

Let's Worship God

6th-11th May 2019

Ezra





Monday - Ezra 3:10-13 - Joy and Sorrow

Last week we noted that the laying of the foundation for the new Temple was an occasion for worship and celebration. The priests blew trumpets, the Levites clashed cymbals and sang, and the people shouted for joy. Mixed with their shouts of joy, however, were also sounds of sorrow. There were some there, older priests and Levites who had served in the first Temple, as well as other elders of Israel, who could remember the glory of the first Temple. Even after many of its treasures had been plundered and even after neglect under the reigns of ungodly kings, the Temple of Solomon had been a glorious structure. Those who could remember it before its destruction fifty years earlier wept and mourned at the laying of the foundations of the new Temple. Haggai 2:3 tells us this was because they could tell, even by just the new foundations, that this second Temple would not be as magnificent as the first. The sounds of their distress mixed with the shouts of joy so that those hearing the sound from afar could not tell whether it was a great celebration or a great mourning.

As we will see, this sorrow will be only the first in a series of discouragements that will cause the Jews to abandon the building of the Temple for several years. The LORD will send the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the people to get back to the labor. In Zechariah 4:9-10, the prophet will encourage the people, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel." The second Temple will not only be completed, but, by the time of Christ, will be considered one of the most beautiful works of human hands.

Sometimes we, like the Jews in today's passage, may find ourselves discouraged - especially when we compare our time to "the good old days." The days of the Reformation, the Puritans or the early Covenanters appear to be times of greater strength for the Church. Perhaps we think our congregation is too small, our church's ministries too few, our voice in the community too weak. We must not use these as excuses not to serve the LORD. We must not despise the day of small things, for the LORD is pleased to show His strength in our weakness (II Corinthians 12:9) and will accomplish His plan to build His Church.

Questions

1. Why did some weep when the foundation was laid?

Prayer Points

1. Pray for encouragement to serve the LORD.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD "For He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11

Praise: Psalm 105 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.



Tuesday - Ezra 4:1-3 - A Devious Plan

II Kings 17 tells us of the conquest of the northern Israelite kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Following that conquest, many Israelites were forcibly resettled in other parts of the Assyrian Empire. During the reign of the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon (c.681-669 B.C.), peoples from other parts of the empire were settled in the region of Samaria in the former Kingdom of Israel and mingled with the Israelites who remained there. An Israelite priest was sent to them to "teach them the law of the god of the land." However, many Samaritans (as this people would be called) did not worship the LORD exclusively, but continued worshipping the false gods of their ancestors as well.

In today's passage we find that, with the excuse that they, too, sacrifice to the LORD, some Samaritans claimed they wished to take part in the building of the new Temple. However, the Scripture tells us they were actually "adversaries" opposed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the LORD's Temple. They deviously desired to take part in the project, not to help, but rather to hinder its progress. Probably realizing this, Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the other leaders of Israel refused their offer. By telling the Samaritans "You have nothing to do with us in the building of a house to our God," the Israelites were pointing out that: 1) Those who worship false gods alongside the LORD are not true worshipers of the LORD - they are not "us" - and 2) the LORD is the God of those who worship Him alone - thus the Israelites call Him "our God." Also, they point out that Cyrus had commissioned them, and not the Samaritans, to build the Temple of the LORD.

From today's passage we learn two important lessons: First, we learn that the LORD is not worshipped rightly if He is not worshipped alone. As the First Commandment tells us, we must have no other gods alongside of (or even under) Him. Second, we learn that not all those who seek an alliance with God's people are to be trusted. Those who oppose the advancement of the Church may pretend to be friendly only so they can water down the Gospel or otherwise weaken the witness of the Church. As Paul instructs us in II Corinthians 6:14-18, we must take care not to enter into spiritual enterprises with unbelievers.

Questions

1. What did the adversaries try to do? What can we learn from this?

Prayer Points

1. Pray that the LORD, alone, might be worshipped.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD "For He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11

Praise: Psalm 106 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.



Wednesday - Ezra 4:4-6 - The Opposition Escalates

While, in yesterday's passage, the adversaries to the building of the Temple pretended to want to help, in today's passage they reveal their true colors. As soon as their false offer of help is rejected, they find other ways to hinder the work. They discourage the people and make them afraid. We can reasonably assume that this included generally negative statements (such as "That project is just too big. You'll never get it finished.") as well as outright threats. They also bribe officials in the government to frustrate the work. It is likely this meant that funding and materials were not arriving on time and new steps in the project had to await lengthy approval processes. This kind of opposition continued from the reign of Cyrus (who would die around 530 B.C.) through the reign of Cambyses (530-522) and an impostor who briefly reigned after him, into the reign of Darius I, beginning in 522 B.C. Construction on the Temple was abandoned and not resumed until Darius' reign (as we will see later). It is here that Ezra's account jumps forward to the reigns of later kings in order to chronicle the ongoing opposition to the Jews by these adversaries. During the reign of Ahasuerus, otherwise known as Xerxes (486-465 B.C.), the adversaries wrote an accusation against the Jews. It is noteworthy that Ahasuerus is the king whom Esther marries in the book of Esther. As we see in that book, opposition to the Jews nearly took a very violent turn during his reign.

