

SENIOR HIGH *Bible Class*



June, July, August 2013

SUMMER QUARTER



COVER:

Mount Olive Baptist Church
28334 Oakford Road
Chandlerville, Illinois 62627

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY:

Chere Kay Garner

Mount Olive Baptist Church was organized the third Sunday in August 1859. The church's motto is "The difference is worth the distance."

Senior High Bible Class

SUMMER QUARTER

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LOOKING AHEAD

One of our most important purposes as God's people is to worship Him. God used His prophet Isaiah to teach His people about this purpose. We should worship God for His perfect holiness as well as for His great works by singing and shouting to Him. We must do this wholeheartedly, not offering meaningless worship from the lips only. In addition, we can worship God for His promise of a new creation.

God also renews us in worship when we fall away, as He did by bringing the Israelites back from the Captivity to worship Him and helping them begin and eventually finish rebuilding His house. Even in troubled times, we can worship through fasting and prayer. We can offer God our gifts anytime.

God protects our true worship as we read His Word for guidance, confess our sins to Him together, seek to defend His house and His people, and honor the Sabbath Day by resting. As we do these things, we too join in God's holy nation of true worshippers.

Vol. LXXXII

June, July, August 2013

No. 3

Editor in Chief: Grace M. Todd

Writer: Benjamin Barnhart

Edited and published quarterly by
THE INCORPORATED TRUSTEES OF THE
GOSPEL WORKER SOCIETY
UNION GOSPEL PRESS DIVISION

Rev. W. B. Musselman, Founder

Beryl C. Bidlen, President Emeritus

Price: \$1.95 per quarter
\$7.80 per year

ISBN 978-1-936897-88-9



Lessons based on International Sunday School Lessons; the International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching, copyright © 2009 by the Committee on the Uniform Series and used with permission. Edited and published quarterly by The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society, Union Gospel Press Division, 2000 Brookpark Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44109-5812. Mailing address: P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101-1059. www.uniongospelpress.com

Scripture Lesson Text

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

2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

3 And one cried unto another, and said, Ho'ly, holy, holy, *is* the LORD of hosts: the whole earth *is* full of his glory.

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

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

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

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

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

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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).

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).

ANALYZING

God’s desire has always been to choose a people for Himself, a nation of worshippers who will give Him the honor and glory due His holy name. Simply because of who He is, He is supremely worthy of all the worship we as His creatures can bring. Through Isaiah’s vision of the Lord, we are given a glimpse of God’s glory and holiness that is meant to draw us near to Him in the worship and submission He deserves.

1. Isaiah’s vision (Isa. 6:1-4). It may seem strange that Isaiah chose Uzziah’s death rather than the beginning of the next king’s (Jotham’s) reign as the reference point for this vision. However, this phrasing made a specific point about the theme of the rest of Isaiah’s vision of the Lord.

Uzziah had been a righteous king at first, but he dishonored the Lord by burning incense in the temple—a job reserved for the priests. God punished him for this sin by striking him with leprosy, which stayed with him until his death. By referencing

this death, Isaiah was emphasizing the importance of righteous worship in view of God’s power and holiness.

The first thing Isaiah saw was a vision of the Lord’s glory. God showed His ruling power in this vision by appearing on a throne lifted high above the temple. God’s majesty was so great that just the train of His kingly robe filled the entire temple, where Uzziah had pridefully entered. In this way, God gave Isaiah a picture of how serious a matter it was to worship Him in the correct way.

As a further manifestation of His surpassing glory, the Lord’s appearance to Isaiah was accompanied by angelic beings known as seraphim. These six-winged creatures were in themselves more amazing than anything Isaiah had ever seen. However, they were merely servants in waiting to the glorious King. By covering their eyes, they expressed humility in not gazing directly at the Lord. By covering their feet, they affirmed that they had no glory in themselves to compare to His. For such amazing beings to be so humble before the Lord was a powerful picture of God’s glory for Isaiah and

those who heard his message.

The seraphim were also crying aloud to each other the whole time. The passage does not say what their voices were like, but they were so loud that the doorposts of the temple shook at the sound of them. The power of their voices also seems to be associated with the temple's filling with smoke.

Even more significant than their sound, though, was the content of their cry. They cried, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). This song of praise is filled with the reasons God is worthy of worship. First and most important, as shown by its threefold repetition, is God's holiness. This refers to God's being completely set apart in perfection. Nothing is enough like Him to even be placed in the same category as He is. He is perfect in every way, lifted high above all others, and He desires us to praise Him for it.

Second, God is Ruler of the hosts. All the angelic beings, including the imposing seraphim, are completely under His command. No human army could ever hope to match the power of the heavenly hosts, and God Himself is more powerful than all of them put together. Clearly, then, God is also in command of all human battles. Victory or defeat in these contests also comes from Him alone.

Third, the seraphim also sang that all of the earth that God created is filled with His glory. He is not just big enough to fill the whole earth; all of His creation actually reflects the majesty of His Person. Anything on earth that is glorious in any way is so because God has filled it with some part of His own glory.

2. Isaiah's response (Isa. 6:5). In response to this inescapable glory, Isaiah realized his own unworthiness. It is possible that Isaiah's initial awe at the vision turned into woe as he realized his life was forfeit in the presence of the holy God. He was undone—laid bare for God to see him in all his impurity and weakness.

The particular sin that Isaiah was convicted of in God's presence was the uncleanness of his lips. In other words, he had failed to give God the honor of which He is worthy. Anytime an unclean or even unworshipful word passed his lips, Isaiah had dishonored the Lord.

Isaiah recognized that the rest of the people of his nation and generation were likewise unfit to see the Lord. Perhaps this is also a reference to King Uzziah's sin. If a ruler does not give God glory, it is very likely that his people do not, either. In any case, Isaiah seems to have felt their unholiness surrounding him as well.

In short, by the end of this vision, Isaiah was almost lamenting that God had shown it to him. Once he realized what he had seen, it seemed to be too much for him to bear, and he feared that God would take his life for it. However, now that Isaiah had realized his life was in God's hands, God had plans for his life, not death!

3. God's invitation (Isa. 6:6-8). God sent one of the seraphim with a live coal from the altar that burns before God, a symbol of purification and holiness. Instead of killing Isaiah for looking on His glory, God chose to cleanse him of his sin, making it safe for him to stand in God's presence. The altar can be seen as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, which al-

lows us to do the same, and the coal as a picture of the Holy Spirit's cleansing work in us.

God had more than just Isaiah's cleansing in mind, however. By purifying him and releasing him from guilt, God also was preparing Isaiah to be His messenger to His people, who had forgotten about true worship. God gave Isaiah the opportunity to volunteer for this job, which his cleansing and preparation allowed him to do, rather than be coerced into serving. In response to this invitation, Isaiah humbly and quickly responded. He saw that his life had been spared and that he owed it completely to the Lord, whatever it was worth. In his humble way, he simply said, "Here am I; send me" (Isa. 6:8).

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Setting Yourself to Seek God. II Chron. 26:1-5.
T.—From Success to Pride to Destruction. II Chron. 26:16-21.
W.—Following a Father's Example. II Kings 15:32-38.
Th.—People Dulled to God's Presence. Isa. 6:9-13.
F.—Choosing to Serve a Holy God. Josh. 24:14-24.
S.—Seeking the Face of God. Ps. 24:1-10.
Su.—Encountering the Holy God. Isa. 6:1-8.

APPLYING

Isaiah's vision clearly shows us that worship of the Lord is not something to be taken lightly. While it is true that Jesus is our Friend and Brother, we must not forget that God is the glorious and all-powerful King. When we come before Him to worship, we must not be flippant or devote anything less than our full atten-

tion to God's praise. His holiness makes Him worthy of our complete devotion.

A true understanding of God's holiness should produce in us several results. First, it should cause us to be humble as we see how far short of God's glory we fall. Isaiah modeled this process of being undone in God's presence. Second, we should be moved to praise the Holy One, to proclaim who He is in all His splendor and majesty, the Lord of Hosts. Third, we should offer our lives willingly to the Lord as Isaiah did. In view of His surpassing holiness and His mercy toward us, we should see that our proper response is full submission to His plans and purposes. We must allow Him to send us to do and speak whatever He commands.

Finally, if we feel unworthy to do God's work, the important thing to remember is that we are! God never disputed Isaiah's assessment of his situation in the presence of God's glory. Instead of leaving him undone, though, God made a way for Isaiah to be cleansed and prepared for the work He had for him. Through Jesus' sacrifice, God has done the same for us, allowing us to enter His presence and be His servants.

ASKING

1. Why was King Uzziah's death significant to Isaiah's vision?
2. What were the three parts of the seraphim's song of praise?
3. What was Isaiah's response to his vision of God's glory?
4. How had God prepared Isaiah to be His messenger to Israel?

Scripture Lesson Text

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

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

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

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

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

6 Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zi'on: for great *is* the Ho'ly One of Is'ra-el in the midst of thee.

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).

ANALYZING

Last week we saw how, rather than destroy him for his sin, God spared Isaiah and cleansed him so that he could stand in God’s holy presence and worship. This week’s passage continues that theme by emphasizing God’s mercy not only in sparing us from eternal punishment but also in giving us many undeserved blessings. In light of these blessings, we have every reason to sing and shout to God with all our might.

1. What God has done (Isa. 12:1-3). Isaiah’s hymn is a prophetic song, one that will be sung by the people of God in a future day when joy will be full—the Day of the Lord. Isaiah used this term to refer both to soon approaching events and to the final Day of Judgment, when God will give everlasting salvation to the righteous and punish the wicked. Such a twofold application means that his prophecy has already reached fulfillment in history but will be fully fulfilled when God institutes His new kingdom.

The work of God on the Day of the Lord marks an occasion of great praise for His people. In that day, any

of God’s people will be able to truthfully sing the praises Isaiah wrote. That day will be the indication that God has turned away His wrath and turned toward His people with love to guide and sustain them. How could anyone fail to praise in light of such mercy?

