

Holy, Holy, Holy

Lesson: Isaiah 6:1-8

Read: Isaiah 6:1-12

TIME: about 739 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

The worldview of any individual will depend on the value he places on the Person of God. When Isaiah saw God as absolutely holy, it changed the way he saw the world around him. Our understanding of the character and perfection of God should affect every aspect of our lives in the same way it did for Isaiah.

A CHANGE IN POLITICAL FOCUS— Isa. 6:1

King Uzziah was possibly a relative of Isaiah, maybe even a cousin. If he was a member of the royal family, Isaiah would have been trusted by the political rulers of Israel. When the king died, it was necessary for Isaiah to reevaluate that trust. He had to get his eyes off men before he could truly see God in all His holiness.

The center of his life up to that time had been the palace, but now God wanted him to focus on what was happening in the temple. He needed to know God was far greater than any political ruler in the land.

Uzziah had failed to follow God, just as so many of the kings had. He had entered the temple to offer a sacrifice—something only the priests were allowed to do (cf. II Chron. 26:16-21). As a result of that act, he contracted

leprosy. The king's actions in the temple are in stark contrast to what Isaiah now experienced.

In the vision, Isaiah saw God in His rightful place, “upon a throne” (Isa. 6:1). Originally Israel had been a theocracy, ruled by God. The monarchy had come at the request of the people because they wanted to be “like all the nations” (I Sam. 8:5). All the kings had their faults, including Uzziah. But the King whom Isaiah saw on the throne that day was without fault. He was absolutely holy and could be trusted to lead the nation aright.

In the vision, Isaiah saw God “high and lifted up” (Isa. 6:1). He was the King of kings. No other ruler could even begin to compare with Him. Isaiah needed to see God as sovereign in the affairs of the kingdom.

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

Isaiah had worshipped God even before he experienced this vision in the temple. But his prior worship was done without the knowledge of some important truths concerning the God he served. When he saw God for who He really was, he recognized the prominence that God deserved. No pagan god could

even begin to compare to the Almighty God who was above all others. Even the angels were waiting to serve Him.

These powerful beings, whose very existence was for the purpose of worshipping God, held Him in such reverence that they covered their faces in His presence. Their very actions revealed what they thought of Him. They were powerful, but their power did not compare to the might of the God they served.

Isaiah's religious outlook changed when he realized the honor that God deserved from all creation. God was holy, morally distinct from all of the created world. He alone was sinless, perfect, without blemish of any kind. Holiness was basic to His very character. Everything He did was holy, just, right, and good. There was no hint of sin, injustice, or evil in His Being. The thrice-holy adulation of the angels proclaimed a state of perfection possessed only by God Himself.

In relationship to the creation, He was the Recipient of all glory. The glory of God was not confined to the temple; it was evident in the entire universe He had created. Isaiah realized that worship of God was not something that took place only in the temple. All of life was to honor and worship God because all the earth and everything in it was created to give Him glory.

Since all the earth was to give glory to God, all that was in the earth was to do the same. The purpose of man was to give glory to God as well. Worship was not just an action performed in the temple. Worship of God was to be a way of life. Everything Isaiah said and did and thought was to be a hymn of praise to God Almighty.

A CHANGE IN PERSONAL FOCUS—Isa. 6:5-7

Truly understanding who God is changed Isaiah's attitude toward himself. Since God was holy and he was a sinner, Isaiah realized that he was cast

off from God. The word translated "unclean" (Isa. 6:5) is the word the lepers used to keep people at a distance from them because of their disease (Lev. 13:45). Just as King Uzziah had been overcome by leprosy, so Isaiah had been overcome by the leprosy of sin. He realized the great distance between God and him. He could not approach God because he was a sinner. The very act of worshipping in the temple reminded him of the "woe" (Isa. 6:5), the curse, that was upon him as a result of his sin.

Isaiah also realized that his actions were a result of sin. He was a "man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). It was not the words he said that made him a sinner; instead, his inner character was revealed in the very words of his mouth. What he was inside came out through his lips. Because he was a sinner, the things he said and did were sinful.

This personal insight also reminded Isaiah that he was part of the fallen human race. Everyone around him was in the same sinful condition before God. All of the nation—in fact, all of mankind—was separated from God by the sinful condition of the human race. God was holy, and man was sinful.

In addition to showing him what he really was, Isaiah's vision of God showed him his spiritual need. His sin needed to be cleansed, and that cleansing needed to come from God. The live coal placed on his lips was a symbol of the cleansing of the holiness of God. Since he had identified his sin as being on his lips, that is what God used to represent the inward cleansing from sin that Isaiah needed. The coal did not take away his sin. It only touched his lips. It was God who took away his iniquity. The angel declared, "Thy sin [is] purged" (Isa. 6:7).

A CHANGE IN SOCIAL FOCUS—Isa. 6:8

When Isaiah saw God, he realized that the entire nation was in the same condition. They all were sinners in

need of cleansing, and that cleansing could only come from God. An understanding of that truth transformed his entire attitude toward society. Instead of depending on the king and political action to benefit the nation, Isaiah dedicated himself to ministering to the spiritual needs of his people. The economy, foreign affairs, homeland security, personal wealth, and prosperity all took second place in his desire for the people around him. They had a spiritual need, and satisfying that spiritual need became the predominant desire of his life.

Isaiah did not see just the condition of the people around him; he also saw their need. If he had simply seen their sin, he would have condemned them. When he saw their need for cleansing, his heart was filled with concern. His own cleansing showed him what God could do for the rest of the nation as well.

God's call to Isaiah was heard only after he had been cleansed. Before that, he had been focused on his own plans. But once the sin was removed, he was able to discern that God had a plan for his life.

It is also true that God could not use Isaiah to do His work before the cleansing from sin. It was necessary for Isaiah to have a changed life before he could recommend that spiritual change to the rest of the nation. He needed to see God and respond to God before he could show God to others and invite them to respond to His offer of cleansing.

God's call to Isaiah was a call to work as a divine messenger. God wanted someone to "go for us" (Isa. 6:8). The time would come when God Himself would come to earth in the flesh, when He would come to men and live among them in the incarnation. But the task set before Isaiah was to represent God to the people. He was to speak God's message and invite the nation to respond to that message. It was a far greater task than anything he had ever

been called on to do as a possible member of the royal family. That was what changed his social focus.

God's call to Isaiah was met with an immediate response because of the cleansing from sin. He was no longer cast off from God but was instead willing to follow His leading and be totally obedient to what God wanted him to do. He responded to the call of God without any reservations. Sin had kept him from hearing God; but once the sin was removed, his will was to do what God wanted him to do.

The society around him had not yet changed, but Isaiah's heart had changed. What God thought of him now took prominence over his standing in society. What God wanted for other men—their cleansing—was more important to him than anything else.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Isaiah trust the political leaders of his day?
2. How did seeing God on His throne change Isaiah's political focus?
3. How did the angels display their reverence toward God?
4. How do we know that God's glory was not confined to worshipping Him in the temple?
5. Why did Isaiah see himself as a spiritual leper?
6. What in Isaiah's inner character made him sin with his lips?
7. Why did God use the symbol of a live coal on the lips as a picture of cleansing from sin?
8. Why was it important for Isaiah to be cleansed before God called him to a place of divine service?

—Robert A. Allen.

Sing and Shout!

Lesson: Isaiah 12:1-6

Read: Isaiah 12:1-6

TIME: about 735 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

The nation of Israel had many reasons to be disappointed in the way kings had ruled their country. The great majority of the kings were evil, and the result of their reigns was domination by foreign powers, sent by God as a punishment. One of the common themes throughout Isaiah’s prophecy was the coming kingdom of God. With the Messiah on the throne, conditions would be far different from the way they had been under earthly kings. Under the reign of the Messiah, the people would have manifold reasons to sing and rejoice in worship of God.

PRIVATE WORSHIP—Isa. 12:1-3

Private thanksgiving for an end to God’s wrath (Isa. 12:1). The history of Israel reveals a pattern of disobedience and punishment. God often used other nations to bring judgment on His people. They knew that it was ultimately the fact that God was angry with their sin that made them prey to the attacks of the enemies around them.

When the kingdom arrives and the King is on His throne, those attacks will no longer take place. God’s anger will be turned away from His people. In that

day they will look back on the judgment they faced and rejoice that the days of defeat at the hand of the enemy are over. The kingdom of the Messiah will be set up in the entire world in spite of the age-old opposition of the powers of Satan.

As long as we are in this world and the temptations Satan brings into our lives prevail, we will answer to a just God for our sin. His purpose in chastisement is always remedial; He wants us to humble ourselves and return to Him. When that happens, His anger will be turned away, and we will rejoice in the mercy of a restored fellowship with Him. So true worship should always include repentance that leads to divine forgiveness and renewed fellowship.

Private thanks for the victory of our salvation (Isa. 12:2). Salvation always includes both a present and a future aspect for the believer. We have a present salvation through the work of Christ the Messiah. Our salvation has already begun through faith in Him. But the same Christ who saves us also keeps us. The victory over sin is not just at one point in time but is also available to us moment by moment.

Victory in salvation will silence our

fears. We will be able to “trust, and not be afraid” (Isa. 12:2). The nation of Israel had reason to fear their human enemies, and this song of praise and worship for the kingdom age reminded them that when the King came, those fears would be gone. As we worship the King, we must also remember that no enemy can defeat Him. “Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Our position in Him is secure, and that should remove any fear from our hearts.

Victory in salvation will also strengthen us for the spiritual battles we face. We will not need to depend on our own power because God is our strength. There will be attacks by Satan, who is the great tempter, but we can look to the Saviour for strength to overcome. There will be work to do and trouble to face, but it is not necessary for us to face them alone. He will always be there to hold us up and give us the victory.

This is one of only two places where the double title *Jah Jehovah*, or “LORD JEHOVAH” (Isa. 12:2), is found in Scripture. That title of God speaks of His unchangeableness and His eternity. Doubling the reference is a way of emphasizing the fact that He will not and cannot fail in His promise to sustain us through all the trials of life. With salvation from God, we do not need to fear.

Victory in salvation will also give us a theme for our worship. He will become our “song” (Isa. 12:2). The person who allows God to calm his fears and bring peace to his heart will naturally praise God in song. Since this still concerns private worship, the idea is not outward singing but rather the song in his heart. It is the song that reveals a settled trust in God that results in a peaceful, stress-free life.

Private thanksgiving for our joy in the Lord (Isa. 12:3). The kingdom will usher in a great time of peace such as the world has never seen. It will be a

time when people will live without worry or anxiety because war will cease and prosperity will reign. Isaiah described it as a time when joy will flow like the water bubbling up from a well. The reason for that peace will, of course, be the salvation brought by the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

Since we have experienced His salvation, we too can live a life of continual rejoicing. No matter what happens, the joy of the Lord can be our strength. The land may be parched around us, but the well of salvation will never run dry. A person who draws daily upon the water of the Word and lives in obedience to the promises of God will find that all of life becomes a joyful experience. As Jesus told the woman at the well, “The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

Private worship will help a person live such a life of joy. Reading the Word of God and fellowshiping with God in prayer will produce a spirit of joy that triumphs over every circumstance of life.

