

**EZRA**

Please turn in your Bibles this evening to the book of Ezra as we continue our study through the Word of God. We have just finished up our study of I and II Chronicles and as we have seen, these books took us through the period of Kings, focusing on the Southern Kingdom of Judah all the way to their Babylonian captivity. And II Chronicles ended with God's promise of restoration for Israel coming to pass after 70 years of captivity. In 539 B. C. Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian Empire and in 538 B. C. the first group of Jewish captives returned home.

Now what is interesting is that the book of Ezra opens up where II Chronicles ended. What we have is a short repeat in the introduction of Ezra with the ending of II Chronicles. That is why many feel, besides the Jewish tradition, the Talmud (Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah or the first five books of Moses), that Ezra wrote I and II Chronicles and Ezra! And so as this book opens up, the exile has ended and the Jews are going to return home and the restoration of the Temple will begin.

Now we can divide the book of Ezra into two sections. Chapters 1-6 deal with the first return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. In this first return only 49,897 people came with Zerubbabel in 538 B. C., mostly because they became comfortable in Babylon. Prior to their deportation to Babylon, they were mostly shepherds, farmers; they lived in an agrarian society. But now in Babylon, the commercial center of the world, they prospered.

And keep in mind that the Babylonians looked down upon anyone who dealt with money; we would call them bankers today. So the Jews were given that responsibility, and they were very good at it and became very comfortable, not wanting to make that 900 mile journey back to Jerusalem. That is why out of some 2 to 3 million Jews, less than 50,000 returned with Zerubbabel in that first return.

The second division of the book is found in chapters 7-10. Here we see the second return from Babylon under the leadership of Ezra in 457 B. C. and this time only 1,745 returned. Ezra's primary focus was to restore the spiritual condition of the people, a call for them to get right with God.

Now to kind of put things into perspective of what was going on during this period of time, between the first and second return to Jerusalem there is a time span of some 80 years and within that gap we see the events of the book Esther come to pass, taking place between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra.

Also, there was a third return to Jerusalem, this time under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445 B. C. And Nehemiah's primary focus is to rebuild the walls, the gates, and the city of Jerusalem. We will look at Nehemiah a little closer in a few weeks when we study the book of Nehemiah, but keep in mind that during the time of Nehemiah, Malachi is prophesying.

Now this man Ezra, the writer of this book, will be introduced to us in chapter 7, but now it is Zerubbabel who will come on the scene. So let's look at what this man of God encountered and who he was before we get into the book of Ezra.

Zerubbabel came from the tribe of Judah, a descendant of King David, grandson of Jehoiachin (I Chronicles 3:17-19), and he is called a prince. Zerubbabel was a political leader who will work closely with Joshua, the High Priest or spiritual leader of the people.

And keep in mind that when we see that only a few went back to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel, there were good reasons, besides them being comfortable in Babylon. You see, what Zerubbabel and those who journeyed with him encountered when they arrived in Jerusalem was not a pretty picture. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon had destroyed the city, the Temple back in 586 B. C., leaving the place in ruins. As they arrive the first thing they do is rebuild the altar of sacrifice so they could atone for their sins. Then, in 536 B. C. they began to lay the foundation for the Temple but because of opposition that rose up against them, the work was put on hold for some 15 years. It is during this time that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah began to minister.

And here was the problem. You see, instead of putting God first, they were rebuilding their own homes while the Temple of God, the place of worship, was in ruins. And Haggai warns them to get their priorities right, put God first or you will never be satisfied, you will always be in need, you will never have enough. Then, after 15 years of doing nothing on the Temple, they begin to work again, completing the Temple in 515 B. C., 21 years after the work started in 536 B. C.

Then, as we get to chapters 7-10 we see Ezra return to Jerusalem with another group of people. Ezra was a priest and a scribe, a descendant of Hilkiah the High Priest, who found the book of the Law of the Lord during the reign of Josiah. And Ezra comes on the scene some 80 years after the first return. And his call was to put away the foreign wives and get right with God. And that is how the book of Ezra closes, as the people separate themselves unto the Lord.