This leads to one of God’s chief praiseworthy works: He saves us. In the present, God is our source of safety from our physical enemies. In the Day of the Lord, He will also save us from our ultimate foes—sin and death. Therefore, we can have lives that are eternally free from fear. This freedom from fear will come as we learn to trust in the Lord.

The prophet put extra emphasis on the name of the Lord in Isaiah 12:2, reminding us that God’s name is “I AM” (Jehovah), which means that He is always the same. Our own strength is very prone to change due to illness or injury, but God’s strength is constant.

God also wants to be our song, our source of joy even in the difficulties of life. Like our physical strength, our emotions may change easily; but trusting in God will always leave us with a song to sing. Isaiah’s hymn is

evidence of that, and it echoes the song of Moses from when God saved Israel out of Egypt (cf. Exod. 15). The Exodus is a perfect example of how God became the salvation of Israel in exactly the way they needed.

Keeping the Exodus of Israel in mind can also help explain the image Isaiah used in Isaiah 12:3. As the Israelites traveled through the desert, the constant need for water was one way that God tested their faith. They despaired on more than one occasion, questioning whether God would really save them. Each time, though, He provided what they needed just in time. The wells He showed them literally saved them. Isaiah used the image of a well to reveal God as a limitless and refreshing source of salvation.

2. How we respond (Isa. 12:4-6).

In light of the salvation He provides, God wants us to praise Him and encourage others to do the same. God's people can teach others to experience the joy they have found by praising the Lord and calling on His name. This encouragement is for both those who do not yet belong to God and His people who forget to call on Him.

God's worshippers can praise Him among the people two main ways. First, they should be proclaiming the great things He has done for them. Every blessing of a believer's life provides an opportunity to tell someone about what He has done. Second, they should praise God for His very nature! No other one can claim the eternal existence of I AM. In our time, we know that this exaltation applies also to Jesus, whom God has given the name above every other name (cf. Phil. 2:9).

God also desires that His people respond directly to Him in worship. One way to do that is by joyfully singing out loud to Him. God created music, and He has specifically designated it as a way He desires to be glorified. We show our love for God when we sing to Him and proclaim His excellence.

The excellent things God has done also motivate His people to praise Him. There is no need to look far for examples of His great works. As the seraphim sang in last week's passage, the whole earth is full of God's glory. There is no place where His great works are not seen. It is the work of God's people to help ensure that He receives praise for them.

Another way to respond directly to God for His excellence is one that seems to be less common in our time: crying out and shouting. God wants His people to hold nothing back when they draw near to worship Him. God loves it when His people care so much about His praise that they shout it out. To shout implies strong feeling by its very nature, and our love and honor for God and our joy in His presence should be the very strongest.

Even though God asks His people to be willing to shout His praise, He is certainly not far away from them. In fact, He draws near to His people. In that time, the temple in Zion was the only residence of God on earth. In the new covenant, though, we know that God dwells in our hearts. Our very bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. I Cor. 6:19). He is now in the midst of us in the most literal sense possible, and this gives us a constant reason to shout for joy.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Giving Thanks Is Good. Ps. 92:1-8.
T.—Into God's Presence with Thanksgiving. Ps. 95:1-7.
W.—Remembering God's Wonderful Works. I Chron. 16:8-13.
T.—Giving Thanks and Praise to God. I Chron. 29:10-18.
F.—Thanksgiving for God's Goodness. I Tim. 4:1-5.
S.—Unthankful Recipients. Luke 17:11-19.
S.—Giving Thanks to the Lord. Isa. 12:1-6.

APPLYING

One of the key lessons we can draw from this passage is that we do not have to live lives of fear. As Christians, we know that God is the only truly fearsome force in this universe. And His wrath has been turned away from us! If He has chosen to be our strength and salvation, then any fear on our part of anything else in the world simply shows a misunderstanding of the order of the world. No one is stronger than God, and God is on our side; therefore, we have no reason to fear as we trust Him.

This passage is also a call to personal humility. We know that the Lord alone is our strength and our salvation, so the credit for our victory over sin and trouble certainly does not belong to us. It is all too easy for us to take credit for things that God has done for the purpose of drawing us to worship Him! We must not sin against the holiness of God in this way.

On the other hand, God does give us a role in His purposes: we draw the water from His wells of salvation. However, if we take credit for saving ourselves, it is as if we were taking credit for digging this bottomless well, or for filling it, or even for creating the water! All of these ideas are

clearly ludicrous. We should simply enjoy the benefits of God's provision, taking part in them without taking any credit for them. Our role also includes proclaiming God's goodness to others.

Finally, and perhaps most important, Isaiah's song is an encouragement for us to worship exuberantly! We do not find it strange in our culture to shout and sing in honor of favorite sports teams or musical performers; how much more worthy of this respect and praise is the God of all things? He wants to give us His joy so that we can praise Him with all our might!

God is not calling us to be self-conscious in praising Him. If we are worried about what others think of us, we are again showing a misunderstanding of how the world is ordered. God's approval is infinitely more important than the approval of men, and He has called us to worship with our whole hearts. By withholding our worship for fear of what we might look like to others, we are actually choosing to honor ourselves above God. However, His glory, not our own, is our chief goal in this life and the proper response to the blessings God has given us!

ASKING

1. What did Isaiah mean by "that day" (Isa. 12:1, 4)?
2. How is God to be our strength, song, and salvation?
3. How can we worship God in our relationships with others?
4. What are two specific ways to respond to God's greatness?

Scripture Lesson Text

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

10 For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.

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

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

13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near *me* with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed

their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

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

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

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

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).

ANALYZING

In last week’s lesson we saw that God desires us to worship Him through enthusiastic singing and shouting of praises. This week we will see that God wants our hearts to draw near to Him each time we sing His praise. To worship God with a distant heart is meaningless and does not please Him.

1. The people’s confusion (Isa. 29:9-12). This week’s passage describes a situation without giving the reason for it right away. This is a dramatic strategy that God inspired Isaiah to use to convey the spiritual confusion He was bringing upon the people of Israel. They were in a situation they did not understand, and Isaiah’s writing style echoed this dangerous predicament.

The first image Isaiah used was of people staggering as if they were drunk. However, the cause of their staggering was unknown to them. Apparently, all they were capable of was gaping in astonishment and

confusion at their plight. Perhaps that is why Isaiah called them to cry out for help, in hopes that God might shed His light on their darkness.

According to the next verse, though, it was actually God who was the source of their confusion! He covered them with “the spirit of deep sleep” (Isa. 29:10). Their unsteadiness, then, was due to spiritual drowsiness. Their eyes were closed, blinding them to the reality of their spiritual condition.

Even the prophets, who were supposed to be seeing the visions of God, were afflicted with this blindness. Apparently, there were some in Isaiah’s time who claimed to be prophets but were just proclaiming whatever they thought the people wanted to hear (cf. Isa. 30:10-11). Isaiah attributed the evil practice of these so-called prophets to their blinded spirits.

A second image Isaiah used to describe the people’s blindness refers to a group of people trying to read from a sealed book. This obviously ridiculous idea exemplifies the futility of trying to gain understanding apart from the Lord. Only by God’s

grace is the truth revealed.

Isaiah's image showed the people taking the sealed book to a great scholar, but he instantly recognized that the book was sealed. Human wisdom is only a product of divine revelation, so the sealed book is of no more use to the wise than to the foolish. That did not stop the people from trying, though. In their desperation, they even took the book to an illiterate man. Even if the seal was removed, the foolish would not be able to read the words of the book. Perhaps Isaiah was indicating that even if God had not sealed His words away, the people of Israel did not possess the wisdom to understand what He was saying. These people were looking everywhere but to God for understanding that could be found nowhere but in right worship and fellowship with Him.

2. The Lord's reason (Isa. 29:13-14). Thankfully, God gave Isaiah the reasons He had afflicted His people with spiritual blindness. The first of these reasons was the people's hypocrisy. Rather than use any more images, God showed Isaiah in plain language the essence of Israel's sin. God was offended that they drew near to Him only with their mouths. They knew how to say the right things and bring honor with their lips, but their praise did not include the engagement of their hearts before the Lord.

Perhaps the right things to say had become merely an unthinking routine for them. They were unaware that their hearts were far from the Lord. It is more likely, though, that they were in outright rebellion against the idea of worshipping God with their whole hearts. Isaiah said that their hearts were far from the Lord. This seems to indicate an intentional distancing

from and an active rebelling against God. They did not just draw slightly away from the Lord; they were running far from Him in their hearts.

Isaiah continued this idea by stating that the people feared God only because of human precepts or traditions. They had lost sight of the true and glorious nature of God and were merely concerned about following the right rules. They were content simply to try to avoid punishment rather than pursue the guidance and blessing found in true worship.

The second main reason God had blinded the eyes of His people was to increase His own glory. Isaiah 29:14 begins with the command "Therefore, behold," showing that God wanted His people to look to Him and see what He was doing. His plan in all of the affliction He brought them was to reveal His power to them in such a way that they could not help marveling at it and giving Him the glory only He deserved.

God's plan in so doing was to shatter the worldly wisdom that had held His people captive. Their wise men (like the one in the image of the sealed book) would find their wisdom was dead, and understanding would be hidden from those who had led people astray. God would love His people by leaving them nowhere to turn except to Himself and His guidance.

3. The hypocrite's woe (Isa. 29:15-16). This week's passage concludes with a declaration of woe toward those who would persist in rebellion against God. The fact that their works were "in the dark" is an image of hiding from God but also of blindness. Those who continue to reject God will not have their sight restored and will remain in darkness.

This darkness included unbelief in God's unlimited ability to see and know us. He sees all we do, but His vision is not limited to our actions. It also includes knowledge of our hearts. It has always been fruitless to hide from God.