PUBLIC WORSHIP—Isa. 12:4

During the kingdom, the entire world will be involved in worshipping the King of kings. There will be no false gods because Satan and his followers will have been defeated. So the public worship in the kingdom provides a model for what our worship should involve at the present time as well.

Public worship includes proclamation. The variety of public proclamation included in this text suggests some of the ways in which we can worship God in our times of gathering together. One of those methods is to speak our praise in the company of others. Such public proclamation can be an expression of our own hearts or an invitation to others to join us in praise. When we speak publicly of what God has done for us, we encourage others to re-

spond with their own praises to God. That is one of the reasons a time of public worship is such an encouragement to the church.

Another method of worship is prayer. Isaiah wrote that in the kingdom, they will “call upon his name” (Isa. 12:4). Public prayer is not for the purpose of showing how eloquent one person can be in addressing God. Public prayer is for the purpose of uniting hearts in petitions and thanksgiving. As one person prays, all those present should pray right along with him so that all are worshipping as one.

Testimony is another way to worship. We can tell others of “his doings among the people” (Isa. 12:4). As we share what God has done in our lives and others share what He has done for them, it becomes evident that He deserves the praise for all that is taking place.

Actual words of exaltation are the fourth way of worship in the kingdom, and they should be part of our worship as well. Exalting God for who He is can be done through the reading of Scripture, through song, and through the preaching of the Word. Seeing a sermon as one means of worshipping God can keep us from arbitrarily dividing our services into two parts. We should not think of worship as the first part or singing part of the service and then relegate the sermon to a different status. Preaching is a means of exalting God and is definitely a form of worship.

PUBLIC GLORIFICATION— Isa. 12:5-6

One of the great activities of the kingdom age will be the glorification of the Messiah. People will recognize that He alone is responsible for the prosperity, peace, and blessings of the kingdom and will accord Him the honor He deserves. This will happen in “all the earth” (Isa. 12:5). His greatness will

be the subject of the music of the kingdom. His accomplishments will be the subject of the news of the kingdom as men record the “excellent things” He has done. His glory will be the impetus of great public displays of cheering and adulation as men and women rejoice in the fact that the Holy One has come as their King and dwells in their midst.

As believers, we should accord to Christ the same exuberance and adulation. If we can compose songs, we should write about Him. If we can write articles, our writing should bring Him glory. Everything we do and say should resound to the glorification of the Son of God, who has given us salvation and all that accompanies new life in Him. Let us not wait for the kingdom to shout the praise of our God.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Isaiah encourage the nation with his prophecies concerning the coming kingdom?
2. Why does God bring judgment on His own people?
3. How does salvation strengthen us for spiritual battles?
4. Why did Isaiah use a double title for God in Isaiah 12:2?
5. How can a believer live a life of continual rejoicing?
6. Why is it important for the church to engage regularly in public worship?
7. Why should preaching be considered a vital part of the worship experience?
8. How can we glorify God through the way we live?

—Robert A. Allen.

Meaningless Worship Condemned

Lesson: Isaiah 29:9-16

Read: Isaiah 29:1-24

TIME: probably 711 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

During the days of Isaiah, the nation of Israel continued to worship at the temple. They brought sacrifices and offered incense, but it had become empty ritual. Isaiah had told them at the very beginning of his prophecy that God was weary of their meaningless worship (Isa. 1:14).

In this section of his prophecy, Isaiah listed the reasons their worship had become empty. The people were still doing the same things, but they had lost the awareness of the spiritual meaning behind what God had asked them to do.

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

Isaiah was amazed at the spiritual deadness he saw in his own nation. They had the Law of Moses, they had God’s prophets, and they had priests and Levites to teach them what was right. Yet they were totally insensitive to the repentance and conviction of sin that God desired of them. Because he was so amazed, Isaiah called on others in the nation to behold this folly as well.

The picture he used to describe the condition of the people is one of a drunk.

They were so controlled by their evil ways that they had no ability to discern the right way to walk or talk. Spiritually they were like men overcome by alcohol. They staggered and stumbled over the truth God wanted them to obey.

Because of their evil choices, God had delivered them to their own devices. Since they had chosen to close their eyes to the truth revealed through Isaiah and others, God gave them what they wanted. He refused to give them insight and poured out on them a spiritual “deep sleep” (Isa. 29:10). Even the eyes of the “rulers” and “seers” had been blinded.

One of the great dangers of empty worship lies in the fact that joining with others in meaningless ritual blinds our eyes to what God really expects of us. Simply going through the motions of praying and singing and going to church can actually convince a person that all is right between God and him. Many people today live in the presence of gospel light and yet have no sense of conviction over sin. People who go through the motions of worship without seeking forgiveness from God for sin are just as blind as

those who lived in the days of Isaiah.

A person who has been raised in church may well struggle with the possibility of empty worship. What seems real to others is simply ritual to him. He needs conviction of sin in order to really understand what Christ has done for him.

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

God was right then in the process of revealing His Word to the nation of Israel. The prophecy of Isaiah would join the books of Moses and the psalms of David and the rest of the inspired books from God. But the spiritual blindness of the people kept them from understanding what was written.

There were two attitudes among the people—both of them wrong. Those in the first group were like a student who has been given a book that is sealed and fails to open it. He has the book, but it does him no good because he does not read what it says.

There are those who claim to worship God and yet never even begin to study what He says in His Word. It is like a sealed book to them because they never read it. Worship will never be of spiritual value unless it includes diligent study and application of the truth of the Word of God to a person's life. Corporate worship will be the outgrowth of personal worship and study of the Person of God in His Book.

The second group used the excuse that they were "not learned" (Isa. 29:12). They were offered the Word of God but claimed that they could not understand it because they had not been taught how to read.

It is important for our churches to spend time teaching people how to read and understand the Scriptures. Attending a worship service can be an empty exercise in religion if our knowledge of God's Word is not increased during that time. At the same time, it is

foolish to use the excuse that we cannot read and understand the Word. God has revealed Himself in His Book, and it was written so that men can understand it if they study. Laziness is not an excuse for a lack of knowledge of God. It is readily available to us. Commentaries and books on how to read and understand Scripture make it possible for every person to learn God's truth.

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

God knew the hearts of those who were coming to the temple to worship. They were saying the right things, praying the right prayers, and bringing the right offerings. At the same time their hearts were in rebellion against what God wanted them to do and be. When their offerings were given to God, their thoughts were on the things they were going to do once the service was over. When the incense rose to God along with their memorized prayers, they were laughing in their hearts at how they had once again been able to deceive those around them into thinking they were really spiritual. But God knew their hearts.

One of the reasons for this false worship was simply because their fear of God was taught "by the precept of men" (Isa. 29:13). That means that they were worshipping because it was what men expected of them. Their worship did not spring from a desire to please and serve God. Instead, it was an attempt to keep up appearances in society.

That same attitude is a real danger for young people today, especially those from Christian homes. They may participate in worship and service only because that is what is expected of them since they come from a godly family. God expects a genuine change in a person's heart because of repentance of sin and faith in Christ. If that change does not take place, regular church at-

tendance, memorization of Scripture, and participation in a music group become empty, meaningless worship.

Many Christians live their lives in conformity to what others expect of them rather than to what God desires. They live by the standards imposed by men rather than by the biblical holiness that pleases God. They think that if they look just like everyone else and say the same things others say, no one will know what is really in their hearts. But God knows the heart. Participating in meaningless worship will not help a person hide from God today any more than it did in the days of Isaiah.

When a person chooses to follow men instead of God, He often gives them what they desire. Since they have hardened their hearts against Him, He allows them to seek and receive advice from others. What they do not realize is that those to whom they are listening have no wisdom, for they have also rejected God's truth. They think they are wise, but they have no wisdom because they do not know God's Word.

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

The end result of the empty worship of God's people was that they had no need for God. They were hiding from Him instead of seeking Him. They had convinced themselves that simply going to the temple had deceived both God and their fellow men of their righteousness. No one knew what they were really thinking, and no one knew what they were really doing.

But God did know what they were thinking and what they were doing. They could not hide from Him. To think that God did not know was the height of foolishness. To think that God did not understand what was happening in their false worship simply revealed their lack of knowledge concerning Him.

Using religious exercises as a cover for evil thoughts and deeds was par-

ticularly reprehensible to a holy God. It was dishonoring to Him for them to think that He was being deceived by their actions. They did not believe that God knew all things, so they were really the ones who were being deceived. Their poor knowledge of the Word led to a poor understanding of God.

They also dishonored God by thinking they could turn His plans "upside down" (Isa. 29:16). They had forgotten that He was the Creator. He made them, and He alone understood what was best for those He had made. Instead of considering His will, these people chose to do their own will.

An empty life is one that is lived apart from a need for God. All plans that do not include Him will leave a person unsatisfied. Only living in His perfect will can bring peace and happiness to men. True worship will take place only when a person seeks to know God and genuinely honors Him with his whole heart.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did the spiritual condition of the nation amaze Isaiah?
2. How were the people like those overcome by alcohol?
3. How do people today treat the Bible like a sealed book?
4. Why is it foolish to claim that we cannot understand the Bible?
5. Why is our heart attitude important when we worship?
6. Why does God want more than outward actions in worship?
7. How does a genuine knowledge of God help us worship?
8. How do we dishonor God when we try to run our own lives?

—Robert A. Allen.

The Glorious New Creation

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

Read: Isaiah 65:1-25

TIME: about 700–695 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

God had promised to bless His people. Because of their sin, that blessing was too often changed to a curse. Their false worship offended God, and His blessing was not given to a disobedient people. Isaiah looked forward to the day when God’s blessing will be fully realized during the days of the kingdom. All those who enter the kingdom will have faith in God and will not be false worshippers. So the blessing of God will be seen in complete fulfillment of all of God’s prophetic promises.

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

The millennial kingdom follows immediately on the heels of the Great Tribulation. Under the rule of the antichrist, the earth will suffer because of war, plagues, earthquakes, and famine. It will be necessary for the King of kings to restore the earth after those years of destruction. This is the beginning of God’s plan to recreate the earth to the glory it had in its original state. It will eventually become “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17) where even death itself is destroyed (cf. Rev.

21:4). During the kingdom there will still be death, but the effects of sin will be so mitigated that the terrible memories of the tribulation period will fade away.

The economic blessings of the kingdom will usher in a time of prosperity previously unknown in the world. The new earth will not suffer from the effects of war and famine. Resources will be reallocated to areas that will benefit the human race. Wealth will not be wasted on weapons. Science will focus on economic issues, and freedom from fear will be the experience of all people. Poverty and want will be forgotten as the entire world rejoices in the blessings of the kingdom.