Now the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are called the post-exilic books, events that occurred after their captivity. And these books close out the period of the Old Testament history. Remember, for a little over 400 years God is silent. From 432 B. C. to 28 A. D. there is no prophet speaking for God, there is no, *“Thus says the Lord!”* There is only silence. But then John the Baptist comes bursting on the scene, calling for the people to get right with God, cleanse themselves before God, to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. We read in Matthew 3:1-3, **“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.’”** God was once again speaking to His people!

I do like the focus or the theme of this book; it is ***The Word of the LORD!*** In this book there is a reference to the Word of the Lord some ten times, (Ezra 1:1, 3:2, 6:14, 6:18, 7:6, 7:10, 7:14, 9:4 and 10:3). And listen carefully to what is said in Ezra 9:4 and repeated in Ezra 10:3, “**... trembled at the words of the God of Israel ...**” May we tremble at the Words of God today, to have that reverence, that appreciation for what God has given to us and then take what He has said and apply it to our lives. It is something that is needed in the church today as the church is moving away from God’s Word and they are gravitating to experience, things that make them feel good but they don’t make them holy!

One more thing before we dig into this book. Besides the many prophets that were speaking during this post-exilic period of time, there were many false prophets also speaking. And to give you some perspective on what was happening elsewhere in the world, Buddha was in India (563-483 B. C.), Confucius was in China (551-479 B. C.), and Socrates was in Greece (470-399 B. C.). And look at the false prophets that are out there today speaking so boldly and leading people away from Jesus, the Jesus of the Bible. And sadly, many are speaking from the pulpits of churches across America! Let that be a warning to us. With that said, let’s begin reading in Ezra chapter 1, starting in verse 1 and see what the Lord has for us as we study through His Word!

**EZRA 1****VERSE 1**

1. Now keep in mind that in 539 B. C. Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians. Then, in 538 B. C. he made this decree or proclamation. Now this was not the first year that Cyrus was king, but the first year he had defeated the Babylonians, his first rule over the Babylonian kingdom and making his kingdom a world power.

2. Now it says that God stirred the heart of Cyrus so that he would make this decree. Keep in mind that this was a pagan king and so how did God stir the heart of this pagan king? Turn to Isaiah chapter 44, starting in verse 28, and let's begin reading here and you will see what God did even before Cyrus was born. We are told, **“Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be built,’ And to the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’” Thus says the Lord to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held - To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut: ‘I will go before you And make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze And cut the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the Lord, Who call you by your name, Am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, And Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me,**

**That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things.”** Isaiah 44:28-45:7.

Here we see that some 150 to 200 years before Cyrus was even born God called him by name and said that he would defeat the Babylonians going through the gates that were left unlocked. You see, these gates allowed the water from the Euphrates River to flow through the city, but prevented anyone else from entering through them. And as these gates were left unlocked, Cyrus diverted the water from the Euphrates River and they walked into this fortress defeating the Babylonians as they were unprepared for this attack. They thought that no one could get through their walls! And Cyrus would not only defeat the Babylonians but he would also allow the Jews to return home. Josephus tells us (Antiquities of the Jews 11. 1. 1.) that when Cyrus read this, some say Daniel gave him these words from Isaiah, that he sought to fulfill what was spoken and allow the Jews to return home.

We also see another prophecy in Jeremiah 25:11-13, and 29:10-14 where God said that the Southern Kingdom of Judah would be in captivity for 70 years and then they would be released. Daniel, taken prisoner to Babylon, understood the captivity was to last only 70 years and that is what led him to the prayer in Daniel chapter 9. And in this chapter he is praying for the people and the city of Jerusalem. But how did Daniel know the captivity was to be only 70 years? In Daniel 9:2 we read, **“In the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.”** Daniel read the Word of God and he believed the Word of God! May we do the same!

