor to observe and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Numbers 29 outlines the requirements of the daily burnt offerings. Although the Israelites feared the reaction of other peoples around Jerusalem to their celebration, they chose to obey the commandment of the Lord.

We must choose to obey the Lord, no matter what the reactions of friends, family, or coworkers. The Israelites were displaying their love for the Lord by observing the Feast of Tabernacles. Are we exhibiting our love for God by keeping His commandments?

—Kristin Reeg.

The Temple Restored

Lesson: Ezra 3:8-13

Read: Ezra 3:8-13

TIME: 536 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

In order to rebuild the temple, money and materials were needed. King Cyrus had given them money, and the materials could be purchased. But that still left the matter of labor. The people themselves needed to be the ones who did the actual construction. That meant they needed to be prepared just as much as the money and materials needed to be prepared.

PREPARATION OF THE WORKMEN—Ezra 3:8-9

Not everyone who went into captivity in Babylon returned home. Only a small remnant of the people actually went back to Jerusalem, but that included men who were skilled in the various tasks necessary for the construction of the temple. The leaders of the people organized those men into three contingents of workmen. It is possible there were three groups so that they could work different shifts and the work could be completed in a shorter period of time.

The workmen were chosen from among the Levites, whose assigned task since the days of Moses had been the oversight of the temple. They worked under the leadership of Zerubabel the governor and Jeshua the

priest. One of the three Levite groups included sons of Jeshua, but that was a different man from the one who served as the priest. The Levite Jeshua, along with Kadmiel and Henadad, served as foreman for the three crews.

The advancement of the cause of Christ has always depended on people who are willing to work. In the local church or on the mission field, God needs those who will take the talents He has given them and serve Him. Being willing to do what He asks is the first step toward yielding to the call of God on a person's life. Every young person who knows the Lord should have a desire to serve God. That does not mean that He will ask everyone to be a missionary or a preacher. It does mean that we should be willing to serve Him full-time if that is what He wants. Too often the desire to make money becomes the primary deciding factor even in a Christian's life. The desire to please God should always be the greatest factor in the decisions we make.

PREPARATION OF THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE—Ezra 3:10-11

The entire purpose of the temple was to make possible the worship of

the Lord. So it was appropriate to initiate the laying of the foundation with a celebration of praise. In addition to the masons and carpenters, there were also those among the Levites who possessed musical talent. Their voices and instruments led the people in a time of worship that focused their hearts on the spiritual nature of the project they were undertaking.

The ministry of the Levites who sang and played instruments was just as much a part of the service of God as those who worked with wood and stone. God had given them their abilities, and they were using what they had in His work. We should never start thinking that some jobs done for God are more important than others. He equips people for ministry and uses them where they can be most useful. Envyng someone who has a different talent is sinful and unproductive. How much better to discover the ways God has gifted you and then determine to use those gifts for Him!

The people responded to this service of worship by shouting their praises to the Lord. It was an exciting time, for they were finally seeing the start of this major project to rebuild the temple. The worship service united them in admiration for what God had done. It also gave them a united focus and purpose that would sustain them through the days of actual work on the building. The Levites knew that although they were doing the physical labor, the entire nation was supporting them and encouraging their success.

Music continues to be a large part of godly worship in the present day. It serves to unite people in praise to God and focus their hearts and minds on Him. Those who serve in the musical areas of the church should always seek to lead worship in such a way that people's hearts will be ready to do what God wants them to do.

PREPARATION OF THE MINDS OF THE PEOPLE—Ezra 3:12-13

All of the people joined in the celebration as the temple construction began. But there were those who had their doubts about the end result. The men who had been carried away to Babylon as young people and had now returned remembered the glory of Solomon's temple. They could see that the size and the beauty of the new temple would not begin to compare with what they had previously known.

When a new project is undertaken, there will often be those who doubt its success. That is a part of human nature. But their doubts should not keep them from doing the work of the Lord. The new project may not be exactly like what they remember, but it can still be something that draws men and women closer to God. Living in the past often hinders a person from moving forward for God. Sometimes we need to let go of even a precious memory and recognize that God's work can and does change with the times, even though He is unchangeable.

The combination of shouting and weeping produced a sound that was heard by those who lived near the city of Jerusalem. Not all were happy that the remnant had returned or that the temple was being rebuilt. They did not believe in God and were opposed to the new settlers, for they meant less land for them. The sound they heard from Jerusalem was an announcement to them that the new arrivals were serious about serving God. It was a testimony to them of the Jews' faith.