In the history of the Church, we find that, before openly violent persecution occurs, more subtle forms of opposition arise. In our time, liberal theology and other unbiblical doctrines have weakened the witness of the visible Church. The Church has been slandered by those who call the preaching of the Word of God "hate speech" and seek to have it outlawed. In formerly Christian nations and in places where freedom of religion has prevailed, Christians are now finding their freedoms infringed. However, this is nothing new. The LORD preserved the Church through such opposition in the Old Covenant period, He predicted it would happen in the New Covenant period, and He has promised to preserve His Church to the last day.

Questions

1. What do the adversaries do when their first plan failed?

Prayer Points

1. Pray for wisdom and perseverance as we encounter opposition to the Gospel.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD "For He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11

Praise: Psalm 107 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.



Thursday - Ezra 4:7-16 - A Poison Pen

A poison pen letter refers to a letter or note (or email or text message) that unjustly speaks evil of someone. As Ezra's account jumps forward in time to chronicle the ways the Jews were opposed over the years, he writes of such a poison pen letter sent from the adversaries to King Artaxerxes of Persia. Artaxerxes reigned from about 465 to 424 B.C., so these adversaries would have been those who opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Like the adversaries in Zerubbabel's time, these are Samaritans - descendants of peoples who were forcibly resettled in Israel by the Assyrians. (The "Osnappar" to whom they refer is probably Ashurbanipal who reigned from 669 to 633 B.C.). Their letter is preserved in the original Aramaic in which it was written. (Indeed, the text of Ezra shifts to the Aramaic language from 4:8 through 6:18 before returning to the Hebrew). This letter slanders the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem, claiming they intend to rebel against the king of Persia as soon as the walls of the city are complete.

As we seek to serve Christ in the world, we may find ourselves the subjects of slander. The opponents of the Gospel will write poison pen letters, emails, text messages and articles about Christians. Jesus told us to expect this, and assured us in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Questions

1. Of what do the adversaries accuse the Jews of Jerusalem in this letter to Artaxerxes?
2. Should we expect the Church to receive such opposition in our day?
3. What has Jesus promised concerning such things?

Prayer Points

1. Thank God that He preserves His Church in all ages.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD "For He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11

Praise: Psalm 108 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.



Friday - Ezra 4:17-23 - The Answer of Artaxerxes

Yesterday, we learned of the letter the adversaries to the building of Jerusalem wrote to King Artaxerxes of Persia in the days of Nehemiah. Today we see the initial answer Artaxerxes gave to these people who were "Beyond the River" (that is, in the province of the Persian Empire west of the Euphrates River). Artaxerxes had decreed that historical research be done to find out if, as the accusers claimed, Jerusalem had a history of being a rebellious city. Indeed, it was found that it had given much trouble to those who claimed lordship over it, like the Assyrians and Babylonians. This small amount of truth mixed in with the lies the adversaries were telling about the Jews of their day was enough to convince Artaxerxes to order the construction on the walls of Jerusalem to halt until he might say otherwise. (In fact, Artaxerxes will later decree that the walls of Jerusalem be built. That decree, which came in 457 B.C., started the count of the seventy weeks of years predicted in Daniel 9, which culminated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the going forth of the Gospel to the nations beyond Israel).

We must be on guard against lies mixed in with the Truth. Much as the adversaries in today's passage supported a lie with the truth that Jerusalem had been a troublesome city to the Assyrians and Babylonians, the adversaries of the Gospel will support falsehood by mixing it with truth. Purveyors of false gospels will say many things that are true, or at least that seem like reasonable interpretations of Scripture, all the while undermining basic Biblical truth concerning the character of God, the definition of the Gospel, the Person and Work of Jesus Christ and so on. We must take care not to accept anything that undermines the Truth God has revealed in Scripture.

Questions

1. How do the adversaries convince Artaxerxes to order the work at Jerusalem to cease? What lesson might we learn from this?

Prayer Points

1. Pray that we might be careful to discern Truth from lies.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD "For He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11

Praise: Psalm 109 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.



Saturday - Ezra 4:24 - The Work Discontinued

From verse four through twenty-three, Ezra recounts a period of history stretching from the 530s to at least the 460s B.C. In verse twenty-four, he brings us back to 536 B.C. Because of the opposition of the adversaries to the building of the new Temple, the Jews became discouraged and abandoned the work. For sixteen years, until the second year of Darius king of Persia (520 B.C.), no further work was done on the Temple. As we will see next week, it will take the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to motivate the people to get back to work, pointing out that a people who trust in the LORD have nothing to fear from men. As Jesus would later say in Matthew 10:28, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can kill both soul and body in hell."

Like the people of God 2500 years ago, it could be easy for us to become discouraged in the face of all the opposition we see to the building of Christ's Church today. We might be tempted to abandon the work, to neglect to preach the Gospel to the lost because our neighbors might not like us - perhaps they will even persecute us - if we share Christ with them. We must remember that those who trust in the LORD have nothing to fear from mankind. He will sustain us and He will build His Church as we proclaim Christ to the world. There is nothing the adversaries of the Gospel can do to stop Him.

Questions

1. Why did the people abandon the work on the Temple?
2. When did the work resume?
3. How might we avoid discouragement in the face of human opposition?

Prayer Points

1. Pray for the preaching and hearing of God's Word tomorrow.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD "For He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11

Praise: Psalm 110 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

The goal of Let's Worship God is to encourage and help you in your worship of God each day.

**God tells us that
Ezra read from
the book of the Law
day after day
and that
the people of God
were filled with joy!**

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