

LESSON 10

The restoration of God's temple had a special meaning for these exiles for another reason. For 70 years they had been surrounded on all sides by pagan temples to false gods.

About 50 temples are mentioned in Babylonian texts, along with over 1500 shrines for their false gods. Every time the Jews saw one of those false temples or shrines, they must have remembered the true temple that had been destroyed.

Freewill gifts are offered in verse 5. They are described in Leviticus 22:18-23, and they were the only sacrifices that non-Jews were allowed to offer to God.

The heart that loves God desires to worship God in a way that pleases him, and these people had that heart. We see that heart in these freewill offerings. These people were not just doing what was required – they were going beyond what was required. They made the offerings that God had commanded, and then they made additional offerings.

Verse 6 ends with a “but” – “But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.”

One point of this statement is that even though the sacrificial system had been reinstituted, there was much work that remained to be done.

A partial restoration is not a restoration at all; it is instead, at best, more of a reformation. And while a reformation may accomplish some needed reforms, those reforms are not enough unless they proceed toward a complete restoration of proper worship. Ezra is not describing a reformation movement; Ezra is describing a restoration movement. There is a huge difference between the two.

But there is another lesson in verse 6, and once again we have a lesson pointing us forward to the church. I think the final phrase in verse 6 (“But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid”) has both a negative lesson and a positive lesson. We just saw the negative lesson – there was much work left to be done. What is the positive lesson?

What verse 6 is telling us is that the worship of God on the Temple Mount had been reinstituted, even though no temple existed. In fact, not even the foundations for the second temple had yet been laid.

Jeremiah had told the Jews before the exile that they should trust in God rather than in the physical

temple.

Jeremiah 7:4 — Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.

Jeremiah 7:14-15 — Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim.

Although their forefathers had placed their trust in the temple rather than in the Lord of that temple, these people, their descendants, had learned in their land of exile that God's presence and God's worship did not require a building.

That realization must have been shocking for the Jews, but it is not shocking for those of us in the church. God dwells in his people, not in some building made with hands.

Acts 17:24 — God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.

Ezra 3:7

7 They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia.

Verse 7 is one of the most informative verses in Ezra, which might seem like an odd statement when you read verse 7. But verse 7 tells us something very important about this small group of former exiles – they sincerely wanted to give their very best to God.

Even though this group was small and mostly poor, they set very high standards when it came to doing God's work. They hired talented masons and carpenters, and they ordered the finest materials.

They were a focused people and a dedicated people; they were not a laid-back people or a casual people when it came to doing God's work. Their desire was to give God their very best in everything they did.

Is that our desire? It will not happen by accident. Giving God our very best will either be our driving goal – or it won't happen. This group left us a good example to follow.

But, unfortunately, they also left us a bad example.

We are looking now at the first return. The third return under Nehemiah occurred about 90 years later, and the prophet Malachi preached about 10 years after that.

About 100 years after the people here in verse 7 were intent on giving God their very best, Malachi described a very different situation:

Malachi 1:7-8 – Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.

In short, there had been a decline in their desire to please God and give God their very best.

We need to always be on guard against that same sad decline. If we are giving God our very best today, then that is wonderful – but we need to always remain focused and dedicated on giving God our very best. The priorities of the returned exiles changed over time, and we can see the result of that change in Malachi.

Solomon had also used cedar trees from Lebanon in constructing the first temple, but he had paid for that timber himself. Here the timber was paid for, not by King Solomon, but by King Cyrus. God's people had fallen from their former glory because of their disobedience.

The Babylonian exile had provided many important lessons to God's people. One such lesson was the danger of idolatry. Idolatry had been a major cause for the exile, but interestingly, idolatry was never the problem after the exile that it had been before the exile.

A second lesson they learned from the exile, and a lesson that is shown here, is the danger of pride and self-sufficiency.

We know that God hates a proud look (Proverbs 6:17), but why? What is it about pride that causes God to so frequently warn us against it?

The answer is that pride is dangerous – in fact, pride may be the greatest danger. Why? Because pride and self-sufficiency blind us to God and to our desperate need for God.

We should be thankful for reminders that we are not self-sufficient. We should be thankful for events that deflate our pride. Why? Because those reminders and those events cause us to look to God for our salvation and not to ourselves. They remind us to rely on the arm of God rather than the arm of man.