The words and actions of every believer should be a testimony to a desire to serve God. It is confusing to an unsaved person when someone worships God on Sunday and then serves self or even Satan the rest of the week. To have a clear testimony of faith, our words and our deeds must always agree.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did the people need to prepare themselves for the work?
2. What qualified the Levites to work on the temple?
3. Why does God place a high value on willingness when it comes to His call to service?
4. Who gave the musicians their talent and ability?
5. How did the people respond to the musical celebration?
6. Why was worship important at the beginning of the project?
7. Why were some of the men discouraged when they saw the laying of the foundation?
8. How was the worship of the people a testimony to those who lived around Jerusalem?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Doing the work of God does not preclude proper preparation and organization (Ezra 3:8).
2. God's work requires God's people to be united in purpose and goal (Ezra 3:9; cf. Phil. 2:2).
3. Praise to God should be the daily activity and response of every believer (Ezra 3:10).
4. While doing God's work, be sure to take time to celebrate His faithfulness (vs. 11).
5. Never allow the memories of the past to overshadow God's present blessings (vs. 12).
6. The praise of God's people should often reach the ears of those around them (vs. 13).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

“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).

When just the foundation of the temple had been laid, the Israelites threw a party! Have you ever watched a home renovation show? Have you ever listened to the shouts of the people right after they see the renovation displayed? You hear the shouts from the people, but when you look at the faces of those whose house has just been remodeled, most of the time they are weeping out of amazement and joy.

We have to remember that the Israelites who were rebuilding the temple came out of captivity to return to Jerusalem. They were finally settled back in their own land. With the foundation just laid, they once again had a place to go to worship and offer sacrifices to the one true God.

All this was just cause for a celebration! God's love toward Israel truly endured forever. Now they could see with their eyes that God had not forsaken or forgotten them. Someday the rest of their people would be released from captivity and would worship with them in the temple of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 states, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up.” Life can be difficult, especially when one traumatic moment can alter our lives forever. We are never the same. But we can choose to celebrate our own rebuilding. As we reconstruct our lives following disappointments, let us lift up shouts of joy to God at every level of completion, for He is good. His plans for us are to prosper us, not harm us. He is the Master Architect.

—Kristin Reeg.

Celebrating with Joy

Lesson: Ezra 6:13-22

Read: Ezra 6:1-22

TIME: 516 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

The chronology of the book of Ezra is not always easy to follow. King Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return to the land, but the people who were already there protested to a new king, and the work on the temple stopped. Then King Darius sent word that the work could resume. That encouraged the people, and after sixteen years the work on the rebuilding of the temple started again.

GOING TO WORK WITH JOY— Ezra 6:13-14

The news that Darius would allow the work to continue brought great joy to the citizens of Jerusalem. It meant that their conflict with their neighbors over the project would cease. They would once again be at peace with those living nearby.

Another source of great joy was the fact that God had also sent them some prophets who were proclaiming the Word of the Lord. Haggai and Zechariah came on the scene at this time in order to remind the people of what God wanted and to encourage them in the work. Knowing that they were hearing a message directly from God strengthened their resolve to complete the project that had been started many years before.

Joy also grew out of the understand-

ing that what they were doing was the will of God. He had commanded them to build the temple, and that was even more important than the fact that they had the permission from Darius. Knowing that they were doing what God had ordained brought great rejoicing to their hearts and produced strong motivation to work.

A final source of joy was the permission from the king. In spite of the opposition of the enemy, each of the kings to whom appeals were made sustained their right to build. They knew that only God could have made such rulings possible on the part of these heathen kings.

CELEBRATING WITH JOY— Ezra 6:15-18

It took another four-and-a-half years before the work on the temple was complete. When the work was done, the entire nation celebrated. The primary reason for their return from the Captivity had finally been accomplished. They could now worship God in His own temple—something that had not been done for nearly seventy years.

The celebration patterned itself after a similar occasion when the first temple, Solomon's temple, was dedicated. At that time the nation had been prosper-

ous, ruling over a large part of the Middle East. Now they were small and had comparatively few resources. But the people were glad to give what they had in order to make the dedication honoring to God. In proportion to what they had to give, the offerings were an abundant testimony to the grateful hearts with which they were thanking God.

Completing the temple made possible the continual worship that the nation sought. They wanted to be regular in the praise and honor they showed to their God. The many years of captivity had shown them the importance of maintaining fellowship with the Almighty. Daily sacrifices could now be offered, and the priests and Levites were organized in such a way that the continual worship of God became a reality.

Even though the temple was new, the order of worship dated back to the time of Moses. They wanted to obey the Word of God.

Change is an inevitable part of ministry simply because of the new technologies and methods that become available. But it is important to be sure to remember that God's Word does not change. Worship may take different forms, but obedience to the Word of God is always the standard for those who trust in Him.

CONTINUING WITH JOY— Ezra 6:19-22

Dedicating the temple marked the beginning of renewed worship among the people of God. They were not satisfied simply to have completed their project. Now that they had the temple, they wanted to restore every possible type of worship that Moses had commanded.

Celebrating the Passover at the new temple brought great joy to the hearts of the remnant. The Passover had been instituted at the time of the Exodus. It reminded them of the deliverance God had accomplished when they were slaves in Egypt. Now that they had been delivered from the Captivity in

Babylon, this feast that commemorated salvation meant even more to them.

Passover involved the death of a lamb whose blood was applied to the doorposts of each house. It represented their hope for the perfect Lamb, who would one day come to deliver them from sin. His coming would fill them with perfect joy.

