

February 17

Scriptures: Read Ezra 3 & 4

Key Verse: “The people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.” (Ezra 3:1)

Overview

True worship to the Lord God was restored under the leadership of Jeshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the civil leader. All the people who returned from the Exile had unity of mind and purpose, as well as enthusiasm, since the Spirit of God had commissioned them and they had the same vision. To accomplish anything for the kingdom of God, there must be unity. Their first action was to rebuild the altar of the Lord that they might worship Him, offer Him the regular sacrifices, and observe all the appointed feasts according to the Law of Moses (3:2-5). They were beginning to understand that God could be worshipped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) and be present in their midst, even if the Temple had not yet been rebuilt; for the Creator of the universe could never be confined in a man-made structure.

In the meantime, they were gathering the various supplies needed to begin the reconstruction (3:7). They were also raising money for the treasury, so they could pay the workers and buy the necessary supplies. Many gave generous offerings, over and above their tithes, “according to their ability” (2:69; 3:7). This expresses the biblical principle of giving to the Lord; it is not the amount you give but the proportion of the gift compared to what is left over.

When the foundations of the new Temple were finally laid, they had a service of dedication and thanksgiving to God, in which there was much joy, as well as mixed emotions. The most elderly Jews remembered the splendour of the former Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. Their tears may have been from sadness that the new Temple would never be as glorious as the one they remembered; or they may have been tears of overwhelming joy in finally seeing the answer to decades of prayer.

As the Jews began the restoration of true worship, they no doubt prayed for divine protection, for they were wary of possible opposition from the foreigners who now occupied Israelite territory (3:3). These were people from other nations whom the conquering nations (first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians) had imported to replace the Israelites who went into captivity (cf. 2 Kings 17:24). These foreigners in the land had mixed their heathen religions with the worship of God, and many had intermarried with Israelites (they later became known as “Samaritans”).

From the events in chapter four, we see that the fears of the Jews were justified. The foreigners were described as “adversaries”, and yet they approached the Jews under the guise of friendliness (4:1-2). Satan, the great adversary of mankind, often comes with deception, in the form of an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:3,14-15), especially when the people of God are following Him and having true success. The adversaries claimed that they sought God just as did the Jews, but Zerubbabel knew this was untrue. The Jews worshipped the one and only true God. These adversaries believed in territorial gods, and since they were living in the territory of the God of Israel, they sacrificed to Him. Their worship was corrupt and syncretistic, for the God of Israel was just one of the many gods they worshipped.

With wisdom and courage, Zerubbabel and the leaders would not compromise, and they refused the heathen's offer to help. With this stand of faith that overcame the enemy, Satan was not allowed to infiltrate their ranks and bring disunity and ultimate disaster (cf. 1 John 4:4; 5:4-5). It is a dangerous thing when the people of God compromise with the world and mix with those things or people displeasing to God. The principle still applies; we have to maintain purity and be separated unto God, aware of Satan's tactics (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:11), prepared to resist him (James 4:7), and equipped to attack with the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:10-17).

When the foreigners were rejected, their true colours were seen; they immediately schemed ways to discourage the people of God. They even went so far as to hire men to frustrate their work and were successful in causing a fifteen-year delay (4:5, 24); but the Lord's will was eventually accomplished.

Satan is called "the accuser" (Revelation 12:10) and "the father of lies" (John 8:44). This is exactly what was reflected in the letters the adversaries wrote to the Persian kings. Ezra is now relating the events that happened after the Temple was completed and when the city walls were under construction during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes. The purpose appears to give further justification for Zerubbabel's refusal of the foreigners' help (4:2-3). These adversaries finally obtained a decree to stop them from rebuilding the city walls. Now Satan was like a roaring lion, seeking to devour and bring destruction (1 Peter 5:8-9; John 10:10). The lying accusers were quick to go up with violence to Jerusalem and put a stop to any building.

Prayer

Thank You for godly leaders in Your work, O Lord. Please give us unity in our faith and purpose, so we may support Your chosen leaders.