#### VERSES 2-4

1. Now I don't know about you but when I read this it sounds like Cyrus became a believer in the God of Israel, but he didn't. He said the right words, but the reality of the situation is that Cyrus was a polytheist, he believed in many gods. And this was a common practice for the Persians, letting the people return to their homes and their gods. Kidner writes regarding this, “A notable feature of the Persian Empire was its integration of a great diversity of peoples into a single administrative system, while maintaining at the same time a tradition of respect for their local customs and beliefs . . . they were encouraged to seek the king's welfare by observing the proper forms of their own religions.”



Not only that, but there is the famous Cyrus cylinder that recorded the story of his capture of Babylon and his returning the people back to their homeland. Again Kidner comments on this and quotes what was written on it for us. He wrote, “The so-called Cyrus Cylinder, from which the following is an extract, gives his own account of this: ‘I return to these sacred cities . . . , the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations . . . May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me . . . ; to Marduk, my lord, may they say this: ‘Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son . . .’”

You see, Cyrus did not want to step on anyone’s toes, especially the gods, so he sought favor from them all, although he saw what the true and living God could do, calling him by name and understanding how God laid out his mission to let the Jews return home to rebuild their Temple some 150 to 200 years before he was born, and yet he put the true and living God in the same deck with all these other gods.

That is foolish but it reminds me of the recent movie, it has been a few years since its release, but it is called *The Mummy*. And in one scene the Mummy confronts one of the actors in this movie and he has a necklace with multiple religious icons on it. And he pulls out the crescent moon of Islam and the Mummy is still coming after him. And he pulls out a few more before he pulls out the Star of David and that stops the Mummy in his tracks. Many are like that; they incorporate all kinds of so-called gods just in case. There is no just in case, there is only one God and apart from Him, judgment will come into your life!

2. Now in verse 4 there is an interesting principle that is laid out and it is good. You see, all can return home if they want, but if you remain in the land, you still have to assist with the work that is taking place back in Jerusalem, you have to support them.

David put that into practice when he fought against the Amalekites. In his pursuit of them, some 200 of his 600 men stayed back, they were too tired to go on. Besides that, many more stayed at home to care for the women and children. And after they were victorious in battle, some of his men did not want to share the spoil with those that did not fight. We read of David's actions in I Samuel 30:23-24. It says, **“But David said, ‘My brethren, you shall not do so with what the Lord has given us, who has preserved us and delivered into our hand the troop that came against us. For who will heed you in this matter? But as his part is who goes down to the battle, so shall his part be who stays by the supplies; they shall share alike.’”**

Listen to how The King James Version puts these verses, **“Then said David, Ye shall not do so, my brethren, with that which the Lord hath given us, who hath preserved us, and delivered the company that came against us into our hand. For who will hearken unto you in this matter? but as his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff: they shall part alike.”** You see, we are all in the battle; we are all in the fight. Some are on the front lines and some are at home guarding the *STUFF!* We all contribute to the battle and because of that, we all will be rewarded.

VERSES 5-6

1. Please understand that these returning exiles were facing a difficult and dangerous task. The journey itself was dangerous and expensive. The city was in ruins, their homes destroyed, there were no roads, nothing for them when they returned. There were many enemies who wanted to destroy them. And yet, God stirred their hearts, gave them the encouragement they needed to take those steps of faith, trusting in the Lord! And please notice that this move is not manufactured by man, but is orchestrated by God as He stirs the hearts of the people not only to go to Jerusalem, but also for those to give. Even those that did not return assisted in the work by giving gifts. May we have that kind of faith to walk as God leads us!

VERSES 7-11

1. How did Cyrus get all these Temple implements? Well, keep in mind that when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon invaded Jerusalem, he took back with him many of the treasures from the Temple. And the night that Babylon fell to the Persian Empire, Belshazzar held a great party and brought out those vessels from the Temple and began to drink from them, honoring the gods of man's hands. It was then that God wrote on the wall for Belshazzar to see, "**MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN**" which Daniel interpreted for him. It basically says that Belshazzar, you and your kingdom have been weighed in the balances of God and you have come up short. You and your kingdom will come to an end. And that very night Babylon fell to the Persian Empire. Now those articles are on their way back to Jerusalem, where they belonged.