The remnant looked forward to the coming of the Lamb of God and His sacrifice on the cross. We look back to the finished work of Christ. Our worship should be filled with joy because of what He did for us when He died in our place and won the victory over sin and death and hell. Worship should be a celebration of our deliverance from bondage to sin and our new life in Him.

The Feast of Tabernacles served to remind the people of God's provision as they wandered through the wilderness. They lived in tents for forty years as God led them from Egypt into the Promised Land. Throughout that entire time He provided for them in miraculous ways, giving them manna to eat and water from the rock.

In contrast to the joy of Tabernacles, Passover was a time of purification, confession of sin, and getting right with God. It was a time of rejoicing over what God had done for them by changing the heart of the king. It was a time of unification as those who returned from Babylon joined with all those whose hearts God had touched so that the entire nation celebrated together.

Worship should always remind us of the power and majesty of God and His work on our behalf. The purpose of worship is to honor Him, and that can be done only by those whose hearts are in fellowship with Him. Before every worship service it would be good to spend time in private prayer, admitting any sin to God and seeking His forgiveness. Then our worship will be genuine and not hypocritical—worship that honors Him.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why were the Jews in conflict with the surrounding nations?
2. How did the decree of Darius bring peace?
3. How did the fact that they were obeying God bring joy to the hearts of the remnant?
4. How did the dedication of the new temple compare to the dedication of Solomon's temple?
5. Why was this dedication just as significant in the eyes of God?
6. Why did the people desire means of continual worship of God?
7. How did the history of the Passover encourage the people so many years later?
8. How did the feasts help to unite the nation before God?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Our great God uses both believers and unbelievers to do His will (Ezra 6:13-15).
2. Joy is the proper response of God's people when they recognize His blessings (vs. 16).
3. Sacrifices and offerings are always a part of true worship (Ezra 6:17; cf. Rom. 12:1-2).
4. Any work of God should be carefully organized and biblically founded (Ezra 6:18).
5. The true worshipper is concerned about spiritual purity (vss. 19-20).
6. All are always welcome to celebrate the faithfulness of God (vss. 21-22).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

“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).

The *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines “joy” as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.”

Imagine the joy the Israelites must have felt! After many long years being held captive, the very authorities that could have kept them in bondage had sent them back to Jerusalem to build a temple to their God. Not only did the king give them freedom, but he also stated he would pay for the rebuilding and offered protection from anyone who tried to stop its construction!

Anytime we experience a great event by God's grace, it is time to celebrate. We often celebrate milestones in our lives such as graduation from high school, college, and graduate school. When we say “I do” to the person who is becoming our spouse, we throw a massive party. These are the times in our lives when we are not just happy. We are full of joy!

Happiness is determined by external circumstances. Sitting in front of a fire with hot chocolate on a cold day can make us happy. Our favorite sports team winning the game can make us happy. Receiving an unexpected gift can make us happy. Nevertheless, these moments of happiness often end as quickly as they began.

Joy runs deeper than happiness. Joy lives in our souls. It is based on the grace that drew us to Christ. Once we come to Christ, we can always choose joy by remembering that what we have is so much more than what we do not have.

—Kristin Reeg.

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

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

Lesson Exposition

Although Ezra wrote the book that bears his name, he does not appear as a character in that book until halfway through. He led a later return from Babylon than Zerubbabel, whose story he recorded in the first half of the book. Ezra was a godly man who loved to pray. His return to the Promised Land was successful because of those prayers.

A TIME OF FASTING—Ezra 8:21

Shortly after leaving the city of Babylon, Ezra stopped his entire company along a riverbank for a time of prayer and fasting. They were just beginning their journey to the Promised Land, and they wanted to ask for guidance and help from God. The reason for fasting was to show God how serious they were about this request. Their relationship with Him was even more important than the eating of food that sustained life. Their spiritual concerns took precedence over the material needs of their own bodies. Fasting also gave them more time for prayer, since they did not have to spend time preparing meals.

Prayer and fasting always appear as companions in Scripture. Fasting accomplishes a spiritual purpose only when it is combined with a desire for

more time with God. There is nothing wrong with fasting for other purposes, like losing weight. But the spiritual fast focuses attention on God by setting aside normal food practices, which consume much of each day.

It is easy for prayer to become commonplace in our lives. We pray before meals because that is something our family has always done. We pray during worship services because that is what we do in church. We may even pray in our private devotions because we have been taught that it is important to pray. Combining fasting with prayer makes us stop and think about the value of our time with God. It should be more valuable to us than even the necessary task of feeding the body in which we live.

A TIME OF PRAYER— Ezra 8:22-23

One of the reasons Ezra stopped at the beginning of the journey for a time of prayer is that he needed protection from God. They were carrying many valuable items made of gold that had originally resided in Solomon's temple. The king had returned them to the Jews so that they could be restored to the temple. Now the people were going to

be traveling through some dangerous country with those treasures. Ezra had not asked the king for any soldiers to travel with and protect them. Instead, he was determined to trust in God for the protection they would need.