The highlight of the entire process of restoration will be the city of Jerusalem, which will bear the brunt of the destruction wrought by the antichrist. It will become the capital city of the kingdom, and the beauty of its re-creation will produce joy in the hearts of all who dwell there or visit the city. There Christ will reign as King, and God will see that the city is a place worthy of the glorious presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

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

The nation of Israel had often been a disappointment to God because of disobedience. During the kingdom, however, He will rejoice over them. The only way that is possible is through the salvation they will receive when the nation accepts Him as Messiah. Only a redeemed people can bring joy to the heart of God. All those who enter the kingdom will be part of that redeemed remnant.

Social blessings in the kingdom will result from the fact that sin has been cleansed by the blood. Weeping and crying will disappear because the reasons for tears will be gone. The King will reign in righteousness, and crime of all types will be suppressed. Disobedience to authority, abuse of drugs, thievery, abusive relationships, white-collar crime, and all those things that bring sorrow and heartache in today's world will be uncommon.

Sin has also had a tremendous effect on the human body and therefore on longevity. Not every death is a direct result of some sin, but every death is ultimately caused by the sin that universally affects mankind. As sin is subdued in the kingdom, disease and its accompanying destruction will fade away. Infant mortality is still high today, but it will not be in the kingdom. Physical deformity and infirmity will be unknown. Longevity will be enjoyed by all those under His rule. Men will live on earth in a kingdom environment and under the direct rule of Christ in a fashion that will be the greatest one thousand years of human history.

This is not the final state of man that we call heaven because judgment on sin will still be present. People will experience the grace of God, but if a person does die young, it will be seen as a judgment from the King that is deserved. The example given by Isaiah is of one dying when one "hundred years old" (Isa. 65:20). Children born during

the kingdom will have to choose Christ just like all those who went into the kingdom before them. If they refuse Him, judgment will come in the form of an early death. But death at one hundred years old will be considered early, which shows the mercy of God. Those who love and obey Christ will have long lives and possibly could live through the entire millennial age. Old age without infirmity will be a blessing available to everyone.

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

One of the greatest blessings of kingdom living will be the realization that everything people enjoy comes from the hand of God. Prosperity will abound, and men will recognize it as a gift from God. Home ownership will be universal, with no fear of foreclosure or eviction. The wars during the tribulation will produce homelessness throughout the world, but the kingdom will be a time of peace and property rights. During the kingdom, war will cease, for Christ will rule without opposition. No one will take someone else's property away, and people will dwell in peace and safety in their own homes.

Wars are often fought over territorial boundaries. Those who exploit others through economic strife and class conflict succeed in stealing what rightfully belongs to others. During the kingdom, that will not happen. Each person will enjoy the benefits of his own labor. No one will be cheated out of his just reward for his work. Christ will make sure that employers treat employees fairly. In turn, employees will be honest and diligent in their chosen occupations.

The blessings poured out by God on His people will make labor enjoyable. Men will work, but even that will become part of their spiritual activity. Crops will be abundant, for thorns and weeds will disappear. Men and women will not face

the troubles that plague the work environment today. They will not work in vain. Work will be a part of kingdom life, but it will always be profitable for those who work and produce success.

These spiritual blessings come from the fact that the kingdom dwellers are the children of those who have been blessed by the Lord. Entrance into the kingdom demands faith. A perfect environment and a divine political system will give mankind an opportunity to please God and live righteous lives for His glory without the temptations present in a world dominated by sin.

The reference to “offspring” (Isa. 65:23) speaks of those who will be born during the kingdom. Like all others, they will be born in sin. In spite of the perfect environment, some of them will choose to rebel against the King. They will not have the excuse that a wicked society caused them to sin. Men are evil because their hearts are sinful. Even in a perfect environment, men will be wicked without salvation in Christ. The spiritual blessings of the kingdom come because God has transformed hearts.

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

When He first created Adam and Eve, God’s desire was to have regular fellowship with them. One of their joys was to communicate with Him daily. That blessing will be part of the kingdom as well. Christ will be physically present on earth and will be in instant communication with His people. At the very time they are calling on Him, He will answer. The King will be aware of every need of His people and will meet those needs before they even think to ask for help. The blessing of prayer in worship will be enhanced. At times it seems that answers to prayer are long in coming today, but in that day there will be immediate communication.

In the present age, the Spirit indwells

the believer. During the incarnation, Christ lived among us. The kingdom will enjoy His physical presence as well as immediate access. The glory of living with Him will be far beyond anything men have known up to that time.

The physical blessings of the kingdom are so vast that all of nature will experience a complete transformation. Those who were predators will dwell in peace alongside their former prey. The animals that were carnivores will become plant eaters. Death will be so far removed from the kingdom that not even the animal world will fight.

Snakes will no longer strike and kill. Instead, they will eat dust. They will be tamed along with all the rest of creation. The curse of sin will be lifted almost entirely, looking forward to the day when Satan’s defeat will be total and the final triumph over death complete.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why will the earth be restored at the beginning of the kingdom age?
2. How will economic prosperity happen in the kingdom?
3. Why will the beauty of Jerusalem become a reason for rejoicing?
4. How does the subduing of sin bring social blessing?
5. Why will judgment still need to be part of the kingdom?
6. How do the blessings of the kingdom increase longevity?
7. How will property rights be protected by the King?
8. How will God make work enjoyable and everyone successful in their work?
9. How will peace extend even to the animal kingdom?

—Robert A. Allen.

Joyful Worship Restored

Lesson: Ezra 3:1-7

Read: Ezra 1:1—3:7

TIME: 537 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

Formal worship had ended for the nation of Israel at the time of the destruction of the temple. After seventy years in captivity, they were now returning to the land. Their first concern was reestablishing the worship of God. They knew that the Captivity had been a result of their disobedience to God, and now they wanted to obey His commands.

Zerubbabel helped lead the people back from Babylon to Jerusalem with the permission of Cyrus, king of Persia. They had returned with a command to build the temple (cf. Ezra 1:2). So they were obeying God and also fulfilling the desires of the king who had granted them permission to return.

WORSHIP AT THE ALTAR— Ezra 3:1-3

Even before they started on the building of a new temple, the people wanted to restore the sacrificial system required by the Law of Moses.

The seventh month was a great spiritual month for godly Jews. The first day of the month they were to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets. On the tenth day they commemorated the Day of Atonement. And on the fifteenth day began an eight-day festival called the

Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Lev. 23:23-44). As the people gathered in Jerusalem for these holy days, they were reminded of the fact that they were without an altar. The altar was the central place of worship because it was there the offerings they brought to God were sacrificed.

Jeshua was a priest at that time. His grandfather Seraiah had been the high priest at the time Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem (cf. I Chron. 6:14-15). His father, Jozadak, had been one of the men carried off into captivity when the city fell to the Babylonian army. Zerubbabel was the political leader of the remnant who returned (cf. Ezra 2:2). He was a descendant of the kingly line of David.

The purpose for rebuilding the altar was to be able to restore the morning and evening sacrifices commanded by Moses. To obey God meant to keep the law, and that was what the remnant desired to do. They had gone into captivity because they had not obeyed God. Instead, they had worshipped the false gods of the nations around them. They were determined not to make the same mistake, now that they were back in the land. They wanted to do everything

exactly the way God commanded.

Obedience to God has always been based on obedience to His Word. Those who claim to love Him will walk in accordance with His commandments. If a person is not reading and following what God teaches in the Scriptures, he cannot claim to be genuinely worshipping God.

Another reason the people wanted to restore the altar was a desire that God provide protection. They had many enemies, and they feared them. Before the Captivity, they had tried to defeat their enemies without help from God. They had turned to Egypt for protection and had sacrificed to false gods in order to feel safe. Now they knew that God Almighty was their only hope, so they wanted to be certain they were right with Him.

In the same way, trouble today often makes us turn to God for help. We should worship God at all times, but sometimes it takes a severe dose of anxiety to awaken in us a real sense of our need. A person who knows that he needs God will turn to Him for help, while a person who thinks he can handle trouble on his own will try to muddle through without asking for divine guidance. It was only with the help of God that this small remnant had any hope of surviving with enemies completely surrounding them.

WORSHIP AT THE FEASTS—

Ezra 3:4-5

Once the altar was in place, the nation was able to observe the eight-day Feast of Tabernacles in accordance with the way it had been established by Moses. The feast included sacrifices, or “daily burnt offerings by number” (Ezra 3:4). On the first day, for example, they were to offer “thirteen young bullocks, two rams, and fourteen lambs” (Num. 29:13). The next day it was “twelve young bullocks, two rams, fourteen lambs” (vs. 17) and so on through

the end of the feast days. Without the erection of the altar, those sacrifices would have been impossible.

The Feast of Tabernacles reminded them of God’s provision and protection during their wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus. It also spoke in a prophetic way of the blessings of the millennial kingdom and the return of the Messiah. So it was very appropriate to begin their worship with this particular celebration after the return.

In addition to all the offerings required during the feast, the people restored the rest of the sacrifices God commanded in the law. They made provision for the daily sacrifices, the monthly offerings at the “new moons” (Ezra 3:5), and the other feast days.

Besides all that, the people found it in their hearts to give offerings that were not required. They were so thankful for all that God had done that they were willingly sacrificing of their own possessions to express gratitude for His mercy and goodness.

One of the aspects of church services today that we do not normally associate with worship is the offering. But it is very much an integral part of worship. By giving to God, we are acknowledging that everything we have comes from Him. We are offering a portion of that back to Him in praise for His provision. A person who sees giving as an act of worship rather than an obligation will be the type of cheerful giver God desires (II Cor. 9:7).

WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE—

Ezra 3:6-7

The building of the altar and the restoration of the feasts and offerings of the seventh month were a good start toward the worship of God they desired. The fact that the temple was not yet built gave them a great goal and an incentive to start the preparations for that accomplishment.

At that time, not even the foundation

had been laid. They had built the altar on the very spot where Solomon's altar had once stood, but now the building of the temple around the altar needed to take place. The preparations were extensive, but the people were so excited that worship had actually been restored that they entered into the process with zeal.

During their days in Babylon, some of the exiles had been trained in masonry and carpentry. They were given the task of preparing the stones and wood for the rebuilding project. They were not expected to provide their own materials but instead were given money for the purpose of buying what was needed.

The supplies came from Lebanon, the country to their north, and particularly from the cities of Tyre and Sidon ("Zidon"). The payment made to those cities was in the form of "meat, and drink, and oil" (Ezra 3:7). The cedar trees of Lebanon were famous and had been used in the building of the first temple constructed by Solomon. Much of the money they used for these purchases came from a grant by King Cyrus. He had restored to them the articles Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the Solomonic temple and had given them funds to buy what was necessary for the construction of the new temple as well.

God was the one who had moved on the heart of Cyrus to allow the return and to finance the building of the temple. Cyrus probably had his own reasons for doing it, but it was clear to God's people that "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1). Throughout the Old Testament it is clear that God rules in the affairs of men, including the hearts of kings.