2. Now who is this guy named Sheshbazzar? Many feel that Sheshbazzar is another name from Zerubbabel, who will become governor of the land. You see, Sheshbazzar was most likely the Chaldean name that was given to Zerubbabel and it means, “joy in affliction.” Zerubbabel means, “a stranger in Babylon.” That really is our story folks. As Christians James tells us to count it all joy when we fall into various trials, captivity you might say. And yes, we live in this world, but like Zerubbabel, his home was not in Babylon but in Jerusalem, this too is not our home, we are just passing through. Our citizenship is in heaven with our Lord! And to get there we may face many dangers, trials in our lives, but we will get there one day!

3. Now as we move into Ezra chapter 2 we will get a list of those who are returning home from the exile in Babylon. In chapter 1 we saw Cyrus make a proclamation for them to return home and now, as we will see in chapter 2, the children of Israel will reclaim the land that God had given to them!

**EZRA 2****VERSES 1-2**

1. Here are some of the leaders that came back to Jerusalem. Leading the way is Zerubbabel, whose name means, “a stranger in Babylon.” And, as I have said; it speaks of not being comfortable in Babylon, being a stranger there because it was not his home. We too should not get comfortable here in this world because it is not our home, we are just passing through. Many dig their heels in, thinking they will not be removed. But the reality is none will remain. Either we will die and go to be with the Lord, or we will die and be eternally separated from Him. But death is an equal opportunity employer - it takes all!

2. Let’s look at a few of these names here. First of all Jeshua or Joshua was the High Priest, and his name means, “Jehovah is salvation.” So in these two men, Zerubbabel and Joshua we see politically and spiritually the needs of the people will be met.

We also see mentioned Nehemiah and Mordecai. Please understand that Nehemiah did not return at this time, but much later and thus, this is not the Nehemiah from the book of Nehemiah. Also, this is not the Mordecai spoken of in Esther, he did not return home. These are men who just had the same name.

3. One more point here and it is not a big deal, but we should talk about it. We only read eleven names here and yet, in Nehemiah 7:7 there is listed twelve. The name Nahamani is left out here in Ezra. I think there was a copyist error here in Ezra and the name was left out. You see, like the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles these 12 represented the people of Israel. And when you look at Ezra 8:35 you see twelve sacrificial bulls being offered, which again speaks of there being twelve men! Not a big deal, but one worth mentioning.

#### VERSES 3-20

1. Here we see listed the heads of the various families and the number of people they brought back with them. And many feel these were the families that returned specifically to Jerusalem, that is where their homes were located.

#### VERSES 21-35

1. Here is a list of the various cities that the people in each family returned to. Once again, in verses 3-20 we saw the people who returned to the city of Jerusalem, that is where their home was. And now, in verses 21-35 we see the various cities these families returned to outside of Jerusalem.

VERSES 36-39

1. Here is the list of the priest that returned from Babylon. The total number of priests that returned was 4,289 or about 10% of the returning Jews. And this was important for they were the teachers of the Law and God stirred their hearts to return because the people needed to be led back to God and they were the ones to do it! Pastors today have a huge responsibility in leading the people of God, of teaching them the Word of God. We are accountable to God for what we do and tragically many take that far too lightly and they will be ashamed when they stand before God!

VERSES 40-42

1. Here we see listed the Levites, the worship people, the gate keepers that returned from Babylon. And the list of Levites that returned was about ten times less that the number of priests that returned and it should have been the other way around. The reason for this, some speculate, is that the Levites had no passion to serve the Lord, they were comfortable in Babylon. We also see the singers or the worship people that returned and to me, a very important group of people, the gatekeepers. They were the ones who let people into the Temple area and kept those out who did not belong. And as I have said before, pastors, church leaders are, in a sense, gatekeepers in that they allow people to come into the church to worship the Lord but they keep the false teachers, the wolves from coming in and devouring the sheep with their lies! We truly need more gatekeepers today!