The very fact that Ezra did not have military protection motivated the entire company to seek God. They had nowhere else to turn. It is often the same with us. Danger or trouble causes us to seek God in prayer because we have no other alternative. In fact, God may at times allow trials to come into our lives for that very purpose—to increase our trust in Him. When that happens, we should be like Ezra and pray rather than grow angry and blame God for what we are facing.

The time spent in prayer on the riverbank convinced the entire company that God was going to travel with them. They were confident that He would be their Guide and their protection. Because of prayer, they were ready to undertake the long journey ahead.

The company with Ezra could have waited until they actually faced danger along the way before they prayed. God would still have heard that prayer. But by taking time to approach God at the very beginning, they had a confidence that sustained them throughout the journey. They placed their trust in God even before the trouble came.

GOD'S ANSWER TO PRAYER— Ezra 8:31-32

Ezra skipped over the details of the trip from Babylon to Jerusalem, but he did record their safe arrival. They had asked God for guidance and protection, and He answered their prayer.

Even though he skipped the details, Ezra did mention that there were enemies and thieves whom they could have met on the journey. The enemies did not want them to return to the Land of Promise. Some of the nations hated the Jews, and others were in conflict with their Per-

sian benefactors. Their armies could have attacked the small band of travelers, but God protected them. By focusing on the answer to prayer rather than on the details of the trouble, Ezra called attention to the work of God in their lives.

The thieves would probably have come at night and tried to carry off the treasures. Even though they did not have soldiers with them, the men who protected the treasures had the help of God. All of the gold and silver arrived safely in Jerusalem. That itself was a great miracle, for travel at that time was extremely tricky. Bands of robbers would certainly have hindered them if it had not been for God.

As Christians, we sometimes face difficulties in life without ever realizing the number of times God has protected us. We focus on the danger without remembering the years of peace and safety He has provided. Regular times of prayer will remind us of the need for help when we face trials, but it will also remind us of the privilege of giving thanks for the safety He regularly provides.

In addition to the prayer for safety, Ezra and the others had prayed for guidance. It is probable that none of them had ever made this journey before, and they wanted God to help them travel the right roads. Their safe arrival in Jerusalem showed that God had also answered that prayer. No one got lost on the way, and the entire company came to the desired destination—Jerusalem.

After arriving in Jerusalem, they rested for three days before starting into the work they needed to do. The Bible does not say how they used those three days of rest. Judging from Ezra's reputation as a man of prayer, there may very well have been a time of thanksgiving for the answers to prayer God had given. Three days of prayer at the beginning of the journey were mirrored by three days of thanksgiving at the journey's end.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did the travelers need guidance from God?
2. How does combining fasting with prayer remind us of the importance of our time with God?
3. Why did they not have military protection for the journey?
4. What treasures made them vulnerable to thieves?
5. In what ways did Ezra continually focus attention on God by the way he told the story?
6. Why did Ezra stop at the beginning of the journey for an extended time of prayer?
7. How did God answer their prayer for protection on the journey?
8. How did God answer their prayer for guidance?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. For the believer, fasting should be a sign of inward humility (Ezra 8:21).
2. When in need of something, we should always start by asking God.
3. Be sure that your actions before men do not negate your witness for God (vs. 22).
4. God always hears and answers the prayers of His people—but not always as they might expect (vs. 23).
5. The almighty hand of God guides and guards His obedient children (vs. 31).
6. When God starts a plan, He always finishes it (vs. 32).

—Don Kakavecos.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

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

No believer would deny that there is power in prayer. James tells us, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (5:16). Nevertheless, sometimes fasting is called for as well.

Mark’s Gospel describes how the disciples tried to free a boy afflicted by a deaf and mute spirit. No matter how long they prayed or what kinds of prayers they offered, they were unable to deliver this boy from the spirit. “And when [Jesus] was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” (9:28-29).

Fasting is abstaining from something, such as food or TV, for a length of time. Fasting without prayer, however, is nothing more than taking a break from our normal routine. If we really desire God to deliver us from oppression, if we are desperate for His direction, then we must seek Him earnestly in the midst of our refraining from things.

God does not play hide-and-seek; rather, He plays seek-and-seek. While we are seeking Him, He is seeking us. He longs for us to talk with Him just as much as we long to hear from Him. Fasting purifies our hearts. It is a way of communicating to God that nothing else is as important to us as hearing from Him.

If something in your life needs to change, try coupling your prayers with fasting. Give up something for a few days. Seek God with all your heart. Make your request plain to Him. Be specific about *what* you desire but not about *how* God should move. Wait and watch how He will deliver you!

—Kristin Reeg.

Gifts for the Temple

Lesson: Ezra 8:24-30

Read: Ezra 8:24-30

TIME: 458 B.C.

PLACE: Ahava Canal

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).

Lesson Exposition

One of the reasons for Ezra's journey back to Jerusalem was to restore the temple treasures taken by Nebuchadnezzar. The temple had been rebuilt, but the items used for the service in the temple still remained in Babylon. They were needed for the worship to be restored as well.