Finally, Isaiah revealed the foolishness of questioning God's vision and knowledge by recording God's questions in response to His doubters. God saw that they were viewing life completely backward and upside-down. What kind of sense would it make for a pot to tell its potter that he had made a mistake or, even more nonsensical, that the potter did not exist? Yet worshipping God in word only and not with the heart is like denying the Creator or saying that a pot can do better than its potter. It is folly!

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Fruitless Worship. Isa. 1:10-17.
T.—Worshipping Our Own Achievements. Isa. 2:5-17.
W.—Lives Unmoved by Ceremonies. Isa. 58:1-7.
T.—Refusing to Listen. Jer. 13:1-11.
F.—Tuning Out God. Zech. 7:8-14.
S.—Receiving the Word. Luke 8:9-15.
S.—Hearts Far from God. Isa. 29:9-16.

APPLYING

If we find ourselves confused or unable to understand spiritual truth, it may be helpful for us to examine whether we are worshipping God with our whole hearts. This passage makes it clear that God can use confusion as a tool to make people aware of their distance from Him. It may be that as we repent and draw

near to God in worship from our hearts, He will instantly begin to lift the veil of confusion and offer us renewed clarity of mind.

The central theme of this week's passage is the importance of engaging our hearts in worship each time we come before the Lord. This means we need to guard against letting our worship become so routine to us that we stop thinking about it. Sometimes praise songs can become so familiar that we can sing the words without really thinking about or truly meaning what we sing. We can pray the Lord's Prayer from memory; but do we mean it in our hearts? There are many ways we can lose sight of true worship, but God wants us to worship with our hearts each time. Thankfully, we can come before Him anytime; so the next opportunity to worship in truth is as close as our next breath.

We must also be especially careful to watch out for any rebellion rising up in our hearts. The questions of the hypocrite can sneak in unnoticed. We could be thinking about doing something and find ourselves asking, "Who will see?" It is vital that we cut these thoughts off before they can grow into a rebellious weed that chokes out the true worship our hearts can offer.

ASKING

1. What was the source of the blindness Isaiah described?
2. Why did God punish His people?
3. What is meaningless worship?
4. What does a hypocritical spirit question about God?

Scripture Lesson Text

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

18 But be ye glad and rejoice for ever *in that which I create*: for, behold, I create Je-ru'sa-lem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

19 And I will rejoice in Je-ru'sa-lem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying.

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

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

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

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

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

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).

ANALYZING

Because the world around us is all we can see, it can be easy to forget that our hope is not in this world. In fact, God intends to make all things new in a way that draws all men to worship Him. This week we will see that God deserves praise, not just because of who He is and what He does, but also because of what He will do in the future.

1. New creation (Isa. 65:17-21). In this passage, Isaiah prophesied that God will one day restore creation to its original perfection. It is interesting that Isaiah used the present tense verb “create” to refer to this new creative process. God’s restorative plan has already been set in motion, and we are instructed to behold it and worship Him for His glorious future plans.

The new heavens and earth will be so wonderful that they will completely drive the remembrance of the old from our minds. There will be so much new beauty to take in that we will have no need to dwell on any of the old. We will no longer feel the pull

of the old world on our hearts through sin, either. Everything will be completely new and pure.

The natural result of this restoration will be rejoicing. The new creation will be a reason to worship forever, but Isaiah’s instruction was meant for today as well! We can and should rejoice now in what God is in the process of doing, and we will not run out of reasons to praise Him for eternity.

God’s re-creation also includes the New Jerusalem, which the Apostle John saw in his vision in Revelation 21. God will make His holy city completely new, and it will descend from heaven to earth (vs. 10). God will also make the people of Jerusalem into a joy forever. This statement is probably meant to include all of those whom God has chosen as His own people, which today includes Gentiles as well. In any case, God’s people will not only worship and rejoice in Him but will also spur others on to do the same.

God Himself will take joy in the new things He is creating. It is an amazing part of God’s nature that

He allows His creations to have a role in His emotions. He is able to take joy in the beauty of what He creates and the joy that His people will experience. It is hard for us to understand this, but God's ways are much higher than ours (cf. Isa. 55:9).

God's joy is also a powerful force. When He is joyful about something, all sadness associated with it will vanish. Therefore, the New Jerusalem and its people in whom He delights will be free from sorrow forever. The sounds of weeping and crying will be among the things that will be remembered no more (Isa. 65:17, 19).

Another part of the new creation will be a new prosperity in the lives of God's followers. For example, there will be no more children who die untimely deaths or old men who die before their time. One hundred years will be considered a child's life, meaning that God will give everyone plenty of time to enjoy His wondrous new creation.

Isaiah was looking forward to a time of prosperity that was nothing like what the people of Israel were experiencing at the time he wrote. As the rest of Isaiah's book reveals, this was a time of turmoil in which no one could be sure that he would be able to live in his own house or eat of what he had planted. Isaiah even prophesied that the nation would be carried off into captivity in Babylon (cf. 39:5-6), which came to pass not long after. For this reason, his message that the people would again have homes and vineyards of their own was a great hope. In the new creation, the people would prosper and have no need to fear.

2. New relationships (Isa. 65:23-25). The reason for the increased prosperity of God's people in the new creation will be a restored relationship with the Lord. If they had previously been laboring in vain, the main cause was simply that the Lord was not working with them because of their rebellion or inattentiveness (cf. Ps. 127:1). In the new creation, people will be blessed as they work according to God's will.

Apart from God's blessing, it is easy for parents to fail in raising their children to follow the Lord. Children can end up causing pain to their parents instead of supporting them as they should. God's promise in the new creation includes the assurance that parents and children will be able to follow His ways together.

Another part of God's relationship with His people in the new creation will be very close communion. God will answer them before they even think about calling out to Him! When God's people closely follow His will, His heart is so aligned with theirs that the things they desire are done before they even ask because they are also His desires (cf. Ps. 37:4). When they do speak, God will hear them instantly because He has chosen to draw near to them (cf. 139:4).

God's new creation will also mark the end of humanity's sometimes adversarial relationship with it. Instead of having to defend against nature and its predators, God's people will be able to fully embrace it. Wolves will not prey on defenseless lambs anymore, and lions will eat the same grass as the oxen they might have eaten previously. Therefore, humanity will also be safe from all these formerly dangerous beasts.

Mankind will also be protected

from the serpent in that day. By saying that dust will be its food, Isaiah was referring to the original curse God placed on the snake after it deceived Adam and Eve in Eden (cf. Gen. 3:14). In the new creation, His people will be safe from the physical danger of snakes as well as from the spiritual danger of deception and sin. This safety will lead to a time of total peace, with no injury or destruction in all of God's kingdom. The same voice that spoke the world into existence has said that these things will occur, so we can be sure they will.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—The Handiwork of God. Ps. 19:1-6.
T.—The Guidance of God. Ps. 19:7-14.
W.—No One Is Righteous. Rom. 3:9-20.
T.—Sin, Death, Sacrifice, Salvation. Rom. 5:6-14.
F.—The Servant's New Work. Isa. 42:1-9.
S.—God Makes All Things New. Rev. 21:1-7.
S.—New Heavens and a New Earth. Isa. 65:17-21, 23-25.

APPLYING

The hope of God's renewal of creation is not a far-off idea; God gave us this hope to bless our lives today as well. One way the hope of a new creation can help us is to remind us that we should not focus too much on the things of this world. Because all things will be made new, we should not become too attached to the physical things of our lives. Instead, we should focus on the One who will always be the same and give Him glory both now and in the new age to come.

It can be a challenge not to put

too much focus on the good things of this life, but it is a great privilege that we can look beyond the brokenness of our world. One reason God has shown us part of His plan to restore creation is to give us hope in troubled times. No matter how hard the circumstances of our lives may become, we know that one day God will make all things right. This gives us a reason to keep worshipping Him even when our lives are difficult.

We should also remember that God's primary purpose in creating anything at all was to bring Himself greater glory. It is easy for us to accept even His great blessings in self-centered ways, as if they were meant only to make us as happy as possible. God does love us greatly, and He wants us to live in joy; but the response to His blessings certainly should not stop there. He gives us good things also because He desires that we praise Him for them. For example, it will be an amazing blessing for us to live in a renewed world, but the larger picture is that by blessing us in this way, God allows us to participate in His plan to glorify His own great name. Our role is to respond in worship for who God is and all He has done, is doing, and will do to redeem His creation.

ASKING

1. What physical things will be different in the new creation?
2. What will our relationship with God be like?
3. What is God's purpose in making all things new?

Scripture Lesson Text

EZRA 3:1 And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Is'ra-el were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Je-ru'sa-lem.

2 Then stood up Jesh'u-a the son of Joz'a-dak, and his brethren the priests, and Ze-rub'ba-bel the son of She-al'ti-el, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Is'ra-el, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as *it is* written in the law of Mo'ses the man of God.

3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, *even* burnt offerings morning and evening.

4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as *it is* written, and offered the daily burnt offerings

by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required;

5 And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD.

6 From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

7 They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zi'don, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Leb'a-non to the sea of Jop'pa, according to the grant that they had of Cy'rus king of Per'sia.

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).

ANALYZING

God is faithful to restore His people and renew worship for the glory of His name. In our last unit we saw how God used Isaiah to show His people that He was worthy of worship for His eternal nature and His great works—past, present, and future. However, the people of Israel still fell into the meaningless worship that Isaiah condemned. In this unit we will see how God restored Israel from the Captivity, with which He had punished them. God prepared the way for His people to go back home and stirred their hearts to worship Him joyfully.

1. Gathering together (Ezra 3:1).

At the time of the events of this week’s lesson, there had been no proper worship of God in Jerusalem for approximately seventy years. God had punished the Israelites for their failure to honor Him by allowing them to be taken captive by the Babylonian Empire. However, God miraculously intervened to bring worshippers back to His holy city by bringing to power a new ruler who would allow the Jews to go back to

their homeland and help them do so (1:1-4).