VERSES 43-54

1. Now here in verse 43 it speaks of the Nethinim, who are these people that were in charge of doing the menial work of the sanctuary like cutting wood for the burnt offerings and getting water for the lavers for washing? These Nethinim could very well be the descendants of the Gibeonites. Remember from Joshua chapter 9, Joshua and the children of Israel were wiping out the enemy in the land of Canaan, no one could stop them, no one could stand in their way.

And the Gibeonites recognized that fact, and knew that resistance would be futile! You know the thought, “Better red, than dead” mentality. So they disguised their representatives, making it look like they came from a far country, traveling over a long period of time, and tricked Joshua into making a covenant with them. And shortly after that Joshua saw what happened, but because of the covenant that he made, he could not destroy them.

So they put these Gibeonites into service doing menial work in the tabernacle and then later on in the Temple. Now they returned to Jerusalem, but they did not have to. They were no longer slaves; they could have gone their own way. But instead they were loyal to God. Isn't it amazing how God can take a deceiver, a Gibeonite you might say, and transform him into a new creation! Hey, He has done that with all of us!



Isn't that what Paul tells us in II Corinthians 5:17, "**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.**" I like the way The Amplified Bible puts this verse, "**Therefore if any person is [ingrafted] in Christ (the Messiah) he is a new creation (a new creature altogether); the old [previous moral and spiritual condition] has passed away. Behold, the fresh and new has come!**" That is what Christ has done for us, don't live in the past life, live in the new life that He has given to you!

#### VERSES 55-58

1. These children of Solomon's servants, many believe, were foreigners who became proselytes and they were brought into the commonwealth of Israel! That is something we need to remember, God is not a respecter of persons. We are all on the same playing field and the thing that makes us equal is Christ, we are one in Him!

#### VERSES 59-60

1. It was important to know your lineage for that was how the land was portioned out. But some had lost their records and I guess for most it was not a total loss, but as we are going to see, the priests could not serve without that information.

VERSES 61-62

1. Back then, if you could not prove your genealogy as a priest, you could not serve. Today, we allow any Tom, Dick or Harriet to be a pastor, saved and unsaved. I am not kidding. Just listen to this ad in the classified section in the Christian Century. (Nov. 6, 1996, page 1094). It reads, "Berkeley church seeks minister for local non-denominational congregation. Position open to Christians and non-Christians." Amazing and very sad!

VERSE 63

1. The Urim and Thummim, literally, "lights and perfection's" were placed in the breastplate of the High Priest. Now we are not exactly sure what these things were, but whatever they were, they were used to discern the will of God in various situations. Here it is used to see what God would say in regards to those priests that could not identify their lineage, if they could practice still as priests.

2. Now let me say this and we need to understand this. The Urim and Thummim were not the magic glasses that the angel Moroni gave to Joseph Smith to wear so that he could translate the hieroglyphics off the golden plates, which then became the book of Mormon. That is just plain bologni! Paul warned of those that would turn from the truth in Galatians 1:8-9. He said, “**But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.**” This was something that the High Priest used to determine the will of God and today, we do not use the Urim and Thummim, we do not cast lots, we do not put out a fleece to determine God’s will in a situation. Then what do we do? We ask the Holy Spirit to show us and, in accordance with God’s Word, He will!

#### VERSES 64-67

1. Here we see the number of people who made this 900 mile journey with Zerubbabel. The total was 49,897 people, and their travel time was at least 4 months. Not an easy trip and only those whose heart was touched by God made this dangerous journey. And here we see that Ezra even lists for us the animals that returned.