TREASURES HANDLED BY FAITHFUL MEN—Ezra 8:24-25

Transporting the treasures back to Jerusalem would be dangerous because of the enemies along the way. But it would also be dangerous because of the possibility of covetous men in their own company stealing the gold and silver. Ezra had been entrusted with delivering all of the items safely, so he chose twenty-four trusted men to protect the treasures on their journey. Twelve were priests, and twelve were Levites.

The treasure included items from Solomon's temple, along with gifts from some of the ruling men of Babylon and Jews who were staying behind in the land. All of the gold and silver was for the purpose of beautifying the new temple.

TREASURES HANDLED WITH PROPER CAUTION—Ezra 8:26-27

Ezra had a plan to assure the safe arrival of all the treasures. He weighed everything that was entrusted to the men. When they arrived, the materials would be weighed again. That would prove that the identical treasure was delivered without even small amounts of gold or silver missing.

It was not just that these items were made of gold and silver that gave them value. They were dedicated to the worship of the Lord. When constructed, they had been fashioned from valuable metals to demonstrate how much the Jews valued their God. They wanted to give Him the very best they had when they came into His house to worship. He deserved the finest and costliest objects they could make.

TREASURES HANDLED WITH SPIRITUAL CONCERN—Ezra 8:28-30

The task Ezra assigned to the twenty-four men demanded honesty. They needed to be alert and maybe even prepared to defend the treasure with their lives. But there was an even more important requirement expected of

QUESTIONS

them. They needed to realize that this job was a spiritual responsibility. They were expected to be holy in order to guard these items dedicated to God.

Items used only for the worship of God in the temple were considered holy, or set apart for His use. These men had also been set apart for the use of God. Honesty was not just important when they were handling the treasure; honesty needed to be part of their very character. Ezra wanted them to see the importance not only of guarding the treasure but also of guarding their own lives from contamination with sin. They were to be above reproach in every area of life.

In order for that to happen, the priests and Levites needed to accept the responsibility as a spiritual job. This was more than just something they were doing for Ezra; it was something they were doing for God. The records they kept, the weapons they carried, and the successful completion of the task involved spiritual values. They would not just give account to men; they would also give account to the God to whom the treasures belonged.

Each one of these men accepted that responsibility willingly. Not one of them refused or turned down the opportunity to serve God in this way. In spite of the danger, they were thrilled with the possibility of giving their lives over to the care and protection and transportation of God's treasures.

There is no record of any personal gain for these men in the job they were asked to do. They did not receive big bonuses or even great honor when they arrived in Jerusalem. They did it for God and not for what they could get for themselves. It is possible for men today to serve and even worship for the profit they bring. But genuine worship is all for the honor and glory of God. Our love for Him and His praise should motivate all our spiritual service. He alone is worthy of the best we have to offer Him.

—Robert A. Allen.

1. How did the temple treasures end up in Babylon?
2. Why was the task of transporting them so dangerous?
3. What sort of men did Ezra choose to guard the treasures?
4. What made the objects they were taking to Jerusalem so valuable?
5. Why did Ezra weigh all of the treasures at the beginning of the journey?
6. Why were gold and silver used in the making of worship items?
7. Why did Ezra remind the men of the fact that they were holy just like the vessels they carried?
8. Why were the men willing to face the danger and accept the responsibility given them?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. A wise leader often uses delegation to better accomplish the work of God (Ezra 8:24).
2. Accountability is necessary for everyone involved in the work of the Lord (vs. 25).
3. Seek to choose people you can trust, and then trust the people you choose (vss. 26-27).
4. All we have comes from the Lord and ultimately belongs to Him (vs. 28).
5. Responsibility and accountability go hand in hand in doing the work of God (vs. 29).
6. Believers should serve willingly, joyfully, and faithfully (vs. 30).

—Don Kakavecos.

The Festival of Booths

Lesson: Nehemiah 8:13-18

Read: Nehemiah 7:73—8:18

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

Fourteen years after the journey of Ezra to the Promised Land, Nehemiah returned with a company of people. His mission was to restore the wall around the city. The people needed a wall for protection from their enemies. Having a wall meant that they could worship in safety.

JOY COMES FROM GOD'S WORD—Neh. 8:13

The people of God had been worshipping in the temple since its completion, but worship had been dangerous because of the enemies who lived nearby. Building a wall brought a renewed interest in studying the Word of God. The task of building the temple and the wall had been jobs they knew God wanted them to do. Now that those were complete, they had a desire to know what else God expected from them in the land.

Ezra took up the task of reading the Word to the people and then explaining it so that they could understand. They did not listen to the Word just so they could say they had done something spiritual. Their desire was to know God through His Word. They wanted to be able to do the will of God, and that meant hearing directly from Him.

JOY COMES FROM OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD—Neh. 8:14-15

When the Scriptures were read, the people immediately became aware of their lack of obedience. God had commanded them to hold feast days at certain times of the year. During the history of the nation, they had done that haphazardly. Even if the feasts were observed, they had not celebrated according to the instructions given to them by Moses. The reading of the Word convicted them of disobedience.