About 42,000 Israelites returned to their land at this time (cf. Ezra 2:64), but they were all living in different places. However, God led them to band together in Jerusalem. There they were unified in purpose as God began to restore them as His worshippers. There was no hierarchy of access to God; the people came to worship “together as one man” (3:1).

2. Building the altar (Ezra 3:2-3).

The two main leaders of the returned exiles at this point were Jeshua and Zerubbabel. Jeshua was a priest, a descendant of Aaron. Zechariah later tells us that God put a fire in Joshua’s (Jeshua’s) heart and cleansed him so that he could lead the Lord’s people into worship as his fathers had (cf. Zech. 3:1-9). He led his brothers in ministering before the Lord.

Zerubbabel was the main leader of the first group of exiles to return (cf. Ezra 2:2). He probably became their leader because he was the grandson of the king of Judah who had been deposed. Zerubbabel was apparently a natural leader in his family, but he also would receive a direct commen-

dation from the Lord through Zechariah. God promised to be his strength and give him the privilege of rebuilding the temple (cf. Zech. 4:6-10).

Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to do the work that God had put on their hearts. This shows that they were strong leaders, and it also gives the sense of volunteering, being first in line to serve. In addition, they were able to motivate their brothers to join them in the work.

It is significant that the very first thing to be rebuilt in Jerusalem was the altar of God. God was working in the hearts of His people to bring them to worship. They realized that their first priority should be to resume the worship of God as Moses had commanded them. They offered the burnt offerings there as the rest of the city was in ruins, showing that God was worthy of praise even before His restorative work was completed. In so doing, they also asked God for the atonement and covenant relationship with Him that the offerings symbolized.

Even though they were afraid of their enemies in the land, they worshipped God before building a wall around the city. In fact, the sincere worship of God was their best line of defense against the plans of those who would seek to defeat them. Just as they offered the burnt offerings at the beginning and end of each day, so their defense was only by the Lord's help.

3. Continuing worship (Ezra 3:4-5). The children of Israel made worship a continuing part of their lives as they worked to restore the land. A great example of this is the fact that they kept the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast was a seven-day event

during which the people were not to do any work (cf. Deut. 16:13). This might not seem like a good idea for a people in the midst of rebuilding, but they were so eager to follow the Lord that they left all the things that needed to be done in order to praise the Lord for a week.

Also, the feast was, of course, a feast! It was meant to be a joyous occasion of thanking the Lord for His blessings. God obviously wanted to restore the joy of His people as He restored them to right worship of Himself. Because it was a feast, everyone was to bring his own offering to the Lord out of the abundance He had given. On this occasion, those offerings probably took more faith than usual, since they had not lived in the land long enough to truly prosper in it. However, the people knew that God had promised to bless them if they honored Him (cf. Deut. 16:15-16), so they worshipped Him with joy once again.

Even after the feast was over, the returned exiles continued to perform all the offerings described in the law of Moses. In addition, some of the people even went beyond that by offering freewill offerings to the Lord! This shows that they were not worshipping from a sense of duty but were truly joyful to God for His provision. To worship with such enthusiasm, they must have had their hearts changed and inspired to praise the Lord.

4. Preparing to build (Ezra 3:6-7). The offerings were the spiritual preparation for the large rebuilding project the people were about to undertake. However, they had many physical preparations to make as well. Thankfully, God provided for them in this area. He allowed them to

hire stonemasons and woodworkers to make the temple a work of beauty. They also had special permission from the king to acquire the quality materials they would need for the construction. In all of this, God miraculously provided for Israel's needs and turned their hearts to worship Him once again.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Jesus' Lament over Jerusalem. Matt. 23:29-39.
T.—The Coming Judgment. Jer. 7:30—8:3.
W.—Conquest by the Babylonians. II Kings 24:1-12.
T.—The Destruction of Jerusalem. II Chron. 36:15-21.
F.—Command to Rebuild the Temple. Ezra 1:1-8.
S.—The Response of the People. Ezra 2:64-70.
S.—Restoring the Worship of God. Ezra 3:1-7.

APPLYING

God brought the Israelites back to worship Him together. True worship can be done individually, but God's desire is also that His people would worship together. Where two or more gather in His name, He is there (cf. Matt. 18:20). Imagine if any of the Israelites had decided not to join the rest of the returned exiles at Jerusalem: they would have missed out on the joy of renewed worship that God had for them! The same can happen to us today if we are not willing to join our Christian family in worship.

The children of Israel had legitimate reason to fear the people of the nearby lands, but they realized that God was their source of protection and worshipped Him despite their fear. In fact, they probably realized that their own efforts would be insuffi-

cient to provide for their needs. God was the only one they could turn to. Again, the same is true for us. We cannot provide the things we need on our own, but God is honored when we worship despite our fears because He is the One who can actually help us!

We can also learn from the way the people of Israel made worship their first priority. We may feel there are many things that need to be built or rebuilt in our lives, just like the walls of the city in this passage. However, we can honor God by praising Him first. If we commit to praising Him, we know He will be faithful to help us achieve the other goals He has given us.

We can also learn from the example of Zerubbabel and Jeshua's leadership. Not only did they take the initiative to act, but they also put in the hard work to rebuild the altar. They included their brothers in the task, showing humility by not attempting to do it all themselves or setting themselves above the rest of the people. Today, God is still looking for men and women who will stand before His people in humility and call them to worship from a desire to see God glorified by the joyful worship of all His people gathered together.

ASKING

1. Who were the main leaders of the people of Israel at this time?
2. What was the first thing they rebuilt? Why was it important?
3. How was the Feast of Tabernacles a great expression of worship?

Scripture Lesson Text

EZRA 3:8 Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Je-ru'sa-lem, in the second month, began Ze-rub'ba-bel the son of She-al'ti-el, and Jesh'u-a the son of Joz'a-dak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Le'vites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Je-ru'sa-lem; and appointed the Le'vites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD.

9 Then stood Jesh'u-a *with his sons and his brethren, Kad'mi-el and his sons, the sons of Ju'dah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Hen'a-dad, with their sons and their brethren the Le'vites.*

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 Le'vites the sons of A'saph with cymbals, to

praise the LORD, after the ordinance of Da'vid king of Is'ra-el.

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 Is'ra-el. 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 Le'vites and chief of the fathers, *who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:*

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

The 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).

ANALYZING

In last week’s lesson we saw that God was faithful to deliver the children of Israel from the Captivity. He sovereignly arranged for them to be able to return to their homeland, and He turned their hearts back to worship Him for His goodness. The people responded by reinstating the sacrifices commanded by Moses and celebrating with joy. This week we will see that God wanted them to continue to worship by rebuilding His house!

1. Forward motion (Ezra 3:8-9).

The events of this week’s passage took place in the second year of the Israelites’ return to Jerusalem, showing that either seven months or a year and seven months had passed (vs. 1). If the shorter time is correct, perhaps they were waiting for the correct weather for building. If the longer time is true, there was certainly an unnecessary delay. Either way, the initial fervor the Israelites had for restoration did not continue seamlessly into the rebuilding of the temple.

Therefore, God again stirred up the hearts of Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest to lead the people in His work.

They showed sound judgment in gathering the people as one nation to do God’s will. Just as we saw last week, God used these two leaders among their brothers as the spark that set the flames of true worship ablaze in Israel.

Still, it was clear that it would not be feasible for all the Israelites to work on the temple at once. The assembly decided to appoint the Levites to oversee the work and set it in motion. This did not mean that the Levites had to do all the work themselves; they had been given permission and provision to hire skilled builders (cf. Ezra 3:7). Instead, their calling was to supervise the work on God’s house: to start it and ensure that it kept moving.

The Levites embraced their assignment with vigor. They all worked together in unity to perform the task they had been assigned. Under the spiritual leadership of Jeshua, they were able to rise to the great task of setting forward the temple’s reconstruction.

2. Work and worship (Ezra 3:10-11). Ezra chose to focus his account not on the process of the building but on the people’s re-

sponse to it. He wanted to emphasize the true worship of the Lord. The foundation of the temple was an important first step toward fulfilling God's command, and the people responded rightly to this significant occasion.

The ceremony of worship at the completion of the temple's foundation was quite impressive. The priests put on their best robes and stood, along with the Levites, all around the newly laid foundation. The priests all had trumpets to blow, and the Levites all had cymbals; it seems that they all probably used them all at once! The sound must have been overpowering, but it expressed the true joy and thanks of the people.

The whole form of the ceremony was in keeping with the ordinance that King David had issued. While they were still worshipping at the temporary tabernacle, David had set apart some singers and musicians with trumpets and cymbals to worship before the Lord (cf. I Chron. 16:4-6). Among these was Asaph, who used his cymbals to praise, long before the Exile, at the dedication of the original temple. His descendants among the Levites followed in his footsteps by doing the same for the temple God helped them restore.

In addition to the instruments, all the people sang together to worship God. Singing "by course" (Ezra 3:11) probably means that they sang responsively. The Levites led the song; so they would sing the first part, and then the rest of the people would echo with the second. The words of the song in verse 11 are probably taken from the first verse of Psalm 136. This psalm is a call-and-re-

sponse song with a repeated refrain that emphasizes God's ongoing love, making it a fitting one for the occasion.

This song shows two distinct categories of worship: praise and thanksgiving. Praise is giving glory to God for who He is—His unchanging nature and all His majestic attributes. To say that He is good is to give praise; God's nature is to be good all the time, and He deserves glory for this truth.

Giving thanks is simply worshipping God for His specific acts in which we can see His goodness. To say His mercy endures forever, then, is both praise and thanksgiving. God's nature is eternal and endlessly merciful, which is praiseworthy in and of itself. Saying that this was true of Israel, though, calls to mind a specific history of the merciful actions by which He repeatedly saved them because He had chosen them (cf. Ps. 136).