VERSES 68-70

1. Notice that when they saw the Temple, the ruins it was in, just destroyed, it touched their hearts and the people gave for the work to restore the house of God. We read that and we don't think much of it, but keep in mind that they are returning home to nothing, they have no homes, no jobs, no nothing and yet, their priority is the Lord, to rebuild His House! They had the right priority, may we have hearts like that. And truly, it is only from a willing heart that God will accept our giving!

2. Now, when we started out in chapter 1 of Ezra, it was the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi that God had touched to return. But now *ALL ISRAEL* was returning with them. The 10 Northern tribes were not lost as some would have you believe. When the Assyrians fell captive to the Babylonians, those that were in captivity from the Northern Kingdom were taken to Babylon. And now that Cyrus and the Persian Empire are in control they are being released. Also, not all were taken into captivity by the Assyrians, and during the Passover feast under Hezekiah's reign, many from the Northern Kingdom joined them. And thus, when the Babylonians took the Southern Kingdom into captivity, many of the other tribes, besides Judah and Benjamin, were taken captive also.

**EZRA 3****VERSES 1-3**

1. The people returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the political leader. Now under the leadership of Joshua or Jeshua, the spiritual leader, they are going to rebuild the altar of sacrifice so that they can atone for their sins. And all those that had returned were in unity, working together for a common cause, to get right with God. And before they could worship the Lord, they had to atone for their sins and thus, they built the altar among the ruins of the Temple, in the place that God had instructed them. You see, you can have an altar without a Temple but you can't have a Temple without an altar, the shedding of blood for the atonement of sins had to be made before you could worship God!

2. Now I believe there was a time lapse between chapters 2 and 3 and I think during this time they built for themselves homes to live in, which were needed. But here we are told that it was in the seventh month their hearts were knit together to worship the Lord. Keep in mind that this seventh month was sacred to the Jewish people. The reason being is that the first day of the month was the Feast of Trumpets (Num. 29:1–6), the tenth day was the Day of Atonement (Num. 29:7–11), and the fifteenth day was the Feast of Tabernacles (Num. 29:12–38).

3. Now they were not alone in the land. It seems that during those 70 years in captivity other people had settled in the land and now they were causing those Jews who had returned some fear to build up in their hearts. You see, by establishing this altar they were announcing their rite to be in the land and to rebuild the Temple, and like today, people did not like it! But they put their trust in the Lord, knowing that He brought them back into the land and He would protect them from the enemy. Thus, they continued to do those things that God required of them. Morgan makes another interesting point regarding this as he wrote, “They were conscious of how, in the neglect of the altar of God in the past, they had become contaminated by the idolatrous practices of surrounding peoples, and in order to prevent a repetition of such failure, they immediately set up the true altar.” They were taking a stand that they were going to serve the Lord and they were not going to let anyone distract them from their goal. May we have hearts like that!

#### VERSES 4-6

1. As we have seen, they first built the altar of sacrifice to atone for their sins. Then they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, a seven day feast that looked back at the faithfulness of God during their wilderness wanderings, from their journey from Egypt to the Promise Land! And the foundation for the Temple was not yet laid and that took place the following year, in 536 B. C.

#### VERSE 7

1. This area of Tyre and Sidon was known for its cedar logs, and like with the building of Solomon’s Temple, they too are using this timber to rebuild the Temple.

VERSES 8-11

1. If you remember from I Chronicles chapter 23, David lowered the age of ministry for the Levites from 30 years old to 20 years old. The reason was that there was much work to be done and he wanted to give everyone an opportunity to serve the Lord to the fullest. Today God is doing the same thing, putting all kinds of people into service, for the work is great and the laborers are few.

2. And we see here that as this foundation is laid there is great joy, great celebration. The people saw the goodness, the mercy of God towards His people; the Jews and they were so excited. May our hearts be filled with that kind of joy and excitement as we see the Lord working in us and through us, building up these temples, our bodies in which He dwells in! Keep in mind that they had no Ark of the Covenant, there was no visible presence of God in the Temple, only the foundation was laid. But they knew God's Word and they trusted in the Lord in spite of what was before them. May we learn to trust God's Word and walk by faith as they did!