Conviction of sin led them to seek forgiveness and become obedient. Plans were made to observe the Feast of Tabernacles the way Moses commanded. They were to camp out for a week in memory of the journey through the wilderness after their rescue from Egypt.

The excitement of the people over the observation of this feast came from the knowledge that they were doing God's will. The leaders of the people shared God's message with others all through the land so that everyone could join together in this step of obedience. Once they knew what God wanted them to do, it was just a matter of following His instructions. They gathered

branches and started building temporary shelters in backyards and on rooftops throughout Jerusalem.

JOY COMES FROM WORSHIP IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD— Neh. 8:16-18

Not since the days of Joshua had the entire nation united in observance of the Feast of Tabernacles. The assurance that they were of one heart and mind before God brought great joy to the people of God. A person could not walk through the streets of the city of Jerusalem without seeing the shelters that people had built for the feast.

The nation also joined together in one voice of praise to God. The week was set aside entirely for worship. They did not go out into the fields to work but instead rejoiced in the opportunity to honor God with music, prayers, and offerings.

It was the reading of the Word of God that had prompted obedience from the start. But joining together in doing the will of God awakened in the people an even greater thirst for a knowledge of God through His Word. Every day during the feast, they gathered to hear from Ezra as he read and explained the Scriptures to them. One step of obedience brought such joy that they wanted to know everything they could about God's Word and how it could change their lives.

A person who begins to live in accordance with the Word of God will soon discover the blessing that comes with obedience. The joy of living a life that is pleasing to God will encourage in a believer a thirst for even greater understanding. On the other hand, a person who refuses to obey the Word will soon quit reading it because of a desire to avoid conviction. Sin will keep that person away from God's Word just as surely as obedience will keep him reading and studying His Word. Worshipping God always involves learning from and obeying what He has commanded.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did God's people need the protection of a wall?
2. How did the wall make possible their desire for studying God's Word?
3. What did Ezra do besides reading the Bible to them?
4. What convicted them as they began to study and understand the Word of God?
5. Why did the leaders want the entire nation to be involved in celebrating the feast?
6. How did united worship bring joy to their hearts?
7. How was this feast different from any other since Joshua?
8. How did obedience stimulate a greater desire for knowledge of the Word of God?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. People of all classes and ranks should give careful attention to God's Word (Neh. 8:13).
2. Only God can reveal truth; man can only discover and disseminate it (Neh. 8:14; cf. Deut. 29:29).
3. If the Word is not proclaimed, it cannot be received and obeyed (Neh. 8:15; cf. Rom. 10:17).
4. The best evidence that we believe God's Word is our full obedience to it (Neh. 8:16).
5. Obeying God always brings joy—if not now, then later (Neh. 8:17; cf. Luke 6:20-23; Rev. 19:7).
6. Daily encounters with God's Word can both guide and guard us (Neh. 8:18).

—Don Kakavecos.

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

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).

Lesson Exposition

Their study of the Word of God brought conviction into the hearts of the people concerning the feasts. But it also showed them their sin and disobedience in the thoughts and actions of their own lives. They recognized that their sin was against God and determined to join together in a time of confession in order to seek His forgiveness.

CONFESSION INCLUDES AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHARACTER OF GOD— Neh. 9:2, 6-7

The remnant became aware of their own sin when they saw the contrast between God and themselves. He is holy and completely separate from sin of any kind. They were burdened down with iniquity, just as their fathers had been. Their fathers had joined with the pagan nations in worshipping false gods, and they had failed to separate themselves from those who were strangers to the covenant of God as well.

Another reason the people became aware of their need for confession was their failure to honor God. All the rest of creation honored the Creator, but men chose to honor themselves. Throughout their history they had joined others

who worshipped the created world, the moon and stars, rather than the One who made them. Understanding the power of God reminded them that He alone was to be worshipped.

Throughout the history of Israel, God had remained faithful to His people even though they had often failed Him. When they read the Word and recognized His attribute of faithfulness, it showed just how miserable their own behavior was in comparison to His. He had always kept His word. They had lied and dissembled and played the hypocrite. Their conduct and His faithfulness emphasized the need for confession of sin.

CONFESSION INVOLVES ADMITTING A NEED FOR GOD— Neh. 9:9-10

Four hundred years of slavery in Egypt had convinced the people of Israel that they needed God. His actions in delivering them from the hand of Pharaoh had long been celebrated as the greatest event in their long history. It had been impossible for them to save themselves, and God had worked a mighty work on their behalf. He had become their Deliverer, and the entire world had recognized His power.

QUESTIONS

It was the Exodus that the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles commemorated. They had just observed those feasts and had read in the Scriptures the record of His great power on their behalf. When they saw their need at that time and how God had met that need, they were encouraged to seek help from Him once again. They knew that before they could ask for that help, they needed to confess their sin. They needed to depend entirely on God.