The prophets prior to the exile all spoke to a people who were blinded by their pride and by their arrogance. We are now reading about a very different people. The exile had created a very different people – a people much closer to God and a people who understood their total dependence on God.

In our introduction, we mentioned that a theme in this book is the link between the events in Ezra and the establishment of the eternal kingdom in Acts 2 as prophesied in Daniel 2 and Isaiah 2. We have already seen some examples of that theme in this chapter.

Verse 7 has two links to other times – one that points **backward** to the first temple and one that points **forward** to the church that was to come.

The backward link, of course, is that the same materials that had been used for the first temple were being used for the second temple.

What about the link to the church? Listen as Isaiah describes the church in similar terms to verse 7:

Isaiah 60:11-13 – Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. ... The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

Why did the temple exist in the first place? Why was there a first temple? Why was there a second temple?

Hebrews 8:5 – Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.

Why was the revealed pattern so important? Because the temple was a shadow of heavenly things. Is the revealed pattern for proper worship any less important today now that we are members of that spiritual reality – the eternal kingdom of Christ?

Everything about the Old Testament is pointing forward. That is what Hebrews tells us. We need to always be looking for those spiritual realities in the shadows we see in Ezra and in the rest of the Old Testament.

Isaiah 60:11 describes the church as a place where **“thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the Gentiles, and that their kings may be brought.”**

Do we find a similar description of the church anywhere in the New Testament? Yes, we do.

Revelation 21:24-25 – “And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.”

What are those verses describing? Revelation 21:2 is very helpful in answering that question: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down from God out of heaven**, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

That phrase “coming down from God **out of heaven**” tells us two important things about Revelation 21. First, it is not describing heaven, and second, it is not describing something in heaven. Verse 2 could not be any clearer on that point.

What then is being described? Revelation 21 is describing a people rather than a place. We know that from the descriptions in Revelation 21 (the frequent use of the number 12, for example) that God’s people are being described.

What people is being described? That one is easy. Verse 9 says, “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” Revelation 21 is describing the church.

But **when**? When are God’s people being described. I think verses 24-25 are an important clue – **the gates are open!** People are still being invited in! Will that be true of the church in heaven after the end of the world? No, but it is certainly true of the church here and now.

Ezra 3 is pointing forward to the church, and Isaiah 60 is pointing forward to the church. Revelation 21 later describes that church after its establishment using the very same language!

Ezra 3:8-9

8 Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD. 9 Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.

We are now in the second month of the second year after the first return, and verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to “set forward the work of the house of the Lord.”

Solomon also began building his temple in the second month (1 Kings 6:1). This was the month after Passover, or April-May on our calendar, and it was the beginning of the dry season, which made it the ideal time to start building.

Even so, as will see, the people here did little more than repair the foundation until nearly 20 years later during the time of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC, at which time they made another beginning (Ezra 5:2) two decades after this beginning.

What caused the delay?

At this point, if this was all we knew, then we might think we could blame it on the Levites. Verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua delegated the work to them, and maybe the Levites dropped the ball. The job was delegated to them, and then nothing happened for 20 years. (I could insert a “deacon” joke here!) But that is not what happened.

We will see what really happened when we get to Chapter 4, but even here in these verses we know we can’t blame it just on the Levites. In verse 8, the leaders set forward the work, and in verse 9 the leaders set forward the workman. In each case, the word used refers to supervision. Everything that was done was being overseen very carefully by those in charge. This was not a case in which work was delegated and then forgotten. This was being done right in that the work was being delegated

and then carefully overseen. They were all getting off to a very good start!

But before we proceed, we need to consider yet another Levite puzzle! Notice in verse 8 that the Levites who were appointed were at least age 20. That little detail raises some questions.

- Numbers 4:3 says that the Levites began their work at age 30.
- Numbers 8:24 says that the Levites began their work at age 25.
- 1 Chronicles 23:24 says that the Levites began their work at age 20 (as we also find here in Ezra 3:8).

How is all of this explained? Is it 20, 25 or 30?

As for the difference between 30 years and 25 years in Numbers 4 and Numbers 8, the best explanation (and the one that the rabbis adopted) is that the Levites had a 5-year apprenticeship.

But how about the change to 20 years in 1 Chronicles 24 and Ezra 3?

I think Numbers 8 answers that question. Numbers 8:24 places the starting age at 25 and places the retirement age at 50. But Numbers 8:26 says that the retired Levites could assist the others. I think those Levites who were younger than 25 were most likely also there just as assistants.