Men today may think that they are doing what they have chosen to do, but ultimately God is still the one in control. That does not excuse a person when he does wrong, for men have free will and can refuse to serve and trust God. But even when they rebel, He sets limits on

what they can do and ultimately works His will in all their plans. That should be a great encouragement to those who trust in Him. We do not need to fear what men will do, for we know that He directs the very course of history.

That is the reason the people of the remnant worshipped God and not Cyrus. They knew that Cyrus had issued the decree to return, but it was God who caused him to reconsider their captivity. They knew that Cyrus had given them the money to build the temple, but it was God who had moved on the heart of Cyrus to make that provision. It was God who deserved their praise for everything men had done. A true heart of worship will always see the hand of God behind every event in life. We can praise Him for His protection, for His provision, and even for His judgment. We know He wants the best for us.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why was the seventh month special in the Jewish calendar?
2. Why was it necessary for an altar to be built before the feast?
3. Why did their fear of enemies compel them to build an altar?
4. Why was the Feast of Tabernacles a good way to begin the worship?
5. Why did the people give offerings that were not required?
6. How is the giving of an offering today an act of worship?
7. Why did the people choose to import cedarwood from Tyre and Sidon up in Lebanon?
8. Who provided the money for the rebuilding of the temple?
9. Why did the people praise God rather than Cyrus?

—Robert A. Allen.

The Temple Restored

Lesson: Ezra 3:8-13

Read: Ezra 3:8-13

TIME: 536 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—“All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid” (Ezra 3:11).

Lesson Exposition

The remnant had returned to the land with the express purpose of rebuilding the temple. King Cyrus had given the command and provided the money for the project. But there were still preparations that needed to be made. The people had to do the work, and it was their dedication that would make the project successful. Their bodies, hearts, and minds needed to be ready for the task that lay before them.

PREPARATION OF THE WORKMEN—Ezra 3:8-9

The work on the temple had not started immediately upon their arrival back in the land. Seven months had passed since the altar had been laid, but those had not been months of inactivity. The cedar trees from Lebanon had to be delivered, which could well have taken that long to accomplish. The people were eager to begin the work, but there were other preparations that needed to be made as they awaited the arrival of the raw materials they had ordered.

One of the first preparations involved the organization of the workmen. The political and religious lead-

ers, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, along with the entire community worked together to plan the course of action. As we have already seen, they were giving offerings of their own free will, and we also see them encouraging those who would do the actual work by their presence and support.

One of the blessings of working together for God is the prayer support and encouragement God's people give to those who are serving in various capacities. Not everyone goes to a foreign mission, for example; but those who do not go can be a great encouragement through their support and their prayers.

The actual workers came from among the Levites, a group of individuals who had been given the responsibility of working on and maintaining the temple ever since the days of Moses. They were divided into three groups according to families. “Jeshua” was a different Jeshua from the high priest mentioned in the previous verse. He was head of one Levite family. Kadmiel and Henadad were the heads of the other work groups. The purpose for this division may have been to schedule successive work crews throughout

the day.

Service to God always involves the help God gives and the work He expects from us. We depend on Him, and He provides; but He also expects us to use what He sends and work hard to make every project a success. As James told us, it is our work that shows we have faith (cf. Jas. 2:22). We work hard because we are trusting Him.

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

Because of their experiences during the Captivity, the remnant knew that whatever they did had to be with the approval of God. Their hearts and not just their outward actions had to be genuine in worship. So the laying of the foundation of the temple was accompanied by a great festival of praise and worship. Spiritual preparation for building was just as important as the provision of the supplies and the organization of the workers.

Some of the priests were skilled in the playing of musical instruments and singing. The “sons of Asaph” (Ezra 3:10) were known for their musical abilities (cf. Neh. 7:44). Their ancestor had written some of the songs used in worship (cf. Pss. 79—82). David himself had helped plan the use of the sons of Asaph as permanent musicians in the temple. Among the instruments they used to accompany their singing were trumpets and cymbals.

The music they used was sung “by course” (Ezra 3:11), which may mean that they sang antiphonally. One group would sing, and then another chorus would respond. The words came from Psalm 136: “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever” (vs. 1). It is easy to see how that psalm could be used antiphonally, since the phrase “for his mercy endureth for ever” is repeated all the way through it. One choir could sing the first part of each verse, with

the other choir singing the response.

The response of the people to the singing of the psalm and the playing of the instruments was a great shout. The purpose of the entire event was to show their thanks by giving praise to the Lord God, who had made that day possible. He had provided the materials through Cyrus. He had worked in the hearts of those who returned and given them the skills necessary for the work. And now He had worked in the hearts of the people to get completely behind the endeavor because their hearts were fixed on worship of the Lord.

Music has always played a large part in the worship of the Lord. Those who are skilled in singing and the playing of instruments can be a great encouragement to the entire congregation, but it is important for all of God’s people to participate as well. It is good for those who have musical abilities to lead in worship so that the experience is one of united praise and not just a performance. When that happens, the hearts of all of God’s people will be joined together in praise, and they will be prepared to do the work of the Lord.

Those who were involved in the preparation and presentation of the music were just as much a part of the building project as those who had been chosen to do the physical work. When God gives gifts and abilities to His own, He does not make a distinction between them. Sometimes we start thinking that one position is more important than another, but in His plan, God has a place for each one to work. What one person does for Him is just as important as what anyone else does, whether that work is in the nursery or in the choir.

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

As a whole, the people of the remnant had a mind-set that rejoiced at the prospect of having a temple once

again. The laying of the foundation was to them an occasion of great joy. Not every individual within that group had exactly the same attitude, however.

There was a group of older men who could remember Solomon's temple from before it was destroyed. They remembered the beauty of the temple and how glorious it was with all the gold Solomon had used in its construction. To them this new temple was never going to be as large or as beautiful as what they had known (cf. Hag. 2:3). They were glad the temple was going to be rebuilt, but they were saddened by the fact that it would not be as glorious as what they recalled. They were sad that the glory would not be the same, but they were also grieving over the fact that the beauty of what Solomon had built no longer existed.

When sin enters into a life and causes its inevitable destruction, there is still a place for mercy and restoration. God will forgive, but sometimes what has been lost will never be completely recovered. There will always be a sense of what might have been had the sin not intervened. That was the situation these older men faced. They were glad for the restoration, but they were sad that sin had destroyed a very beautiful and important part of Jewish history.

It is important for Christian young people to live lives of holiness and separation from sin. We must never fall into the trap of thinking that what we do does not matter because of the availability of forgiveness. God will forgive, but at times the scars that are left by sin can never be removed. A person who abuses his body with drugs or alcohol can certainly be forgiven, but the effects of that abuse will remain with him. In many cases relationships that have been broken by sin can never be completely restored. We can end up like this group of people who were both rejoicing in the mercy of God and grieving over what they had lost.

How much better it would have been had the Captivity and subsequent destruction of the temple never taken place! Similarly, it is much better for a person to avoid sin and the sorrow it brings. Purity and holiness will prevent many tears in the life of one who trusts in Christ.

The mixture of shouting and weeping produced a sound that could be heard far away. Anyone living near the city of Jerusalem was aware of the celebration that was taking place. Laying the foundation of the temple meant the start of a process of spiritual renewal for the people of the remnant. They were not just back in the land; they were now doing what God had sent them there to do. No longer would they be without a place of worship. Instead, they would once again be able to keep the Law of Moses as God had intended them to.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did seven months pass before the work began on the temple?
2. Why were the Levites organized into three groups?
3. Why does God's work always require divine and human effort?
4. How did the music of praise encourage those who worked?
5. Why was Psalm 136 so appropriate for antiphonal singing?
6. How does God want us to view the abilities He gives to all?
7. Why were the older men in tears at the laying of the foundation of the restoration temple?
8. How was this temple different from the one built by Solomon?
9. Why is separation from sin so important for the believer?

—Robert A. Allen.

Celebrating with Joy

Lesson: Ezra 6:13-22

Read: Ezra 6:1-22

TIME: 516 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—“The children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16).

Lesson Exposition

Sixteen years had passed since the foundation of the temple was laid by the remnant who returned from Babylon. They had been discouraging years. Now word had arrived from Babylon that Darius had confirmed the initial decree by Cyrus allowing them to rebuild the temple. The joy with which this message was received invigorated the people and caused them to start again on their work for God.

GOING TO WORK WITH JOY— Ezra 6:13-14

There were actually a number of reasons why the people were joyful when the work on the temple resumed. The decree of Darius brought a cessation of the opposition they had faced from the neighbors who surrounded them. Tattai and Shetharboznai were the same men who had called into question their initial permission (cf. Ezra 5:3).

Once the decree arrived from Darius, they stopped their opposition to the project and instead complied quickly with the command of the king. It brought great joy to the hearts of the remnant to see peace restored with their neighbors. They did not want to come into conflict; they simply wanted

to be free to worship and live in accordance with the will of God.

The second circumstance that brought them joy was the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The fact that God sent them men who spoke to them on His behalf reminded them that He was the one who had made both their return and their work on the temple possible. God was the one who had directed Cyrus to give permission in the first place and the one who led Darius in his decision to permit the work.

Listening to the preaching of the Word of God should always be a great joy to the believer. It is good to be challenged by the Word, which was the primary ministry of Haggai. It is also good to be encouraged by the Word, a characteristic of the ministry of Zechariah. Both purposes of preaching should produce joy.

The third element that caused them to work with joy was the knowledge that they were doing the will of God. The work on the temple was in complete obedience to the “commandment of the God of Israel” (Ezra 6:14). They knew exactly what God wanted them to do and rejoiced to be living in obedience to His commands. A believer who is resisting the will of God will

never live a life of joy. But one who knows God's Word and does God's will finds satisfaction and contentment in work that is done for Him.

There was also joy in their hearts because of the support they received from foreign leaders. Cyrus had made the original decree (cf. Ezra 1:2). Darius had now confirmed that decree and added his permission. Later on, Artaxerxes would join the others in providing materials for the temple (cf. 7:20). The people were thankful that these foreign rulers wanted to see the house of God built as well.

CELEBRATING WITH JOY— Ezra 6:15-18

Joy for the completion of the work (Ezra 6:15-16). The work on the temple of the Lord, which began again by the decree of Darius, took another four-and-one-half years to complete. They finally finished it in the "sixth year of the reign of Darius the king." Haggai records that the work began in the second year of Darius (cf. 1:14-15). It had been a long project, but now the work was done. It was time for a dedication and celebration.

The entire congregation of those who had returned from Babylon participated in the celebration. The priests and Levites presided over the preparations since they were in charge of the temple. But all of the people took part in the time of worship. It is interesting that they are described as "children of the captivity" (Ezra 6:16). The reference is to the fact that they had been born in Babylon. They had gone to a land where they had never lived, and they were now worshipping in a temple that was new. They did not remember the land or the old temple, but they rejoiced in what was now their own present experience.