CONFESSION RECOGNIZES THE RESULTS OF SIN—Neh. 9:30-31

Confession was also needed because of the result of the sin of the nation in the past. God had been gracious toward them and long-suffering with them for many years. But the time came when He could no longer tolerate their disobedience, and they were carried off into captivity. Now He had allowed them to return, and they did not want to face His wrath again. They instead wanted to experience His mercy.

God had shown His mercy to the nation by allowing them to return from captivity in Babylon. He had proved to them that He was a gracious God, but they did not intend to presume upon His grace. Instead, they wanted to stay in fellowship with Him by seeking forgiveness of sin.

CONFESSION RESULTS WHEN MEN DESIRE THE GUIDANCE OF GOD—Neh. 9:32-36

The nation of Israel had engaged in national sins and had forsaken the way of the Lord. They had been punished for that, and now they wanted to avoid such a disaster in the future.

The people had also been disobedient in their personal lives. They could not blame their punishment on anyone else because they were also guilty before God. But God had shown His mercy; and because of that, they knew they could trust Him for the future.

—Robert A. Allen.

1. How does the holiness of God reveal our sin?
2. Why should men join with nature in praising God?
3. How did the faithfulness of God bring conviction?
4. How did years of slavery convince the people of Israel that they needed a powerful God?
5. How had a lack of confession resulted in the Captivity?
6. Why did God's mercy in bringing them back to their land show them their need of fellowship with Him?
7. How had the former leaders of Israel refused to follow the guidance from God's Word?
8. How did the remnant determine not to continue in sin?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Separation from sin must accompany the confessing and forsaking of sin (Neh. 9:2).
2. True worship focuses, at least in part, on the character and works of God (vss. 6-7).
3. God's past judgment of sin should serve as a present-day warning to us (vss. 9-10).
4. It is God's mercy, not our merit, that allows Him to forgive our sin (vss. 30-32).
5. True confession must proclaim God as just in disciplining us for our sin (vss. 33-34).
6. Spurning God's goodness always leads to His discipline and our heartache (vss. 35-36).

—Don Kakavecos.

Dedication of the Wall

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

Read: Nehemiah 12:27-43

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

Worship of God can take many forms. It can include confession and adoration and praise. One of the ways in which the remnant offered worship was through a celebration of thanksgiving. They were grateful to God for allowing them to complete the wall around Jerusalem.

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THANKSGIVING—Neh. 12:27-28

The Levites had been involved in the actual building of the temple under the leadership of Ezra. They also had the responsibility of preparing the temple for worship on a regular basis. Their job included the music, which was an integral part of the worship experience.

Nehemiah made sure that the Levites were prepared for the great day of dedication. Their musical instruments, along with their voices, were needed in order to offer the songs of thanksgiving that were part of the ceremony. Although they usually served in the temple by courses, on this occasion they were all called upon to make this a day that would be long remembered.

THE REASONS FOR THANKSGIVING—Neh. 12:29-30

The purpose of the dedication service was to thank God for once again providing a wall of protection around Jerusalem. Walls were the ultimate defense systems in the face of the weapons available in that day.

There were many other reasons for thanksgiving on their list as well. They had the protection of the wall, which meant they could live outside the wall and come to the city for safety when needed. They had godly leaders who were instructing them in obedience to the Word of God. They had the temple and the means of purification through the blood sacrifices. That provided the means of reconciliation with God as they anticipated His provision of a Redeemer who would forgive sin.

Another blessing was the fact that those in the next generation were following in the footsteps of their parents. The children born in the land had the same desire to please God that had led their parents back from the land of captivity. That was a great reason for thanksgiving.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THANKSGIVING—Neh. 12:31-36

The entire nation of Israel joined together on this great day of dedication and thanksgiving. Nehemiah specified the various groups that were present, representing every segment of society. The fact that each of them was involved encouraged the united worship of all.

The Levites led them, but all of the people worshipped. The leaders invited them to come for the dedication, and all of them accepted the invitation. The musicians and singers offered praise to God, and everyone joined in that praise. Even the men who had physically built the wall were part of the celebration. Each one had done his job, and the result was united worship.

THE TESTIMONY OF THANKSGIVING—Neh. 12:38, 43

The two choirs on the top of the wall echoed back to one another the hymns of praise to God. This was a verbal proclamation of the thanks to God in their hearts. They were right with God because of confession of sin, and the result was a great outburst of praise.

The sound of the choirs on top of the walls was so loud that people living outside Jerusalem heard the singing and the shouting. They knew that the remnant was joyful about the completion of the wall. But they also learned something even more important. They learned that these people were giving honor to the God who had made their return and the rebuilding of their city possible.