After all the singing was done, the children of Israel also lifted up a great shout. As we saw in Isaiah, both singing and shouting are methods of worship specifically prescribed by God (cf. 12:5-6). This shout also showed that they were praising God with their whole hearts.

3. Mixed response (Ezra 3:12-13). The older exiles were divided in their response. Some of the older men who had lived through all seventy years of the Captivity had seen the former temple in all its glory. These men were divided between shouting for joy and weeping. It is certainly possible that they cried tears of joy; the old temple was so majestic that the thought of that beauty being restored may have made them unspeakably happy.

However, it is also likely that they were actually tears of sadness at seeing such a small fraction of the temple being celebrated so much when the former one had been so great. Zechariah the prophet recorded that some of the Israelites had despised the day of small beginnings (cf. Zech. 4:10); perhaps these were the people he spoke of. In either case, the two responses were not distinct but happened simultaneously, so that it was impossible to tell the two apart. The weeping and shouting combined to form one great uproar that could be heard far and wide. The Israelites cried out with their whole hearts to God, and He heard them.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—A Great and Wonderful House. II Chron. 2:1-9.
T.—Building a House for God's Name. I Kings 8:14-21.
W.—My Name Shall Be There. I Kings 8:22-30.
T.—A House of Prayer. Matt. 21:10-16.
F.—Make a Joyful Noise to God. Ps. 66:1-12.
S.—Lead Me in Your Righteousness. Ps. 5:1-12.
S.—Tears of Joy. Ezra 3:8-13.

APPLYING

Sometimes there is a tendency for us to wait for the most favorable conditions before we are willing to begin God's work, as it was for the Israelites in building the temple. There comes a time, though, when the important thing is just to start working and obey. Still, we should be wise in doing so. One way to show this wisdom is to respect the authority of godly leaders. Leaders we respect

can lead us to do God's work as Zerubbabel and Jeshua did for the Israelites.

We can also learn from the example of the Israelites in their celebration. They devoted a great deal of time and energy to their worship. We should not just try to fit worshipping the Lord in around the other things we feel we have to do. It should be our first priority, and we can schedule the rest of our lives around it.

The priests dressed up for worship not as an obligation but because they were really happy about the occasion! They created a huge ceremony not because they had nothing better to do but because they thought God was worthy of large-scale praise for what He was accomplishing. If God is putting that kind of joy in our hearts, our worship should also, at times, be a large celebration, although it cannot be manufactured.

The most important thing in all of this is that we praise God for all He has done for us and for His great nature. If we remember that He is good and His mercy always endures, we will always have a reason to praise. We follow God's great purpose for His creation when we allow Him to make us a people ready and willing to worship.

ASKING

1. Who was put in charge of the work on the temple?
2. What did the Israelites sing thanks and praise for?
3. How was the people's response to the rebuilding mixed?

Scripture Lesson Text

EZRA 6:13 Then Tat'na-i, governor on this side the river, She'thar-boz'na-i, and their companions, according to that which Da-ri'us the king had sent, so they did speedily.

14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Hag'-ga-i the prophet and Zech-a-ri'ah the son of Id'do. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Is'ra-el, and according to the commandment of Cy'rus, and Da-ri'us, and Ar-tax-erx'es king of Per'sia.

15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month A'dar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Da-ri'us the king.

16 And the children of Is'ra-el, the priests, and the Le'vites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy,

17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Is'ra-el, twelve he goats, accord-

ing to the number of the tribes of Is'ra-el.

18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Le'vites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Je-ru'sa-lem; as it is written in the book of Mo'ses.

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

20 For the priests and the Le'vites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.

21 And the children of Is'ra-el, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Is'ra-el, did eat,

22 And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of As-syr'i-a unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Is'ra-el.

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).

ANALYZING

Even though the Israelites sometimes let opposition stop them from completing His work, God never stopped being faithful to them. In last week’s lesson we saw that worship of God continued with the celebration of the temple’s foundation. In this lesson, though, we will see that the building did not proceed far beyond the foundation level before it stopped. However, this did not stop God’s plan to restore His people to worship. He provided for them to finally and joyfully finish His temple.

1. Resuming rebuilding (Ezra 6:13-14). Soon after the Israelites laid the temple’s foundation, they stopped working completely because of opposition from their enemies (cf. 4:24). This delay lasted for almost sixteen years—so long that a different person had become king. However, God sent the Prophet Haggai to challenge Zerubbabel and Jeshua, who were still leading the people, to carefully consider how the people’s fear had led them to build up their own houses while putting off work on the Lord’s house, which still

remained in ruins. He encouraged the two leaders to resume work on the temple, despite the opposition (cf. Hag. 1).

God again stirred up the hearts of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and they did as God said and resumed the work (cf. Ezra 5:2). Because so many years had passed, the new local authorities had no knowledge of the original decree allowing the Israelites to rebuild. They wanted to make the people stop working, but God kept them from doing so until they asked the new king about the situation (cf. vs. 5).

At this point, God provided for His people once again. “That which Darius the king had sent” (Ezra 6:13) was a decree reaffirming the initial order giving them permission to rebuild (cf. vs. 1-12). Darius further decreed that the local governor was to leave the construction alone. In fact, he was also commanded to finance it out of the taxes from his region and provide supplies to the Israelites!

God provided financial prosperity, but He also gave spiritual blessing through the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai prophesied the Lord’s blessing and favor on the

people once they began working (cf. Hag. 2:15-19). Zechariah encouraged Jeshua and Zerubbabel with specific blessings from the Lord. Bolstered by this encouragement and the financial support of the king, Zerubbabel and the Israelites did finish the temple after four years of hard work.

2. Dedicating the house (Ezra 6:15-18). The time from the children of Israel's return to the temple's completion was about twenty-one years! After such a long wait, the people had such great joy that they all gathered in Jerusalem again to dedicate the temple to the Lord. They all joined together in worship. There probably were more people at this gathering than at any since they returned because of the children born in the twenty years since work on the temple began.

The people of Israel offered seven hundred animals to the Lord for the dedication of His house! Although the size of this sacrifice is almost nothing in comparison to that which Solomon offered at the dedication of the original temple (cf. I Kings 8:62-63), it still represents a very significant act of devotion to the Lord. They honored God by giving generously out of the little they had (cf. Luke 21:1-4).

The Israelites also made a special offering in repentance for their sins at this time. In doing so, they proclaimed their desire to be pure before God and to worship Him correctly. They also restored the priests and Levites to their God-given roles of ministry in the temple. God had given these guidelines to Moses long before the temple ever existed, showing His deep concern for proper worship.

3. Keeping the Passover (Ezra 6:19-22). Another part of this proper worship was the Feast of Passover. This feast commemorated how God had saved the nation of Israel from captivity in Egypt. When God intended to kill the firstborn sons of Egypt, He told the people of Israel (through Moses) to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts so that He would pass over their houses (cf. Exod. 12). The feast was in remembrance of this deliverance.

Before the feast, all the priests and Levites purified themselves. This ritual cleansing symbolized their being set apart for God's service and free from any guilt. They could then offer the sacrifices for their own families and also for the rest of Israel.

A large part of the celebration had to do with eating together. At the original Passover, God had told the people to make a meal of unleavened bread and eat it together while staying ready to leave Egypt at any moment. The meal became part of the observance of the feast by God's direction to Moses.

It is also remarkable that the meal was open even to those who were not Israelites! Anyone who had given up his evil ways and chosen to seek the true God was welcomed. These people had to give up their unclean practices and follow the laws of Israel, but they did not have to be of Hebrew descent. So all of God's worshippers praised Him together by celebrating the feast for seven days. Ezra made sure to emphasize that their joy was entirely the work of God. He had changed their hearts, and they responded with praise. It was also God who had caused the king to give them permission and provision to come back and wor-

ship—a blessing that could only be divine. The God of Israel sovereignly restored them as His people and His temple for worship.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Resistance to Rebuilding the Temple. Ezra 4:1-5.

T.—Accusations of Seditious. Ezra 4:11-16.

W.—Temple Construction Halted. Ezra 4:17-24.

T.—The Eye of God upon Them. Ezra 5:1-5.

F.—Who Gave You a Decree? Ezra 5:6-17.

S.—An Official Endorsement. Ezra 6:1-12.

S.—The Temple's Dedication. Ezra 6:13-22.

APPLYING

When the governor of the area tried to shut down the work on the temple, God used the king to keep him from doing so. We should remember that God is the same today as when this happened. Even in our day, God can reach down and change the hearts of those in power. The hearts of kings (and presidents) are still in His hand to be directed wherever He pleases (cf. Prov. 21:1). We should believe that enough to ask Him to turn our leaders' hearts to Him today!

As revealed by the long delay in the rebuilding, the Israelites had become more concerned with their own houses than with restoring the house of God. While we may not be faced with physical rebuilding projects today, we can still lose sight of building up God's house, which is His church. How much of our extra time and money is spent on ourselves? Could some of those resources be used by God in other ways? The Prophet Haggai's challenge to Israel still ap-

plies to us today. We should consider our ways carefully and not leave God's house in ruins while ours shine.

We can also learn from the way the Levites purified themselves to lead the people. They wanted to offer a completely holy offering to God. We can lead our families and churches in the same way by asking God to purify us and remove anything in our hearts that does not honor Him. This is part of true worship, and anyone who approaches the Lord this way sets a good example for the rest of His people. No one is too small; even young people are called to set an example for the believers (cf. I Tim. 4:12).

Finally, we can be encouraged by the fact that the people of Israel welcomed all who were truly seeking the Lord to worship with them. God still wants to set apart a people who will worship Him, but He wants all kinds of people whose hearts seek Him to be able to worship Him together. Today, a similar kind of welcome might be to invite someone who is looked down on to church or youth group so that God can change his heart. No one is excluded from worshipping God because of his physical attributes; God wants worshippers who worship Him with their whole hearts!