That view is confirmed by 1 Chronicles 23:3, which says that the Levites were numbered starting at age 30, suggesting that age 30 was still the operative age. But it seems that there was both a five-year apprenticeship dropping the starting age to 25, and an earlier five year period of assistance, dropping the starting age down to 20. Also, with so few Levites, it was important to start them all working as soon as possible.

Verse 9 shows us that the leading priestly and Levitical families were in charge of the work, as we would expect. We first met Kadmiel and Hodaviah back in Ezra 2:40. Henadad is mentioned in Nehemiah 10:9.

Ezra 3:10-13

- 10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in

their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: 13 So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

Verses 10-13 show the reaction of the people when the new foundation was laid – they praised God, they sang together, they gave thanks, they shouted with a great shout, and they wept with a loud voice.

Verse 11 quotes Psalm 100:5 – “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

Jeremiah had earlier prophesied about this very event.

Jeremiah 33:10-11 – Thus saith the LORD; Again there shall be heard in this place, which ye say shall be desolate without man and without beast, even in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, that are desolate, without man, and without inhabitant, and without beast, the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the LORD of hosts: for the LORD is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the LORD. For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first, saith the LORD.

The hearts of the people were full of praise and full of thanksgiving even though construction had just started. As someone once said, “true faith praises God even before the answer has materialized.” True faith prays for rain – and then carries an umbrella! These people knew with certainty that the temple would be rebuilt even while they were still looking at just a pile of rubble.

There were among the people some older priests, older Levites, and older family heads who had seen the original temple with their own eyes. The temple had been destroyed in 587, and the current year was 536, or 51 years after the temple was destroyed. Keep in mind that the captivity started in 605, when Daniel was carried off, but the temple was not destroyed until 18 years after that.

So, for someone now present to have seen the temple with his own eyes and remembered it, he could have been as young as 60, but he was likely closer to 70 or 80, having been carried off to exile in the years prior to the destruction of the city. Daniel, for example, at this time was in his eighties (but, as we have discussed, he seems to have stayed behind in Babylon).

Verses 12-13 are touching. Those who remembered Solomon's temple (called "the first house" in verse 12) wept. Why? Presumably it was because of the difference between that grand edifice built by Solomon and the much less grand version that would now be constructed. They likely had feelings both of longing and regret. Longing for what they had lost, and regret for their sins that had caused it to be destroyed, and also for their inability to restore all of its former glory.

Haggai and Zechariah would preach about this same sorrowful attitude about 20 years later:

Haggai 2:3 – Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

Zechariah 4:10 – For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

Yes, there was sadness, but great joy was mixed in with that sadness.

There is a lesson for us in this. One of the surest ways to derail the work of the church is to focus entirely on the good old days.

- Back in the good old days, there was a church on every corner, and every building was full.
- Back in the good old days, we had gospel meetings that lasted for weeks, meeting twice a day, and hundreds were baptized.
- Back in the good old days, we didn't have the problems we have today with all of the liberal ideas in the church.

And on and on we could go.

First, the obvious point is that the good old days were not entirely good, and much of what we remember about them is not entirely accurate.

Here is how one author summed up the good old days:

In earlier days preachers actually did evangelistic work and churches edified themselves. And that is when we made our greatest growth ... Then it was the old Jerusalem gospel preached under a brush arbor, in a school building, a home, or a simple meeting house. In those days, brethren knew something.

And when was that written? 1953 (*Firm Foundation*, June 2, 1953)! What we may see today as the good old days were not seen that way by all of those living in them.

But second, if the good old days were, in fact, the golden age of the church, that is not the age in which we now find ourselves. Perhaps we are more like these exiles, looking at a current situation that is much less grand than what we saw 50 or more years ago.

How will we react to that? With paralysis and weeping? We can't do what we did before, so therefore we should do nothing? Or shouldn't we instead react with joy and thanksgiving for the wonderful opportunities that God had now given us to do his will and expand his kingdom.

What God seeks is faithfulness, and obedience, and trust. And we can give those things to God without regard to how different things are today from how they were in the good old days, whether that is how things really are or just how we remember them looking back through our rose colored glasses.

The final phrase in verse 13 is ominous: "the noise was heard afar off." Who do you think was hearing all of that joyful shouting? And how would they respond? The opening verse of Chapter 4 will tell us.

#ezra-esther