The joy of the Lord that resulted in a day of thanksgiving provided a strong testimony of faith in God. That should always be the true goal of worship. Others should hear and see what God has done for us. The testimony of hearts that are right with God and satisfied with His provision will show others the grace and mercy of God.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. What role did the Levites play in temple worship?
2. Why did Nehemiah want the Levites to come for the dedication?
3. Why was the completion of the wall a cause for thanksgiving?
4. How did the restoration of the sacrifices give the people a reason to be thankful to God?
5. How did the people encourage each other in their giving of thanks?
6. Why was it important to have the ones who actually built the wall participate in the dedication?
7. What did the people living near Jerusalem learn about God from the celebration?
8. Why is our testimony an important element of our worship?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. We should take every opportunity to proclaim the blessings of God (Neh. 12:27-29).
2. God desires personal purity before any participation in a work for Him (12:30; cf. chaps. 8—10).
3. God gives those who labor for Him abundant reason for thanks (12:31).
4. God's work is usually accomplished by a variety of God's faithful people (vss. 32-36).
5. There is room and time for everyone when it comes to celebrating God (vs. 38).
6. Genuine, God-given joy can be a powerful witness to the world around us (vs. 43).

—Don Kakavecos.

Sanctifying the Lord's Day

Lesson: Nehemiah 13:15-22

Read: Nehemiah 13:4-31

TIME: about 420 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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).

Lesson Exposition

The people of Israel had learned to worship God in the temple. They had thanked Him for the protection of the wall. Their confession of sin had become a part of worship. But they still needed to learn that worship of God extends to every area of life. How we live is worship just as much as how we sing and pray and give thanks.

HONOR GOD IN BUSINESS DEALINGS—Neh. 13:15

Worshipping God in the temple had become a part of everyday life for the remnant. But God had also told them to keep the Sabbath Day holy in other ways. They were not to work on the Sabbath because the entire day was to be dedicated to the Lord.

People who were worshipping in the temple were still going home and working in the grape harvest on the Sabbath. Others were going to the marketplace to buy and sell just as they would on any other day.

The Sabbath Day had become simply another day of the week. Since they had heard Ezra teach them from the Word of God, they certainly knew that what they were doing was wrong. But they had not yet extended their wor-

ship of God into the daily business practices of their lives.

HONOR GOD AS A MEANS OF TESTIMONY—Neh. 13:16-21

One of the problems with working on the Sabbath was that it ruined their testimony with the people who lived nearby. They claimed to honor God and serve Him, but they were not honoring the very day they had set aside for His worship. The marketplace should have been empty simply because no Jews should have gone there to buy or sell. But the men from Tyre knew that if they opened their shops, people would come and spend their money. So they kept their shops open in defiance of the law of the land.

Nehemiah was also concerned about the spiritual relationship between the people and God. By working on the Sabbath Day, they were openly hypocritical. They were honoring God with their words but not with their actions. Nehemiah had no problem telling them that such hypocrisy was a sin. It was breaking their fellowship with the holy God.

As a leader of the nation, Nehemiah realized that he could not let this practice continue. If the people would vol-

untarily choose to refrain from buying and selling on the Sabbath, it would not be necessary to shut down the market by other means. His decision to close the gates of the city from Friday night through Saturday night was indicative of the respect for God he desired all of the people to experience.

The orders from Nehemiah and the enforcement of them impacted not only the dwellers in Jerusalem but the foreign merchants who came to the city as well. He did not allow them to camp outside the walls because they were simply looking for a way to get around the law.

HONOR GOD IN THE WAY WE DO HIS BUSINESS—Neh. 13:22

Allowing worship to impact all of life stems from an acknowledgment that all of life is spiritual. Nehemiah knew that the reason the law was not being kept was simply that men were not clean spiritually. That was why he told the Levites of their need for cleansing. They were leading the people in temple worship, but they were not leading them in obedience in this matter of Sabbath keeping.

Since he was the governor, the men Nehemiah sent to close the gates were the police force. The keeping of the Sabbath should have been the concern of the Levites as a matter of spiritual holiness. They needed to be teaching the people to observe the Sabbath because of their own desire to honor the God they said they worshipped.

What men do in the workplace shows clearly how much they honor and serve God. Honesty before Him requires honesty toward our fellow man. Truthfulness before God demands truth in advertising. A love for God will be demonstrated in compassion for and proper treatment of employees in providing a safe work environment. Employees who serve God will also serve an employer faithfully. Worship affects all of life.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why were people not to work on the Sabbath Day?
2. Why did the pagan merchants open the marketplace when they knew it was not allowed on the Sabbath?
3. Why was buying something on the Sabbath a matter of hypocrisy?
4. What should have been the practice of the people on the Lord's Day?
5. Why did Nehemiah not let the merchants camp outside the wall?
6. How did Nehemiah know that the Levites needed spiritual cleansing?
7. How do business practices reveal the genuineness of faith?
8. How can we worship God by the way we do our jobs?

—Robert A. Allen.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. The Lord's Day is a special gift from God, and we should honor it as such (Neh. 13:15).
2. Our choices on the Lord's Day may well indicate our real priorities (vs. 16).
3. God wants us to have a day of rest and worship; we neglect it at our own peril (vss. 17-18).
4. Properly setting apart the Lord's Day may require some practical limitations for ourselves and others (vs. 19).
5. Serving God fully may sometimes require drastic measures (Neh. 13:20-21; cf. 1 Tim. 6:11).
6. Choose to do right, and God will care for the details (Neh. 13:22).

—Don Kakavecos.