

February 18

Scriptures: Read Ezra 5 & 6

Key Verse: "... the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy." (Ezra 6:16)

Overview

Ezra now resumes the story of the rebuilding of the Temple (from 4:5). The adversaries of the Jews were successful in frustrating the building project for a few years. It was a weakness of the Jews to cease building and thus they yielded to the will of Satan. God, however, intervened by raising up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah (Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). Their messages from the Lord encouraged and stirred the people's faith and zeal, inspiring them to again take up the task of rebuilding the Temple. Haggai rebuked the people for building their own houses and ignoring the House of the Lord. Satan succeeded in getting their priorities mixed up, but because of the persistence of Haggai and Zechariah, the people heeded God's voice and, by His Spirit, were stirred to work on the House of the Lord (Haggai 1:4, 12-14). Through the prophets, the Lord confirmed His will and did not leave His people in doubt. Now, with fresh zeal and the Holy Spirit's enabling (Zechariah 4:6), no amount of opposition could stop them; they continued their work with renewed enthusiasm, since the Lord's watchful eye was upon them (5:5).

The Persian governor, Tattenai, wrote a letter to king Darius, but it was not as malicious as the one written later by the internal adversaries of the Jews (4:9-16); nonetheless, it was sent with the hope that Darius would issue a decree to stop the Temple's construction. In the providence of God, Darius found the decree from Cyrus (from a different dynasty) permitting the Jews to rebuild the Temple to their God. This was an important discovery, since the decrees of a king were considered unalterable and were to be honoured and respected (cf. Daniel 6:8). Again, the Lord was at work in the heart of a king (Proverbs 21:1); first Cyrus and now Darius supported the building project of the Temple. Darius even went so far as to command that the tribute due him from that area went toward the building fund. Although he was polytheistic (believing in many gods), Darius had great respect for the God of Israel, and he gives a reason for allowing the Temple to be built: "offer sacrifices... and pray for the [successful and long] life of the king and his sons" (6:10; cf. 1 Timothy 2:1-3; 1 Peter 2:13-15). Darius also declared that if anyone disobeyed his orders, they would be hanged (6:11). This statement was likely directed at Tattenai, who clearly was not in favour of the Jews rebuilding the Temple. The local adversaries (Samaritans) had likely influenced him against the Jews.

This letter must have come as a surprise to Tattenai, and he had no choice but to obey Darius. The attempts of the enemies were now frustrated. In less than four years from the time of Darius' favourable reply, the Jews completed the Temple because of the Holy Spirit's enabling, the encouragement of the prophets of God, and the aid of the kings, Cyrus and Darius. King Artaxerxes is also given credit by Ezra, since he was the king at the time of Ezra's writing and helped to maintain the Temple (6:14; 7:15-21).

With great joy, the people dedicated the Temple, and thus the plan of God was accomplished. It is interesting to note that at the dedication service there was no fire from Heaven to consume the

sacrifice as there was with the Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon; nor was there any great manifestation of divine power, as there had been in the past (e.g. with Moses, Elijah, Elisha, etc.). Also, the high priest no longer had the guidance of the Urim and Thummim to discover the will of God (2:63, no answer came; Exodus 28:30). During this time period of Ezra and Nehemiah, God was gracious to still send a few prophets (Malachi was the last), but then there were approximately four hundred years of silence until God's voice was heard again through John the Baptist (Malachi 3:1; Luke 1:76). The reason for this was that, from the time of Ezra, the children of Israel were to begin using the divine revelation of God's Holy written Word (the Law, and the writings of the prophets) to receive God's guidance and have their hearts stirred and prepared for the coming Messiah. God raised up Ezra for the specific purpose of teaching His Word (tradition also credits Ezra with collecting the Old Testament canon of Scripture as a unit), that it might stir their consciences and speak to their hearts. The children of Israel had come into a new era, the era of the still small voice, wherein they were to learn to more fully walk by faith and not by sight.

The dedication took place in the month of Adar, the last month of the year (6:15-16), just in time to celebrate the Passover in the first month (6:19; Exodus 12). In accordance with the Law of Moses, the priest, Levites, and lay worshippers sanctified themselves that they might be ceremonially clean (both outwardly and inwardly), in order to partake of the holy meal. They were careful to exclude the sinful, defiled people of the land, since that which is consecrated to God cannot mix with that which is not. In their obedience, the Lord gave them great joy, and they were sure to give the Lord the glory for making it all possible. Truly, with the Lord, everything is possible.

Prayer

Lord, Your joy is our strength. We celebrate Your goodness. Help us to keep our priorities straight, putting You first and thus enjoying Your success.