Joy for the opportunity for sacrifice (Ezra 6:17). The altar had been set up when the remnant first returned to the land (cf. 3:3). Now, with the completion

of the temple, all of the offerings required by Moses could be reinstated. The abundance of the offerings given at the dedication of the temple was indicative of the hearts of the people toward God. Compared to the offerings given at the dedication of the first temple, this celebration was small (cf. 1 Kings 8:63). But in relation to the size of the remnant and their financial straits, the offerings were in great abundance. God did not ask of them more than they had. They had joyful hearts because they were able to give back to God a portion of that with which He had blessed them.

The fact that twelve male goats were offered is particularly significant. Two tribes had been carried away into Babylon. The other ten tribes had been dispersed years earlier by the Assyrians. Now representatives from all twelve tribes were back in the land and rejoicing together in the reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of worship.

Joy for the provision of continual worship (Ezra 6:18). The plan that made continual worship in the temple possible had been in effect since the days of David. The priests had been assigned to divisions so that some of them were present at the temple at all times. They were there to accept the offerings from the people and to sacrifice them before God. Each of the priests belonged to one of the divisions, and the divisions served during the months of their assignment.

The Levites were organized into groups. They had responsibilities in accordance with their service in the temple. Some of them were musicians, some were doorkeepers, and others served in other ways. All of the jobs had to be done in order to keep the temple open as a place of continual worship. They did not come up with these ideas on their own. Instead, they went back to the Law of Moses and organized the jobs in the temple the way he had commanded. They were intent on doing everything in

accordance with the will of God because He was the one they worshipped.

CONTINUING WITH JOY—

Ezra 6:19-22

The celebration to dedicate the temple did not mark the end of rejoicing among God's people. Instead, they put in place elements of worship that would ensure their continued joy in the service of God.

Joy in the Passover (Ezra 6:19-20).

One of the first activities in the temple after the dedication was the celebration of the Passover. The Passover came during the first month of their year and reminded them of God's deliverance from Egypt.

One of the purposes of the Passover was to remind the people of the need for sanctification, or purification. The shedding of the blood as the Passover lambs were killed reminded them that they needed a substitute, something pure and clean that could bear their sin and die in their place. The entire ceremony pointed toward the perfect Lamb of God, who would one day come to take away the sin of the world. The priests and Levites paid special attention to this need for purity. They were aware that the mercy of God was necessary if any one of them was to stand before Him.

Joy in the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 6:21-22).

The Passover was followed immediately by the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. During this time the people camped out in shelters made of branches and leaves so that they would remember their time in the wilderness as God brought them into the Promised Land.

The priests and Levites prepared the sacrifices for these great celebrations, but all of the people ate of the feasts as they worshipped God and sought the Lord. Those who had returned from the Captivity had many reasons to rejoice in their return to the land and the restora-

tion of godly worship. They were joined by others who had separated themselves to them from the uncleanness of the Gentiles. These were either Gentiles who had come to believe in the God of Israel or some of those left in the land earlier who were now returning to faith in God. In either case, they were welcomed and joined in with the worship of God.

The Lord and His work on their behalf were the ultimate reasons for the joy in the hearts of the people. He had turned the favor of the king toward them. He had given them the opportunity to work on the temple. Now He had given them the privilege of worshipping Him and celebrating their forgiveness by means of the sacrificial system in the temple. They were overwhelmed with rejoicing over all that God had accomplished on their behalf.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How did Darius's decree bring peace to the region?
2. How did the preaching of the prophets bring joy?
3. Why was there rejoicing among the former captives?
4. How did the number of the offerings show the sincerity of the people?
5. How were all the tribes represented in the dedication?
6. What provisions were made for the continuation of worship after the dedication of the temple?
7. Why did they organize the Levites according to the Law of Moses?
8. Why was purity important in celebrating the Passover?
9. Why did they camp out during the Feast of Tabernacles?

—Robert A. Allen.

Fasting and Praying

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

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

TIME: 458 B.C.

PLACES: Ahava Canal; Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

The first half of the book of Ezra records the return to Judah under Zerubbabel. The second half records the return that was led by Ezra himself. Ezra was of the priestly tribe and was also a scribe (cf. 7:11). As a priest, he was a very godly man who is known for his fervent prayers. One of those prayers is the subject of this week’s lesson.

A TIME OF FASTING—Ezra 8:21

Not long after leaving Babylon on their journey up the Euphrates River and around the Fertile Crescent to Israel, Ezra stopped by the river Ahava. The location of that river is not known today, but it was a tributary of the great Euphrates. There he and his company stayed for three days for the purpose of holding an extended prayer meeting.

A fast to express humiliation (Ezra 8:21a). It was the desire of Ezra and all those with him to be in a proper relationship with God. They were leaving the land of captivity and returning to the Land of Promise. Their motives were spiritual, and they wanted God to know how much they honored Him. To show that honor, they entered into a fast in order to “afflict” themselves before God.

The type of affliction they were imposing on themselves was simply refraining from eating. The purpose of fasting was to show in an outward fashion the inward condition of their hearts. They longed for God more than they longed for food. They thought it was more important to approach Him in prayer than it was to assuage their own hunger pangs.

John Piper wrote, “Fasting is not a no to the goodness of food or the generosity of God in providing it. Rather, it is a way of saying, from time to time, that having more of the Giver surpasses having the gift” (*A Hunger for God*, Crossway). The people of Israel were not unthankful for what God had provided. Rather they were willing to forgo even what He had given to them in order to have more of Him.

A fast to make time for prayer (Ezra 8:21b). Eating takes time, and time is a valuable commodity for all people. The task of rising each morning, packing up a tent, gathering a crowd of people, and marching on to the next night’s destination took time. Then add to that the process of preparing and eating meals. Ezra realized that if they were to have time for a concentrated period of prayer,

they would have to stop and camp for a while. The decision to go without meals simply enabled them to spend even more time in prayer.

Fasting is always associated with fervent prayer in Scripture. Its purpose is to acknowledge our hunger for God and give us more time to spend with Him. This not just fasting to go on a diet. It is forgoing meals and meal preparation in order to use that time for a solemn approach to the throne room of God.

A TIME OF PRAYER— Ezra 8:22-23

Prayer to seek guidance and protection (Ezra 8:22). Ezra was in somewhat of a dilemma. He had approached King Artaxerxes for permission to return to the land. The king not only had granted permission but also had generously supplied him for the journey. He even gave back the silver and gold vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple. So they had some very valuable items they were carrying with them.

In approaching the king, Ezra had told him about God. He had informed the king that God was mighty and was able to punish those who rejected Him.

Now they were on their way back to Israel, but the one thing they did not have was any military protection. Ezra had been ashamed to ask for a band of soldiers to march alongside them. That was one of the reasons for the three days of prayer. They would be facing possible attacks from robbers as well as foreign armies as they marched. They needed protection, and the only source of protection available to them was the power of God.

Sometimes it is good to be backed into a corner where the only one we can trust is God. It brings us to the point that we must increase our faith because there is no other option. If Ezra had been accompanied by a band of soldiers from Babylon, he might not have been so

quick to stop and spend time in prayer.

Our prayer lives should be regular and consistent; but since we are human, they are often stronger when the difficulties around us increase. In that sense, God may be allowing the difficulties in order to remind us of the need for and privilege of prayer. Instead of depending on outside forces or our own strength, we have to depend on Him.

Prayer for assurance of His presence (Ezra 8:23). The result of the three days of fasting and prayer was a confidence that God had answered their prayer. They became convinced that God really was with them, that He would travel with them all through the four-month journey. They believed that He would guide them so that they would know the right path to take. They recognized that He would protect them even though they did not have an army.

Because of this time of fervent prayer, they were ready to move ahead and travel through dangerous territory. They were ready to face whatever came with the knowledge that God was on their side. Their time of prayer made them stronger than they would ever have been in the presence of a company of soldiers. God was shown to be mighty, and they were willing to put their trust in Him.

GOD'S ANSWER TO PRAYER— Ezra 8:31-32

Protection on the journey (Ezra 8:31). Stopping for prayer at the beginning of their return to Jerusalem did not make the journey any easier. There were still dangers along the way. But while the dangers still existed, God answered their prayer in that He provided protection for them as they went.

Ezra mentions two types of danger they faced. God protected them from enemies. Not every nation was at peace with Darius, and those who opposed the Persians would naturally oppose anyone coming from Babylon,

a Persian vassal state. As the Jews came closer to Jerusalem, there were those who did not want them coming back to reclaim their homeland. They were enemies because of their hatred for God's people. Many of them were well armed, while the group with Ezra had left without making any military preparations for the trip.

Ezra called the second group those who "lay in wait by the way" (Ezra 8:31). These were the thieves and robbers who preyed on travelers, especially in sparsely populated places. They would be after the treasures Darius had given to the Jews to carry back for the service of the temple.

God does not always eliminate all of the dangers from our lives. We still face disease and drought and natural disasters. We still need to be aware of those who are out to steal from us, for fallen human nature is always prone to sin. At the same time, we can take comfort in His protection. He will not allow anything into our lives that is not in accordance with His will. When we face dangers, we can endure them with the strength He provides. We can learn from them to increase our faith and trust Him even more.

Safe completion of the journey (Ezra 8:32). One of the requests Ezra made was for "a right way" (vs. 21). He wanted to know the best path to follow so that they would arrive in Judah safely with their families and possessions. That was another prayer God answered. Their path led them to Jerusalem, and they arrived in safety.

We should never take for granted the safety that God provides for every believer. When we do encounter trouble or get in an accident, we tend to blame God. The truth is that we have no idea of the number of times He has protected us from similar incidents. We should be just as quick to thank Him for a safe arrival as we are to ask for help when we encounter difficulty in life.

The company with Ezra had spent three days in prayer and fasting at the river Ahava (cf. Ezra 8:15, 21). Now that they had arrived in Jerusalem, they spent another three days before going to work. They may have been tired and needed to rest. But it is also probable that those three days at the end of the journey mirrored the three at the beginning. They were thankful for what God had done, and they paused to praise Him for the answers He had given to their fervent prayers back in Babylon.

Prayer is more than simply asking and receiving. It involves adoration and thanksgiving and confession as well. Prayer is our means of communication with God. He wants to hear from us, and He wants to give us what we ask as long as we are asking for those things that will benefit our spiritual lives. If we delight in Him, He will give us our delights.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Ezra's company stop at the river Ahava?
2. How does fasting demonstrate our humility before God?
3. How does fasting give us more time to spend in prayer?
4. Why did Ezra not ask for military protection?
5. Why did the items from the temple make military protection even more important?
6. How did prayer prepare them for the journey ahead?
7. How did God answer their prayers as they traveled to Jerusalem?
8. What were the dangers they faced along the way?
9. How did their safe arrival demonstrate the power of God?

—Robert A. Allen.