ASKING

1. How did God provide for the rebuilding to resume?
2. How long had they been waiting for the temple to be finished?
3. How did the Israelites dedicate the Lord's house?

Scripture Lesson Text

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

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

wrath *is* against all them that forsake him.

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

31 Then we departed from the river of A-ha'va on the twelfth *day* of the first month, to go unto Je-ru'sa-lem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way.

32 And we came to Je-ru'sa-lem, and abode there three days.

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).

ANALYZING

Even in the difficult times of life, we can turn to God in worship. In last week’s lesson we saw that God’s blessing allowed the children of Israel to finally finish the temple. They responded in wholehearted praise. This week we are introduced to a second band of exiles returning to Jerusalem. These travelers, led by Ezra, had trials and fears to confront as they departed for their homeland. However, they trusted in God and worshipped Him even in trials.

1. Fasting and prayer (Ezra 8:21-23). The time of this passage was probably about sixty years after the temple was completed (cf. 7:1), so this section begins a new story with new characters. Ezra himself narrated this story. He was a scribe, or a person who studied and taught the Scripture (cf. vs. 6), who found favor with the new king. This king issued a decree allowing Ezra to return to Jerusalem with a second group of exiles who had not yet gone back. Ezra’s mission from God and the king was to help with the work of the

completed temple and to teach the people how to follow the law of Moses, on which he was an expert (vs. 10).

This second group of exiles was much smaller than the first, but Ezra made sure to include some Levites who could help him teach about the law and serve in the temple (cf. Ezra 8:1-20). Ezra himself was also a Levite, a descendant of Aaron, the original high priest (cf. 7:1-6). He was recognized as a leader by the people, and his knowledge and wisdom gave him authority to lead the people both in worship and on the journey.

Ezra used his spiritual authority to start the journey off on the right note. The river of Ahava was the place where he first gathered the people together for their long journey. This assembly included men, women, and children, each carrying with him all his possessions. Once they were assembled, Ezra led them in seeking the Lord.

He began by proclaiming a fast, or a time of abstaining from food to pray and seek God’s will. Fasting was meant to show humility before God and an earnest desire to focus on

prayer and to learn to do His will. In Ezra's case, he was asking for God to lead them in the right path of safety for their journey.

However, this was not just a matter of finding their way to Jerusalem without getting lost! Ezra expected the road to be watched by bandits who might ambush the traveling party. They would most likely have no friends along the road, only enemies.

These robbers represented a grave threat for several reasons. For one, the exiles were not a group of only fighting men. They also had many women and children with them, who would be defenseless. In addition, they were transporting all of their goods, animals, and food along with them. If all that were not enough, they were also carrying a gift of gold and silver for the temple (cf. Ezra 8:24-30). The total value of the gift was immense—much more than enough to make them a tantalizing target for bandits.

All of these problems could have been averted by asking the king for a protective escort of soldiers. However, Ezra felt that this would have showed a shameful lack of faith in God. It would have amounted to going back on his word since he had told the king about the power and faithfulness of God toward those who seek Him (Ezra 8:22).

All the things Ezra told the king about God were true. He does put His hand of blessing on those who seek Him and work things out for their good (cf. Rom. 8:28). Just as certainly, He turns His power and rage against those who abandon His ways, as He showed by letting the Israelites be carried off into exile in the first place. By being God's witness before the king in this way, Ezra put

himself in a situation where he would have to practice what he preached and trust in the God he had proclaimed.

2. Return to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:31-32). When the first group of exiles to return faced this same threat of attack, they had resorted to their own means to try to protect themselves. They built up their own houses and abandoned work on the temple completely. Their response was characterized by fear and a lack of faith that God would fight for them.

Ezra's approach was very different. Faced with the same threat, he turned immediately to prayer. Ezra honored the Lord even in his trouble by presenting his requests with prayer and fasting, and he even led the others to do the same. He chose God's honor above all.

Still, if Ezra had stopped at prayer and fasting, the end result of the threat of attack might have been the same as with the first group. However, after having presented his requests to God, Ezra boldly led the people to move forward in faith despite the threat.

It showed great faith for the exiles to depart for Jerusalem even without having heard any promise of safety from God. God did indeed answer their prayers, though, by putting His hand of blessing on their whole journey. Ezra gave further honor to God by recording that it was His hand alone that delivered them from enemies on the road. They were never ambushed, and God kept them completely safe until they all arrived in Jerusalem.

After their long journey, the second group of exiles rested together in Jerusalem. Ezra did not emphasize the length and difficulty of the jour-

ney, but we know from an earlier verse that the journey took four months to complete (cf. Ezra 7:9)! All this time, God had kept His people completely safe. Their hearts were set on worshipping the Lord, and He provided everything necessary for them to do so.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Humbly Calling on God. II Chron. 7:12-18.
T.—Beseeching God's Answer to Prayer. Ps. 69:9-18.
W.—Humble and Contrite in Spirit. Isa. 66:1-4.
T.—Fasting Directed to God. Matt. 6:16-18.
F.—Studying and Keeping the Law. Ezra 7:1-10.
S.—Securing Servants for the Temple. Ezra 8:15-20.
S.—Praying for God's Protection. Ezra 8:21-23, 31-32.

APPLYING

Ezra set a great example by leading the Israelites to fast and pray prior to setting out on their journey. There is almost no decision in life so pressing that we do not have time to earnestly seek God before we make it. We can take time before setting out on new jobs or relationships to pray and even fast to find out what God wants us to do in these situations. In doing so, we can show humility before God as Ezra did.

God is also still in the business of offering protection as we travel today. We have fewer bandits these days, but travel is still dangerous. How hard is it to take a moment before each trip to ask for God's protection on the way? Even such a simple prayer is an act of worship.

Our opposition in everyday life today might look more like a boss at

work or a bully at school. Still, the threats to our well-being are real even in seemingly smaller cases. We can easily respond to an abusive peer or boss in such a way that we try to protect ourselves by our own means. Ezra's response, on the other hand, teaches us to honor God even in trouble and to rely on His protection.

We can also learn from Ezra's example that God does not always (or even often) answer our prayers with an obvious promise of well-being. If we refuse to do as He says until He promises us success, we may never end up doing anything! This is not faith but fear masquerading as holiness. We can emulate the true faith shown by Ezra, who did what God asked even though he could not see the result. God loves us, and His hand is "upon all them for good that seek him" (Ezra 8:22). So we can do the things He asks us to do with confidence.

As we walk in this assurance, though, it is very important that we do not take credit for our own success. Ezra went out of his way to explain that God had kept them safe. Only God can save, and He sovereignly chooses to honor those who worship Him. A child asking for a cookie does not make the cookie appear; in the same way, we receive God's mercy as a free gift.

ASKING

1. Where and when did the events of this passage take place?
2. What was the purpose of the mission to Jerusalem?
3. Why was it so important for them to pray and fast?

Scripture Lesson Text

EZRA 8:24 Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sher-e-bi'ah, Hash-a-bi'ah, and ten of their brethren with them,

25 And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Is'ra-el there present, had offered:

26 I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents;

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

28 And I said unto them, Ye *are* holy unto the LORD; the vessels *are* holy also; and the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers.

29 Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Le'vites, and chief of the fathers of Is'ra-el, at Je-ru'sa-lem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.

30 So took the priests and the Le'vites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring *them* to Je-ru'sa-lem unto the house of our God.

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).

ANALYZING

In last week's lesson we saw how the group of exiles led by Ezra praised God by praying to Him and fasting. This week we will see another way Ezra and his group honored the Lord. They did so by freely offering to God, collecting the offerings of others, and watching over all the gifts. This band of exiles showed their desire to worship the Lord even at personal risk to their own safety.

1. Separation (Ezra 8:24). This passage took place during the time of fasting mentioned in last week's lesson. Ezra had collected a great offering for the Lord's temple, and he made preparations to help ensure that it arrived safely. First and foremost, he appointed some of the leading priests to help him keep watch on the gifts. He showed wisdom by delegating some of this immense responsibility.

Ezra picked twenty-four good men to help him take charge of God's offerings. He was apparently a very shrewd judge of character, for he chose the men just after meeting

them! He even noted that Sherebiah was a man of particular understanding (cf. Ezra 8:18). Still, Ezra's faith was ultimately not in these men but in God, who had provided them to help him lead the people.

2. Donation (Ezra 8:25-27). God stirred the hearts of many different people to donate to His temple. This even included the pagan king, who worshipped many different gods, and his various officials. The people of Israel gave generously as well, of course. God is able to use any gift He receives, whether given out of pure motives or selfish ones.

The offering consisted of pure gold and silver, along with specific articles and tools of the finest materials for use in temple service. As far as its size, the best way to describe it would be gigantic. A talent was about 75 pounds, so a hundred talents of gold was between three and four tons, or about 7,500 pounds! The silver by this conversion weighed about twenty-five tons, in addition to other miscellaneous articles of gold and other fine metals. In today's terms, the offering was probably worth close to three hundred million dollars!

This colossal figure begins to explain why Ezra proclaimed a fast and appointed leaders to help him. To walk safely across a wilderness with gifts of that value would have to involve a miracle. It would also require as many workers as possible. In order to achieve his goal of not losing a single ounce, Ezra needed both divine and human help.

3. Consecration (Ezra 8:28-30). Ezra gave the Levites carrying the offering a blessing and a mission. He blessed them by reminding them they were holy, set apart by God for His work. Their mission was simple: to watch and keep the offering for the whole journey. They agreed and worshipped God with their offering along with all Israel.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—A Single Offering for All Time. Heb. 10:1-14.
T.—Stirred Hearts and Willing Spirits. Exod. 35:20-29.
W.—Bring Offerings Before the Lord. Num. 7:1-6.
T.—Contributing Tithes and Offerings. II Chron. 31:2-10.
F.—More Important Than Sacrifices. Mark 12:28-34.
S.—The Gift of a Poor Widow. Mark 12:38-44.
S.—The Offering for God's House. Ezra 8:24-30.