Gifts for the Temple

Lesson: Ezra 8:24-30

Read: Ezra 8:24-30

TIME: 458 B.C.

PLACE: Ahava Canal

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

Lesson Exposition

The temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt and the sacrifices restored. However, many of the articles for use in the temple were not available. They had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar and were still in Babylon. When Ezra prepared for his return, King Artaxerxes gave him the treasures of the temple. The value of all the treasures was great. That was one of the reasons Ezra was concerned about robbers along the journey, as we saw in the last lesson. After praying, he organized the people for the protection of the gifts for the temple. These were treasures that belonged to God.

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

The entire purpose of Ezra’s journey back to Jerusalem was to further the work of God among the remnant. He had been commissioned by the king, but his primary roles were as priest and scribe. The political decree that allowed him to return simply made possible the spiritual goals of his trip.

One of those goals involved transporting the temple treasures without suffering any loss. Not only were there robbers on the way and enemy armies

to face; there was also the possibility of greed and theft among the company itself. So Ezra chose twenty-four men he could trust. These were faithful men who had already proved themselves in service to God. Twelve of them were priests—not just any priests but those who were *chief* (Ezra 8:24) among them. Twelve were Levites, headed by Sherebiah and Hashabiah (cf. vs. 18).

These twenty-four men were entrusted with a large amount of treasure. Some had been given to Ezra by the king. That would include all the gold vessels Nebuchadnezzar had earlier taken from the temple. Other treasure had been donated by the royal household. The royal household in Babylon gave of their own substance to help furnish and decorate the temple in Jerusalem. This came because of the influence of Daniel and Nehemiah and Ezra, who served in the government and gained favor among the leaders of the land of Babylon.

A third source of treasure came from those Israelites who were staying in Babylon. “All Israel there present” (Ezra 8:25) refers to the many Jews who were living in the city and had decided

to stay. Even though they were not returning to their homeland, they were still concerned about the worship and glory of the temple. So they sent gifts for the restoration of its glory.

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

Even though the men chosen by Ezra were faithful and trustworthy, he still took proper precautions in the handling of the gold. The purpose for weighing it was to be sure that the same weight of treasure arrived in Jerusalem as was given out in Babylon. That did not mean that he distrusted those who handled the money. Instead, it was a protection for them so that no one could accuse them of taking part of the treasure.

It is very important that financial matters be handled with proper caution in the work of the Lord. Churches, for example, normally have at least two people counting offerings for the protection of all those involved. Church leaders should not be placed in situations where they can be accused or even suspected of mishandling funds. The work of the Lord should always be above reproach.

The treasures of the temple were valuable because of their gold and silver content. But they were valuable for an even more important reason. Their purpose was divine. They were for the service of God. They were made of gold and silver because those precious metals best represented the worth and value of the God the Jews worshipped. They wanted the very instruments used in His worship to symbolize His value.

Even the vessels of copper were said to be as precious as gold. The description refers to the golden brilliance of the copper, which would “glitter like gold” (Keil, *Ezra*, Eerdmans). Though it was not gold, it was polished to the point that it shone like the golden objects. The person who maintained the

copper vessels took pride in keeping them clean and shining for the Lord.

It is easy to forget that everything done for God is a spiritual service. Those who clean the church and polish the wooden pews are serving God just as much as those who lead in public worship. A caution in how we do His work and a commitment to excellence are indicative of our genuine desire to honor Him.

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

Those in charge of God’s work should be spiritual (Ezra 8:28). Ezra had a special challenge that he gave to the priests and Levites charged with the care of the temple treasures. They were not only to value the items entrusted to them; they were also to see themselves as spiritual vessels for the service of the Lord.

The vessels had been set apart for service in the temple, and so had those who handled them. Both the people and the vessels were consecrated. They had been chosen by God for this task and were therefore sanctified or set apart for His service. But that meant it was also important for them to be holy in their own lives. Their responsibility as servants of God did not end with the transportation of the temple treasures. It extended to every area of their lives. They were to be holy in what they did and what they said even when they were not carrying the gold through the journey. Their character was to be a testimony to the God they served just as much as their service.

Service to God in our day demands the same type of holiness. It is not enough to simply worship God on Sunday and then live for self the rest of the week. We cannot be holy if we draw lines between the sacred and the secular. How we work and how we play are just as important to God as how we

worship. The command “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (I Pet. 1:16) does not end at the church door.

The work of service to God should be considered spiritual (Ezra 8:29). The priests and Levites entrusted with the temple treasures had a job to do that was important to God. The challenge from Ezra was to take their task as a spiritual endeavor. They were to watch over the treasure with a carefulness that came from the realization that they were chosen as holy vessels before God. That included keeping careful records so that the items for the temple were not lost or stolen or mixed in with the other luggage people were taking to Jerusalem.

When they arrived at the end of the journey, the items entrusted to them were to be in the same condition as when they received them. They were to be delivered to the “chambers of the house of the Lord” (Ezra 8:29).

It is interesting that in the present age we have been called the “temple of God” (I Cor. 3:16). The care of our own bodies and spirits is a spiritual task entrusted to us by God Himself. What we eat and drink, as well as how we use or abuse our bodies, is a matter of spiritual concern. It should be our desire to deliver back to God lives that are holy, for that is what He has given to us in Jesus Christ.

Spiritual service to God should be accepted willingly (Ezra 8:30). The immensity of the task entrusted to the chosen priests and Levites had been clearly explained by Ezra. They would face danger because of the value of the items they carried. They would face potential criticism over how they handled the vessels. They would need to give an honest accounting of their task when they were finished. Above all, the job required a holy character since it was being done for a holy God. All of those responsibilities were accepted willingly

by this group of twenty-four men.

There was no personal financial gain for them in the process. All of the treasures they accepted were to be delivered to the temple. Their only profit came from the knowledge that they were doing a spiritual service to the God they loved.

In ministry today there is a danger of seeing it as a means of personal gain rather than as an opportunity for service. The gain may not always be financial. A person may sing because of the fame or honor associated with musical talent. A person may give with the motive of having his name on a building. Another person may accept an office in the church because of the recognition it brings. How much better to serve simply because we love God and have yielded our will to doing whatever He asks of us! That is the type of willing service that pleases the heart of God.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the king make Ezra’s spiritual goals possible?
2. Why was it important to choose faithful men to guard the temple treasure?
3. Who had contributed to the plan to beautify the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem?
4. Why was it important that the men who guarded the treasure be holy before God?
5. How could the job of physically carrying treasure be considered a spiritual task?
6. Why did these men choose to accept the dangerous job that Ezra required of them?
7. What benefit did the men receive from this act of service?

—Robert A. Allen.

The Festival of Booths

Lesson: Nehemiah 8:13-18

Read: Nehemiah 7:73—8:18

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

The wall had been completed. Now that the city was safe, the people could worship in peace. That brought great joy. It was not just the safety that caused them to rejoice, however. Their greatest joy came from the understanding of the Word of God and the obedience to the Word that brought them into fellowship with Him.

JOY COMES FROM GOD'S WORD—Neh. 8:13

When attention is paid to it (Neh. 8:13a). During the building of the wall, it had been difficult to spend time hearing the Word of God. But that had been one of the purposes for which the wall had been built. The people needed safety from those who did not want them to worship God.

Once protection was assured, they immediately turned their attention to the Word. The political and religious leaders came together to hear the scribe Ezra read and explain what God had communicated to them. Bible reading was not just a religious ritual. They were not reading the Book as a part of worship because that was what everyone expected them to do. They were listening and paying attention be-

cause this was a word from God Himself. It revealed the way God wanted them to live now that they were back in the land He had promised them.

There will be periods of trouble in a person's life when time will be consumed by the necessity of providing protection. But we can prepare for those times by giving attention to the Word during times of peace. The very safety that characterizes most of our lives should be an incentive to seek the knowledge of God. What often happens is that we do not recognize our need for Him until we are in the middle of trouble, and at those times it is difficult to spend time in study. How much better it would be to prepare for the difficult times by giving attention to His Word when we have time available!

When we understand it (Neh. 8:13b). The Bible is not an obscure book full of incomprehensible sayings. It is a book God gave with the intention that it be understood. The leaders of Israel gathered to read the book for the purpose of understanding. Copies of the Law were not available except in the temple, so the reading had to be done in a public gathering. As Ezra

read the Word and explained it, the people had no problem understanding what God wanted them to do.

The main reason people fail to understand the Bible is simply that they do not read it. Even the more difficult passages become clear as a study of the Word helps a person compare Scripture with Scripture. In addition to that, the Holy Spirit gives insight into the Word. As a person obeys what he already understands of the Word, the rest of it starts to make more sense as well. The important thing is to start reading and studying, allowing God to speak through His revelation.

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

Understanding God's Word brings conviction (Neh. 8:14). The Law of Moses had instituted a series of feasts that the people of God were to observe yearly. During the latter years of the kings and on into the Captivity, those feasts had not been kept. Even when people remembered the feasts, they did not celebrate them the way Moses had commanded.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths was to be celebrated over the course of an entire week (cf. Lev. 23:34). The Jews were to move out of their homes and live for that week in simple structures made from branches. The week of camping out reminded them of their deliverance from Egypt and the journey through the desert. It provided a physical experience that caused them to rejoice in the provision God had made for them during that time.

Reading the Word brought them under the conviction of the fact that they had not been doing what Moses had commanded. When they became convicted, they started to seek a remedy. Rather than complain about the conviction, they sought to make things right between God and them.

Sometimes a person will stop growing

in faith simply because he comes to a command in the Word of God that he understands but refuses to obey. The purpose of conviction is not to make a person upset. The purpose of conviction is to make him joyful because he understands what he should do and makes the decision to obey the Word of God.

Conviction that leads to action brings joy (Neh. 8:15). The leaders who were listening to Ezra read the Word understood that this command of Moses was not just for them. The entire nation was to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. So they did not keep the message to themselves but instead had a desire for all the people to participate in this step of obedience that would bring them joy in their united worship of God.

God gives positions of leadership for the purpose of encouraging others to obey Him and live lives of joy. Parents need to encourage their children to understand and obey the Word. Husbands and wives need to encourage each other to grow in the Lord. Pastors and church leaders should have as their primary purpose the teaching of the Word so that people will know and do what is right. As believers, we should never keep the Word to ourselves but should share it with those around us, including the lost who need Christ as Saviour.

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

United in worship (Neh. 8:16). Those who heard the Word from Ezra shared it with the people. When the people understood the Word, they obeyed immediately. The preparations for the feast followed the clear instructions from Moses. People gathered branches and constructed simple shelters in their own yards and even in the streets of the city. The festive at-

mosphere spread throughout the remnant who had returned from Babylon.

You could not walk through the streets of Jerusalem during that week without being reminded of God's provision in rescuing them from Egypt. That was the purpose for the feast, and the united action of the people assured the success of what God had planned. It reminded them that all protection, even that from their newly completed wall, was a gift from God. That was exactly the encouragement they needed as they faced the task of rebuilding their land after the years of captivity.

United in praise (Neh. 8:17). There were times during the period of the kings when the Feast of Tabernacles *had* been observed. But the nation had not been united in its desire to obey God completely during those years. Not since the days of Joshua had the entire nation built booths and camped in them for an entire week. The fact that they were doing it this time caused them to greatly rejoice.

As a nation, they spent an entire week doing nothing but praising God. Their actions during the day were focused on worship. These were holidays in the right sense of the word—holy days. Work ceased so that they could honor God with their time. Meals were prepared as feasts of praise to God. Their time with friends and neighbors was enjoyed with the knowledge that honoring Him was foremost in all their minds and hearts.

Time spent in united worship will always bring rejoicing when people see the importance of honoring God. If the focus shifts to what people are wearing or who is singing a solo or whether someone has chosen to sit in the place where I usually sit, those times of worship will no longer be times of great gladness. It is the united praise and worship of God's people that brings strength to those who have gathered.

A greater thirst for the Word (Neh. 8:18). The week off from work served the purpose of uniting people in worship. But a key element of that worship was further study of the Scriptures. Every day Ezra "read in the book of the law of God." The people found great joy in learning from God's Word.

Sometimes churches draw a distinction between the worship portion of a service and the preaching time. Rather than separate them, we should see the preaching of the Word as a major part of worship. Singing should prepare our hearts to hear the Word. Prayer and testimonies and special music should awaken in us the desire to understand and obey what we learn from God's Word. We should willingly set aside all other distractions so that we can concentrate our complete attention on the message God wants us to hear.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the completion of the wall make worship possible?
2. Why did the leaders want Ezra to read the Law to them?
3. Why do we sometimes wait to study the Bible until we are in the middle of trouble?
4. Why do we find joy in obeying what God has written?
5. What is God's purpose in convicting us through the Word?
6. How can leaders encourage others to obey the Word?
7. How did God's people encourage each other by uniting in the observance of the feast?
8. How did obedience to the Word of God create a thirst for greater knowledge of the Word?

—Robert A. Allen.

Corporate Confession of Sins

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

Read: Nehemiah 9:1-37

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

An understanding of the Word of God led the people of Israel to restore worship. It also convinced them of the need for corporate confession. The Captivity had taken place because of their sin as a nation. Now that they had returned, they did not want to incur the wrath of God and be faced with additional judgment because of sin. They needed to confess sin in order to be restored to fellowship with God.

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

God’s holiness (Neh. 9:2). The people’s study of the Word of God began to open their eyes as to who He truly was. They recognized His holiness and their own need to separate from those who did not worship Him. One of the sins in the former days had been their willingness to assimilate the religions of the people among whom they lived. A holy God could not be worshipped in the same ways the heathen worshipped their gods. So separation had to take place.

The great divide between the people and a holy God came because of their

sin. He had given them the law to show them their sinful state. They had never kept the law but instead had disobeyed God at every turn. They worshipped false gods, desecrated the temple, and refused to observe the Sabbath. A righteous God could only bring judgment on them; anything else would not have been just, and God is always just.

God’s omnipotence (Neh. 9:6). The knowledge that God created all things gave the people an understanding of His omnipotence. He had the power to create everything in the universe, both in the heavens and on the earth. Not only did He create them; He also preserved them. The fact that summer and winter, springtime and harvest, came every year was not due to the appeasement of the gods of nature, as the heathen believed. It happened because God’s power preserved the earth and maintained the laws of nature.

All of the created world praised God and gave Him honor. Even the “host of heaven” (Neh. 9:6) worshipped Him. So it was foolish to worship the stars and sun if they were giving honor to the Creator. The sin of worshipping the creation instead of the Creator had been one of the great failures of the nation.

God's faithfulness (Neh. 9:7). Abraham is singled out as the first in a long line of those to whom God proved Himself faithful. The record of the history of Israel recorded in the Word should have reminded them constantly of the faithfulness of God. They had forgotten His promises to them because they refused to remember His faithfulness to others. Once they became convinced of His faithfulness, it became easy to know that everything He had said about their future was also true.

One of the steps toward confession was to compare God's faithfulness with their own. He always kept His word, but they had often broken their promises to Him. He had remained faithful even when they disobeyed Him. They had proved faithless even during those times when He was blessing them.

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

In the history of Israel, the greatest example of their need for God came from their time of slavery in Egypt. God's redemption of the nation from slavery stood as the epitome of His mercy and kindness toward them.

During the years in Egypt, there was nothing the nation could do for itself. They were totally dominated by the pharaoh and his armies. They had no rights as citizens. They labored under taskmasters who were cruel and uncaring. The only one to whom they could turn for help was God.

Because of the abject need, the Exodus stood in their history as a shining example of what God could do for them. He could engage the natural world to work on their behalf as He did when He sent the plagues on Egypt. He could destroy the army that kept them in submission as He did in the Red Sea. He could demonstrate His power over the powerful pharaoh. He could give freedom to a people who had no freedom.

All of these events had given God "a name" (Neh. 9:10). That means that the Exodus had made Him famous as a deliverer. Not only Israel but all of the nations around them knew who God was because of His power on Israel's behalf. Now they were once again in great need; so they confessed that need before Almighty God.

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

Sin brings judgment (Neh. 9:30). Those who returned from Babylon were very aware of the reason for their seventy years of captivity. God had been patient with His people for many years as king after king served false gods. He had continued to send prophets to call them back to Him even when they refused to listen. So the day came when He could no longer forbear, and the Captivity was the result. He gave them into the hand of their enemies.

The fact that God is long-suffering causes some people to think that He is not concerned about sin. They think they can disobey God and not suffer the consequences. While some sin brings immediate suffering, there are times when the results of sin are not instantaneous. When that happens, sin should still be confessed, for the justice of God assures us that eventually all sin will bring the sinner pain and sorrow.

Sin can be forgiven (Neh. 9:31). The mercy of God was another great attribute that the people had learned from their study of the Word. He had demonstrated His mercy on many occasions throughout their history. They had seen it evidenced in the fact that not all of them had died in Babylon. The very fact that they were back in the land was evidence of the mercy of God. He had not forsaken them even while they were in captivity in Babylon. His grace, which they did not deserve, was still present, and now they were back in the land.

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

A need for guidance (Neh. 9:32).

The experience of the people during the past seventy years had convinced them of their need for God. Their trouble had come from their enemies the Babylonians, but the reason for that trouble had been their disobedience to God. They did not consider that to be a small thing, and they wanted God to know that they understood their guilt.

Confession always involves agreeing with God about our sin. As long as we downplay the significance of sin, true confession will not take place.

Personal guilt (Neh. 9:33-34). Even though the sins of the past had brought about the Captivity, the remnant remained conscious of their own sin as well. They did not excuse themselves by accusing their parents. They acknowledged that God, in perfect justice, was right in punishing sin—not only the sins of the past but their own wickedness as well.

Confession takes its rightful place in worship only when personal guilt is faced. We are told that forgiveness comes when we confess our sins (1 John 1:9). Coming to God about someone else's sin will not bring a person forgiveness. We must acknowledge our own evil hearts before Him.

Corporate guilt (Neh. 9:35). This prayer of the people of Israel admitted both personal and corporate guilt. As a nation, they had failed to follow the guidance God had provided to them through His Word. God had blessed kings by giving them the throne, but they had failed to serve Him. He had blessed His people by allowing them to possess a "large and fat land," but they had disparaged His blessing and complained about His provision. Instead of living the holy lives He desired, they rebelled (cf. Isa. 1:21-23).

Thankfulness for mercy (Neh. 9:36). During their time of confession, the people were acutely aware of their own position before Almighty God. They had been redeemed from captivity in Babylon. They had returned to the land—but not as kings. They were servants. They were servants to the king of Persia, who still ruled over them. They did not yet have freedom, but they did have mercy. They were back in the land and were eating the "fruit thereof." God had blessed them, and they did not want that blessing to cease.

True confession will include a trust in God for the future. Guilt should not leave a believer in despair. Instead, it should remind him of the abundance of forgiveness available through the Son of God. It should cause us to seek cleansing and rejoice with thanksgiving that God has promised to forgive us when we come and confess our sins.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did God's people need to separate from strangers?
2. How does the created world show honor to God?
3. What happens when we compare God's faithfulness to our own?
4. How did conditions in Egypt reveal a need for God?
5. How did the Exodus make God famous?
6. Why did God eventually come to the point of allowing His people to be taken captives?
7. What is the inevitable result of sin?
8. Why is it important to be honest with God about our own sin?
9. Why should we never allow guilt to cause us to despair?

—Robert A. Allen.

Dedication of the Wall

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

Read: Nehemiah 12:27-43

TIME: 445 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

On the day of the dedication of the wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah organized a great celebration. The entire remnant joined together in worship of God. The city resounded with the thanksgiving that sprang from the hearts of the people in light of what God had done for them.

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

From the very beginning of the temple services, it had been the responsibility of the Levites to aid in worship. They were the doorkeepers, the incense makers, the ones who prepared the consecrated bread, the musicians, and the singers (cf. I Chron. 9:14-34). All of those ministries worked together to provide the people and priests with the elements necessary for worship and praise. When Nehemiah began to plan his day of celebration, he made sure that the Levites would be present. “Cymbals, psalteries, and . . . harps” (Neh. 12:27) are representative of the estimated thirty different musical instruments in use at that time in the temple. Many of them had been invented by David and used since the time of his reign.

Many of those who returned from Babylon had settled outside Jerusalem. They were called back for the dedication so that they could be involved in the worship preparations. Along with playing musical instruments, the Levites were also those who made up the choirs that would participate on that day.

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

The main reason for celebration at that particular time was the completion of the wall. But there were many other reasons to rejoice as well. They were dwelling in safety after many years of struggle. It was possible for them to live in villages built around Jerusalem. If danger did surface again, they now had the option of fleeing into the city for the safety of the wall. That was a great blessing for each of the families in the land.

Another reason for thanksgiving was the godly leadership now in place. There were priests and Levites who were willing to purify themselves before God. There were men like Nehemiah and Ezra who were available to teach them the Word and lead them in public

confession of sin. Because of that, the people were also pure before God.

The very fact that purification was available was a great blessing. The sacrifices had been restored, and people were once again approaching God through the blood offerings that reminded them of their need for a substitute. They knew that God would one day provide the perfect Lamb, and they were looking forward to that time and His coming.

The spiritual awareness of parents was being shared with their children. A new generation accepted the responsibility of worshipping God and joined with the ones who had returned from Babylon for that purpose. They were the sons and daughters of the return.

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

The presence of others will encourage the giving of thanks (Neh. 12:31-32). Nehemiah's plan involved two great choirs, but the choirs did not carry the burden of worship alone. Along with them were the leaders of the people. Walking with the choir that went around the top of the wall to the right were "half of the princes of Judah." The ones who were actually doing the singing and playing of instruments knew that they were supported by the leadership.