APPLYING

Our help comes from the Lord, by whatever means He uses to bring it to us (cf. Ps. 121:2). The majority of Ezra's gift did not even come from people who followed the ways of the Lord! God can also bring help to us today from unexpected places. He can draw on all the resources of the earth to provide for His people

what they need to worship Him. No provision is too much for God to give.

The Israelites' example of a freewill offering shows a proper understanding of how the blessing of God works. God always initiates the blessing, and He loves to shower us with good things. Our role is to receive the blessings with joy and worship. As we do this, we offer the blessings He gives back to Him. Even though all we give to the Lord came from Him first, we still worship Him by giving back freely from the abundance He gives us.

Ezra's commission of the Levites as guardians of God's gift also contains a lesson for us today. Although we may not be descendants of Levi, as believers in Christ, all of us have become a royal priesthood consecrated to do the work of the Lord (cf. I Pet. 2:9). We are not perfect, but we are holy in the sense of being set apart for holy work. God has also entrusted us with gifts to watch and keep until His return. All of the things He gives us represent opportunities for us to worship God by offering them back to Him. This is a great honor and privilege that we receive only as sons of God. We too have a mission and a blessing!

ASKING

1. Who gave the enormous gift that the Levites carried?
2. How big was the offering?
3. How did Ezra bless the Levites?
4. What was their mission?

Scripture Lesson Text

NEH. 8:13 And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Le'vites, unto Ez'ra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law.

14 And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Mo'ses, that the children of Is'ra-el should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:

15 And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Je-ru'sa-lem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as *it is* written.

16 So the people went forth, and brought *them*, and made

themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of E'phra-im.

17 And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jesh'u-a the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Is'ra-el done so. And there was very great gladness.

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

The 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).

ANALYZING

God’s mission to set apart His people for worship includes the call of His prophets and His renewal when His people fall away. It also includes His protective blessing on true worship. A large part of this protection comes from studying God’s Word. At Nehemiah’s request, Ezra began to teach God’s Law, and the people learned the true guidelines for the Festival of Booths.

1. Reading the Law (Neh. 8:13-14). A short time after Ezra’s return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah also returned to rebuild the wall of the city. When the people gathered to celebrate the wall’s speedy completion, they asked Ezra to read to them from God’s Law. They also had teachers help them understand the meaning of what they heard.

The people honored God with their desire to hear and know His will through His Law. As they read, they discovered that they had not kept the Feast of Booths as God had commanded Moses. In fact, they had not made booths at all!

Their decision to read from the Law led them to true worship of God in a way that He had commanded long before.

2. Building booths (Neh. 8:15-16). Even though the task of reinstating the proper observance of the feast was large, the people obeyed without hesitation. First, they had to spread the word about God’s command that they make booths for all of them to live in during the week of the feast. Next, they had to go out into the hills to find the materials they would need to construct these temporary shelters for their families. Finally, they had to find a place to put these booths in the crowded city! There were booths everywhere, and the people joined as one community to worship the Lord.

3. Keeping the feast (Neh. 8:17-18). The Israelites congregated in Jerusalem for a massive celebration of the completion of the wall and the restored Feast of Booths. Just as God had brought their ancestors out of captivity in Egypt to Jerusalem, so He brought the exiles back to the city out of their captivity in Babylon. Their celebration of the feast by dwelling in

temporary booths reinforced this connection to their forefathers. God was reminding them that He was the God of their fathers, and He showed that He was their God by revealing His law to them so that they would be able to worship Him. It is no wonder they praised with such gladness!

The children of Israel also realized that the best way to ensure they were worshipping God properly was to have His Word become a large part of their celebration. Their eagerness to learn about God and to please Him was a true expression of worship, and it led them to further worship by confessing their sins at the solemn assembly on the last day of the feast (cf. Num. 29:35). God was purifying their hearts and making them true worshippers.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Rhythms of Work and Worship. Exod. 23:12-17.
T.—First Bring Your Offering. Lev. 23:9-14.
W.—Celebrating God's Bounty to Us. Deut. 26:1-11.
T.—Commemorating God's Deliverance. Lev. 23:33-44.
F.—Gathering to Hear God's Word. Neh. 7:73-8:6.
S.—Responding to God's Word. Neh. 8:8-12.
S.—Discovering a Neglected Festival. Neh. 8:13-18.

APPLYING

The most obvious application of this lesson is that it is important for us to read God's Word! In God's Word we find the direct revelation of His will. More than just rules, these are actually instructions on how to live a life that has purpose and honors the Lord. His Word is the best possible safeguard for keeping us

from walking down the paths of sin that lead to death.

There is always something new to learn from God's Word. Even Ezra, a trained expert in the law, found new teachings that brought blessing to the people. In the same way, studying the Word from a heart of faith will always bring us new blessing. God's Word does not return void (cf. Isa. 55:11)! We can also learn from those who have studied God's Word. Just as the Israelites had Ezra and the priests explain the law to them, so we can listen to sermons or read books by wise teachers to help us understand how to follow God's Word.

The Israelites immediately obeyed a very large command from God. They had to tell everyone about the booths, and then they had to go out and gather materials and make them! They did all of this without complaining. We should obey that willingly! No task is too big or inconvenient for us to do with a willing heart if God commands it. If we think singing to God or loving our families or even caring for poor people is too hard, perhaps we need to remember the idea of building a handmade shelter out of tree branches and living in it for a week each year.

ASKING

1. What neglected command did the people rediscover?
2. How and where did the people construct their booths?
3. How were the exiles linked to their ancestors by the feast?

Scripture Lesson Text

NEH. 9:2 And the seed of Is'ra-el separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.

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

7 Thou *art* the LORD the God, who didst choose A'bram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chal'dees, and gavest him the name of A'bra-ham.

9 And didst see the affliction of our fathers in E'gypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;

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

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

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

32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of As-syr'i-a unto this day.

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

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

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

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

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).

ANALYZING

God wants us to confess our sins to Him as an act of worship. In last week’s lesson we saw how the children of Israel honored the Lord by committing to read His Law and correcting their celebration of the Festival of Booths. This week we will see how their ongoing pursuit of God’s law made them aware of how much they had failed to keep it. As they chose to confess their sins, they brought honor to God and protected pure worship.

1. Separation and praise (Neh. 9:2, 6). As Ezra and the Levites continued to read and explain the Law to the Israelites, they became more conscious of their failure to keep God’s commands—so much so that they were in mourning (vs. 1). However, their sadness motivated them to action. They separated themselves from the foreigners who lived with them and cried out to God as a nation.

To begin, the people started their prayer with praise to the Lord for His great nature and works, starting with Creation. He alone made

the heavens, the earth, and all that is in them. He also continually preserves His creation just as He did for Israel by bringing them home. They joined themselves with the heavenly host in worshipping God for His majesty.

2. History (Neh. 9:7, 9-10, 30-31). Despite the frequent disobedience of His people, God was faithful to them. Throughout Israel’s history—from His covenant with Abraham to His rescuing them from their captivity in Egypt and establishing their home in the Land of Promise—God fought for Israel.

Even as they dwelled in the land and began to forget about Him, God continued to be patient with them for many years. He sent prophets like Isaiah to convict them of their sin and turn them back to true worship. When they still refused to listen, though, God finally sent them into captivity in Babylon. Still, He did not forget about His people or allow foreigners to utterly destroy them.

3. Confession and request (Neh. 9:32-36). In view of God’s mercy, the people confessed their sins and asked that God would look on all

their suffering with pity and restore their nation. Still, they confessed that God was just in bringing punishment on them for their own sins and those of their ancestors. The law was God's testimony against them, as they had often failed to follow it.

God had made them a powerful nation and placed them in a wonderful land as a blessing. Still, the people seldom honored God, instead using His blessings for sinful purposes. The returned exiles' confession of sins, then, ended in a commitment to be His faithful servants and to protect the true worship of God.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Repent and Turn to God. Acts 3:17-26.
T.—A Changed Mind. Matt. 21:28-32.
W.—Repenting in Dust and Ashes. Job 42:1-6.
T.—First Be Reconciled. Matt. 5:21-26.
F.—Beseeching God's Mercy. Luke 18:9-14.
S.—Joy in Heaven. Luke 15:1-10.
S.—Confessing Sins Together. Neh. 9:2, 6-7, 9-10, 30-36.

APPLYING

We honor God by confessing our sins because in so doing we declare that He is worthy to be confessed to. This is an admission that God knows better than we do and has the authority to set a standard to which we are held accountable. Just as the Israelites did by beginning their prayer of confession with an acknowledgment of God's greatness, so we can begin our confessions with praise to God for His power, grace, and faithfulness toward us.

As Christians, we know that God has already applied His mercy to us by punishing Jesus for our sins in our stead. Our confession of sins, then, is also a prayer of thanks for this undeserved favor. We know that God has shown us the ultimate mercy and that no sins are left on our record as unpaid. This should free us to confess without fear.

Our confession, like that of the people of Israel, should not merely be a list of the wrongs we have done. They set a great example by ending their time of confession with a commitment to serve the Lord faithfully. This was true repentance; their goal was not just to avoid sin but to proactively do the will of God. In view of God's mercy, this is the only correct response.

We may think it strange that the Israelites repented not just of their own sins but also of the sins of their whole nation, past and present. However, God was honored by this prayer, and it is an example worth considering for us today. We live in a nation that was once set apart as "under God" but that now is guilty of terrible sins like abortion and sexual immorality at a national level. Our nation needs God's mercy and healing. Who will ask Him for it if we do not?

ASKING

1. What did the people do before beginning their confession?
2. For what sins did the people of God repent?
3. How did they commit to protecting the true worship of God?

Scripture Lesson Text

NEH. 12:27 And at the dedication of the wall of Je-ru'sa-lem they sought the Le'vites out of all their places, to bring them to Je-ru'sa-lem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, *with* cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.