Sometimes in churches the worship gets delegated to a few people who have musical talent. It is not wrong for such individuals to lead in worship, but it is important for the entire body of the church, including the leadership, to participate. The unity of fellowship that results from corporate worship will be a tremendous encouragement to the entire church. Those who lack musical talent can still be involved through Scripture reading, public prayer, and even congregational singing. When everyone sings, a person who does not feel he sings well can join in and not worry about anything except praising God.

The presence of others will remind us of why we are thankful (Neh. 12:33-34).

The list of names in these verses includes those who had built the wall on which they were walking (cf. chap. 3). They were the ones who through their hard work had made the day of dedication possible. God had used them in the physical carving and placing of the stones. The wall was large enough that these great choirs could walk on top of them; so we know it was a huge project. With these men along, the people had a visual reminder of who deserved their thanks.

The presence of others will aid in the giving of thanks (Neh. 12:35-36).

The Levites encouraged the entire company by leading them in song. Those who had the ability to play the trumpet led the way. Others with "the musical instruments of David" played right along with them. Because of the music, the entire company willingly joined in the praise and worship of God.

Worship music should not be confused with performance. There is a time and place for a musician to perform, and concerts are appropriate even in the church. But the use of music in worship should be for the encouragement and participation of the entire congregation. Even if a soloist is singing, a congregation can listen to the words and praise God right along with the singer. It would be similar to listening to a public prayer and saying amen right along with the one actually speaking. The difference is that the performance focuses attention on the performer, while the worshipper focuses attention on God, the One being worshipped.

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

The second choir went around the top of the wall to the left. As the choirs began to sing and the instruments be-

gan to play, the effect was antiphonal. One group echoed back the praise that came from the other company traveling in the opposite direction. When they came to the gate of the temple, they joined together into one massive choir and entered the gates of the temple with a mighty chorus of praise (cf. Ps. 100:4).

Nehemiah traveled with the second choir, along with half of the people. Their purpose, which paralleled the purpose of the first group, was to give thanks. The entire day was more than just a dedication of a wall. It was a day of heartfelt praise for the One who was the reason for all their success. God was the recipient of their thanks.

True worship is ultimately a matter of the heart. A person can attend a worship service, sing along with a crowd, listen to the Word being read, and even pray without really worshipping at all. Unless a person is right with God, his worship remains empty. That is why this day was one of such great joy; it had been preceded by a time of confession.

True worship is also a time of personal sacrifice. The nation did not come to God empty-handed on the day of dedication. They came with the sacrifices He had commanded. Those sacrifices reminded the people of their sin and their need for forgiveness. They also reminded them of the reconciliation with God that He would make possible through the coming Messiah. That in itself was a tremendous reason for thanksgiving.

True worship results in a joy that comes from God. Knowing they were forgiven and knowing that He was pleased with their obedience filled their hearts with great joy. Joy was not something the nation had known for many years. They had lived under the wrath of God during the days of the wicked kings. They had mourned the loss of their nation during the days of the Captivity. But now they were filled with the joy of the Lord because they were once again in the place where He desired them to be.

True worship is a testimony to others around us. The worship of the men who were on the wall spread first of all to their families. They recognized the hand of God in the blessings they were experiencing, and that brought joy to their hearts as well. Then the sound of joy spread to those who were far away. The enemies who had opposed the building of the temple and the building of the wall were not happy that God had brought them joy. But they were aware of what God was doing in their lives.

When the joy of the Lord begins to affect the heart of a believer, it will spread to others as well. Those in our family will know that He is at work in our lives, and the unsaved world will be aware of His presence as well. Joyful hearts provide a wonderful means of sharing a testimony of what God means to us.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the Levites make the praise of others possible?
2. Why was the completion of the wall a reason for thanksgiving?
3. Why were the people grateful for the experience of purification?
4. Why was leadership a reason for giving thanks?
5. How did people encourage one another to give praise to God?
6. What part did music play in the worship service at the dedication of the wall?
7. What kind of music resulted from dividing the choir into two groups?
8. How was God the source of the joy people experienced?
9. How did the joy of the people spread to others around them?

—Robert A. Allen.

Sanctifying the Lord's Day

Lesson: Nehemiah 13:15-22

Read: Nehemiah 13:4-31

TIME: about 420 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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

Lesson Exposition

The temple had been rebuilt. The altar was restored, so sacrifices could be offered. The wall was finished and dedicated, so now the people could worship in peace. But there remained one important lesson concerning worship that needed to be emphasized. Worship and service to God did not take place just in the temple. The Jews' dedication to God needed to impact every part of their lives, including the way they conducted their business. Conducting business on the Sabbath Day showed that they were not giving God the honor He deserved.

HONOR GOD IN BUSINESS DEALINGS—Neh. 13:15

One of the purposes of the Sabbath Day was to allow people time for worship. By setting aside their business concerns, they could spend time in family worship, bring sacrifices to the temple, and use a day of rest to commune with God. But the people of Judah were not just working on the Sabbath; they were allowing that work to interfere with God's purpose for their lives.

Some of the work done on the Sabbath was done in private. Treading

winepresses would normally have been done in a person's own yard. The people apparently felt that when the grapes were ripe, they needed to be turned into juice. The work could not wait even one day. But God had told them not to work on the Sabbath (cf. Exod. 20:10). That day belonged to God and was set aside for worshipping Him.

Others did not even try to keep their disobedience private. They loaded up their donkeys with merchandise and brought it right into Jerusalem. The marketplace did not close even on the Sabbath Day because they kept selling. During the years in captivity, they had become accustomed to the ways of the Babylonians. No one there kept the Sabbath; it was just like any other day. That custom had returned with them to the land. But now they had been taught by Ezra and should have known better. They knew the Word of God and simply chose not to obey.

Sometimes believers try to draw a line between the secular and the sacred. They think they can live for God while at church but conduct their business without regard for His truth. Nehemiah's desire was that the people's religious be-

liefs would permeate the workplace. They were to honor God in the way they ran their businesses, and Sabbath breaking was an obvious indication that they were not choosing that option.

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

Testimony can be ruined by business dealings (Neh. 13:16). The remnant lived in the midst of nations where God was not honored. One of God's purposes for Israel as a nation was to be a testimony to those people of the power and majesty of God. They were to live in such a way that the nations around them would also come to know God. Instead, they ruined their testimony by not obeying God themselves in their business practices.

The markets were supposed to be idle on the Sabbath Day. If the people of Judah had simply refused to buy anything on the Sabbath, that would have happened—there would have been no reason to open shop. But the men from Tyre knew that they could make money on the Sabbath; so they set out their fish and other items even though they knew it was against the law. They could depend on Israelites to come and buy.

Those who know Christ as Saviour actually have the opportunity to influence the marketplace through their purchasing power. Because we live in an increasingly secular society, we may not have the impact that the people of Judah possessed. But making moral choices in the music we download or the entertainment venues we visit will still have a monetary impact.

Fellowship with God can be affected by business dealings (Neh. 13:17-18). Nehemiah's great concern was for the relationship between God and His people. Refusing to honor the Sabbath Day had been one of the major reasons for the Captivity. It was an obvious way in which people claimed

to honor God with their mouths but dishonored Him in their actions.

Nehemiah had no problem describing their actions as sin. They were acting in disregard to a clear command in the law, and disobedience was evil. They were destroying their fellowship with God through their activities while they continued coming to the temple with sacrifices and claiming to worship.

Sin will always break a person's fellowship with God. Refusing to recognize disobedience as sin simply compounds the problem. Stealing from an employer by taking extra time on a coffee break is just as much a sin as pilfering from the cash register. A boss who cheats employees by taking a kickback from an insurance company is sinning just as much as a person who mugs someone in the alley. A believer must be honest before God in every aspect of his business dealings.

Respect for God can be demonstrated through business dealings (Neh. 13:19-21). As a leader of the nation, Nehemiah had a responsibility to enforce the laws of God. He ordered that the gates of Jerusalem be closed at the beginning of the Sabbath, which meant at sundown on Friday evening. He ordered his own servants to keep everyone out from then until the end of the Sabbath on Saturday evening. If the people could not bring their merchandise into the city, the markets would not open. His purpose in all of this was to show respect for the Lord's Day and therefore respect for the Lord Himself.

If God's people had simply refrained from buying and selling on the Sabbath, the command to shut the gates would not have become necessary. They could not discipline themselves to keep the law, so it became Nehemiah's job to enforce the Sabbath rest by legal means. Even today God desires that our hearts be right with Him and that we choose obedience rather than rebellion. When those in authority find

it necessary to make rules, it often is because people will not do what is right willingly. We chafe against the rules without ever realizing that our own actions have made them necessary.

It was not just the people of God who were impacted by the new rules. The foreign merchants who could not get into the city set up shop outside the walls. Perhaps they did not think the command concerning the gates would be strictly enforced. Maybe they thought they could still sell to the people who lived outside the walls. But Nehemiah was not about to put up with that, either. He warned them and even threatened them until they stayed away from Jerusalem on the Sabbath.

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

God's business should be done with purity (Neh. 13:22a). The unethical business dealings taking place in the city of Jerusalem had a spiritual cause. The men who should have been teaching the people and encouraging them to do right had allowed their own spiritual character to deteriorate. They needed a spiritual cleansing.

The Levites had been the leaders in worship during the dedication of the wall. They had led the people in celebration and thanksgiving. Now they were leading the people in violation of the very law of God they claimed to teach. If they did not serve God with their actions, how could the people be expected to obey?

God's business should be done with fervency (Neh. 13:22b). Even though Nehemiah was willing to use his own men to guard the gates, he knew that it should have been the responsibility of the spiritual leaders. They should have had a zeal for the purity of the Sabbath Day. They needed to be the ones who were guarding the gates and preserving the sanctity of the Sabbath.

Guarding the gates would not be an

easy task. The people and the pagan merchants were used to having their own way, and economics is always a strong motivator. They would be losing an entire day's wages if the gates remained closed. But Nehemiah reminded them of the honor they owed to God.

That honor owed to God was the motivation for Nehemiah as well. He did not really care whether people were upset with him. His concern was for his standing before God. He wanted God to remember him and what he had done for the glory of God.

How we conduct our business should be a great testimony to the work God is doing in our lives. It is important for a believer to place a greater value on the approval of God than on the accumulation of wealth. In the end, each one of us will go through life either pursuing money or honoring God.

—Robert A. Allen.

QUESTIONS

1. How did God want His people to use time on the Sabbath?
2. Did it make a difference to God whether disobedience was public or private?
3. How did the people ruin their testimony by their business dealings?
4. What should have kept the markets from opening on the Sabbath?
5. How did their business choices affect the people's fellowship with God?
6. Why did the merchants continue camping outside the walls?
7. What role should the Levites have played in this problem?
8. What determined Nehemiah's attitude toward business?

—Robert A. Allen.