28 And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about Je-ru'sa-lem, and from the villages of Ne-toph'a-thi;

29 Also from the house of Gil'gal, and out of the fields of Ge'ba and Az'ma-veth: for the singers had builded them villages round about Je-ru'sa-lem.

30 And the priests and the Le'vites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall.

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

32 And after them went Hoshai'ah, and half of the princes of Ju'dah,

33 And Az-a-ri'ah, Ez'ra, and Meshul'lam,

34 Ju'dah, and Ben'ja-min, and She-mai'ah, and Jer-e-mi'ah,

35 And *certain of the priests' sons with trumpets; namely, Zech-a-ri'ah the son of Jon'a-than, the son of She-mai'ah, the son of Mat-ta-ni'ah, the son of Mi-cha'iah, the son of Zac'cur, the son of A'saph:*

36 And his brethren, She-mai'ah, and Az-a-ra'el, Mil-a-la'i, Gil'a-lai, Ma-a'i, Ne-than'e-el, and Ju'dah, Ha-na'ni, with the musical instruments of Da'vid the man of God, and Ez'ra the scribe before them.

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

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

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).

ANALYZING

When God blessed the Israelites by helping them finish the wall of Jerusalem, Nehemiah made sure that they praised Him. In last week’s lesson we saw how the Israelites confessed their sins to God as an act of worship. This week we will see that God responded by giving them a reason to celebrate as they finished the wall of Jerusalem to protect their houses and the worship of God at His house.

1. Dedication (Neh. 12:27-30). Nehemiah finished the wall of Jerusalem quickly because of God’s favor, but he did not celebrate it immediately. Nehemiah would not dedicate the wall until he gathered the Levites from across the country. One reason this was so important was that that they were set apart to do the Lord’s work and praise Him with songs and instruments. Calling for them focused the celebration on God alone.

It was also important to bring the Levites to perform the ceremony of purification. This ritual of physical

cleansing symbolized spiritual purity. In it, the Levites affirmed that they were holy, set apart for the Lord’s work. They also purified the rest of the people as a reminder that they were God’s chosen nation of worshippers. The Levites purified the wall itself as well. This was the actual dedication of the wall, showing that it too was set apart for God.

2. Celebration (Neh. 12:31-36, 38, 43). Nehemiah divided the Levites into two choirs of thanksgiving. These two groups stood on top of the newly completed wall and worshipped the Lord. Each group also included half of the leaders of Judah and priests with trumpets. One group had the musical instruments of King David, and the other had descendants of the singers he had set apart (cf. I Chron. 25).

The leader of the first group was Ezra, who continued to be the spiritual leader of God’s people. The second group was led by Nehemiah, but he followed behind it instead of leading at the front. He was Israel’s main leader and the backbone of the rebuilding process, so he deserved a position of honor like the one he gave

Ezra. Instead, he continued to direct all praise to God by bringing up the rear.

Once they were separated, the two groups set out along opposite sides of the wall, worshipping God. They circled the entire city on top of the new wall until they all arrived at the temple, where the two choirs of thanksgiving joined (cf. Neh. 12:37, 39-42).

After the procession reached the temple, the people offered sacrifices to the Lord. They knew that God alone was the source of their joy. He used Nehemiah as His instrument, but it was God who made all the men, women, and children rejoice.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—Celebrating God's Greatness. Ps. 96:1-9.
T.—Celebrating the Lord's Coming. Ps. 96:10-13.
W.—Celebrating God's Blessings. Deut. 12:2-7.
Th.—Celebrating Freedom from Oppression. Nah. 1:6-15.
F.—Celebrating the Restored Nation. Jer. 30:18-22.
S.—Celebrating the Restored Jerusalem. Isa. 66:10-14.
Su.—Celebrating a Completed Task. Neh. 12:27-36, 38, 43.

APPLYING

Nehemiah's humility in the dedication of the wall is a good example of how to handle success. Even though he was the largest human factor in the remarkably fast rebuilding project, he had no problem directing all the praise to the Lord. When we experience success, we would do well to do as he did by inviting others to celebrate God with us instead of making any of the celebration about ourselves.

This passage also reveals that joy comes only from God. When His Spirit is welcome and is blessing something, joy is a natural fruit (cf. Gal. 5:22). Still, we often forget this and search for joy in our own possessions, accomplishments, or relationships. All these things that can otherwise be joyful become empty if we look to them for joy that only God can give. If we find ourselves lacking joy, we should consider whether we are looking for it in the right place. Only God can give it, and He loves to do so when we ask Him.

God's main goal for His work in our world is to bring glory to Himself. The people worshipped because He made them joyful, but their joy was not His main goal. It was simply a wonderful side effect of their following His will in bringing Him all the glory. In the same way, we should seek first His kingdom, trusting that He will bless us as we do (cf. Matt. 6:33). It is easy for us to get caught up in celebration without having hearts of worship, but we must remember that all we accomplish is a result of God's work in and through us (cf. Isa. 26:12). Even the protection of God's house and His people who worshipped there was possible only because He protected the protectors!

ASKING

1. Why was it so important to gather the Levites?
2. How did Nehemiah organize the dedication celebration?
3. What was the true source of the people of Israel's joy?

Scripture Lesson Text

NEH. 13:15 In those days saw I in Ju'dah *some* treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all *manner of* burdens, which they brought into Je-ru'sa-lem on the sabbath day: and I testified *against them* in the day wherein they sold victuals.

16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Ju'dah, and in Je-ru'sa-lem.

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

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

19 And it came to pass, that when the gates of Je-ru'sa-lem be-

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

20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Je-ru'sa-lem once or twice.

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

22 And I commanded the Le'-vites that they should cleanse themselves, and *that* they should come *and* keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, *concerning* this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

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).

ANALYZING

Nehemiah continued to protect the worship of the Lord by keeping the Sabbath Day holy. In last week's lesson we saw how God blessed Israel with joy as they dedicated the wall of Jerusalem to Him. In this week's lesson we will see that some of the people began to fall away from true worship by breaking the Sabbath. Nehemiah, however, never stopped fighting for God. He forcefully challenged the disobedience of the people.

1. The people rebelled (Neh. 13:15-16). Nehemiah found people who were doing work on the Sabbath Day, when all of Israel was supposed to rest. They were trying to gain extra wealth in a way God condemned. All their harvesting, loading, and transporting of goods violated the fourth of the Ten Commandments (cf. Exod. 20:8-11). The people were not to work on this day; instead, they were to devote it to rest and worship. Their actions also violated the covenant they had just made after confessing their sins. In it they had promised not to buy from merchants who came on the Sabbath (cf. Neh. 10:31).

2. Nehemiah reacted (Neh. 13:17-18). Nehemiah accused the people of profaning the Sabbath Day, or violating its holiness. The day was set apart for God and therefore holy, so any secular work dishonored the day that God had commanded to be honored highest (cf. Exod. 20:8).

Since those who worked on the Sabbath were so concerned with gaining a little extra prosperity, Nehemiah reasoned with them on that level as well. He explained that they were actually not helping themselves but bringing God's wrath upon the nation, just as their fathers had done. Breaking the Sabbath was one of the sins for which God punished their fathers by sending them into exile (cf. Jer. 17:21-23).

3. Nehemiah intervenes (Neh. 13:19-22). As their governor, Nehemiah bore responsibility for the people's sins (cf. 5:14), so he ordered the gates of Jerusalem to be closed on the Sabbath Day. If no one could enter or leave the city, people would hopefully be induced to rest as God commanded. Nehemiah also posted guards at the gates to enforce this command.

Nehemiah intended the strategy of

shutting the gates and posting his own guards to be temporary. As a permanent solution, he commanded the Levites to cleanse themselves and take up posts at the gates on the Sabbath as part of their service to God. In this way, they would make the Sabbath Day holy for worship once again.

Finally, Nehemiah asked God to remember how he had protected worship on the Sabbath Day. He also asked for mercy not to be held accountable for the people's sins as their leader. He was not concerned with his reputation before men but only with his standing before the great and merciful God he served.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

M.—A Sabbath to the Lord. Exod. 16:13-26.
T.—Keep the Sabbath Holy. Exod. 31:12-18.
W.—Honoring the Sabbath. Isa. 58:9-14.
T.—The Lord of the Sabbath. Mark 2:23-27.
F.—Doing Good on the Sabbath. Mark 3:1-6.
S.—Restoring the Sanctity of the Temple. Neh. 13:4-14.
S.—Restoring the Sanctity of the Sabbath. Neh. 13:15-22.

APPLYING

God has no interest in setting up arbitrary rules to see whether we will obey; His laws are meant to bless our lives. The Israelites may have thought they could gain wealth by working on the Sabbath, but God gave them a day of rest to bless them. Although some today do not value taking a Sabbath rest, it is still to our benefit. We can show that we trust God and recharge for another

week of work by resting on our Sabbath Day.

The measures Nehemiah took to prevent people from breaking the Sabbath were certainly very inconvenient for him. If we follow God's laws only when it is easy or convenient for us, what does that say about our commitment to God? Like Nehemiah, we should commit to obeying God no matter what.

Nehemiah was aware of how sin works as it ruins lives. It might not have seemed like a big sin that a few people were working on the Sabbath. At least the people were not worshipping idols! Ever since the beginning, though, Satan has used seemingly small things as temptations. For Adam and Eve it was just one bite of fruit; for David it was a look from his rooftop when he should have been leading the army (cf. II Sam. 11:1-2).

Nehemiah, however, saw all the way to the end of the road of sin the people were walking. He knew that the sin that led to the Exile had started off in a similar way, and he would not allow that pattern to repeat itself. In the same way, we need to be watchful even for seemingly small sins in our lives. No sin is too small to fight!

ASKING

1. How did the people of Israel sin and rebel against God?
2. What steps did Nehemiah take to address this sin?
3. How did Nehemiah instruct the Levites to help?

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