VERSES 12-13

1. At this dedication service, as the foundation was laid, there were two groups of people. There were the young men who never saw the glory of Solomon's Temple and they were so excited to see the foundation laid, they were pumped up. They were filled with joy to see the work of God being started. And there were these older men, those who had seen Solomon's Temple, with all its splendor and beauty. Silver was counted as nothing in Solomon's day, gold covered ivory chairs; there was gold everywhere and this Temple of Solomon's must have just shined brightly in the sun. And now, all they had was this low budget project, not much to look at! It broke their hearts to see what was happening. It could never compare to Solomon's Temple. And the neat thing here, which does not always happen, is that the noise of the young people drowned out the discouragement of these older men. But again, that does not always happen and many times those that live in the past treat it like a god and discourage us and what God is doing now.

It is as Morgan wrote, "The backward look which discounts present activity is always a peril. Regrets over the past which paralyze work in the present are always wrong. Moreover all such regrets, as in this case, are in danger of blinding the eyes to the true value and significance of the present."



You see, the reality is this. The problem with living in the past is that you tend to glorify it more than it truly deserves. In Ezekiel chapters 10 and 11 we read of the glory of the Lord departing from the Temple, from Israel. Ichabod, you might say, was written across its doors because of their idolatry. And as beautiful as the Temple was, it was only an empty shell; there was no true life within its walls for the glory of the Lord had departed from it. Too many times we long for the past and we miss what God is doing in the present. Yes you can learn from the past, but don't live in it! Listen to this story from J. Vernon McGee. He wrote,

There are a lot of old-timers today who discourage the work of God. I feel that one of the reasons that this present spiritual movement is largely outside the church today is because many old-timers are holding back. They only remember the old days, and they are not about to enter the new days. There is a danger of sitting in judgment upon this spiritual movement of today. I find myself critical of many facets of the program, and I am an old-timer. But let's withhold judgment for a time. Let's see what is going to happen. The Lord knows those who belong to Him. He is going to separate the wheat and the tares. That is His business, not ours. Let us thank God that there is a movement toward God today and rejoice in it. Let us not weep and criticize in this present hour.

I recall that when I was a student in seminary I was asked to hold some summertime meetings in Georgia. In those days it was customary to hold meetings, which they sometimes called protracted meetings. They asked me to preach, and I did. In spite of the preacher, the Lord blessed and people were saved.

I will never forget the last night of a particular meeting. Some of the young officers of the church were rejoicing with me at the way things had gone. An old-timer was sitting there listening to us. He had long whiskers, and he looked to me like Father Time. Finally he said, “You boys had a pretty good meeting, but I remember when....” Then we heard all about “when.” When he got through with his tales of the past, our meeting did not seem like anything at all. That was very discouraging; we all left a little depressed that night. Later I asked another member of the church who was almost as old as “Father Time” and she said, “The meeting he told you about wasn’t all that great. You know, he is in his dotage [old age], and the older he gets the bigger that meeting gets. It wasn’t nearly as wonderful as he thought it was.”

- J. Vernon McGee, Thru The Bible Vol. II, p. 485

2. And in regards to this rebuilding project, listen to the encouraging words from the prophet Haggai. In Haggai 2:1-9 we read, **“In the seventh month, on the twenty-first of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying: ‘Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, saying: “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,” says the Lord; “and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,” says the Lord, “and work; for I am with you,” says the Lord of hosts. “According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!” For thus says the Lord of hosts: “Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,” says the Lord of hosts. “The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,” says the Lord of hosts. “The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,” says the Lord of hosts. “And in this place I will give peace,” says the Lord of hosts.”**

God is saying that through the eyes of men, this Temple is nothing compared to Solomon's. But don't lose hope, for the glory of God will fill this place and make this Temple greater than the former Temple, for which the glory of God had departed from. Don't look at the beauty of a building but the presence of God within those walls of worship! There are many old and beautiful church buildings in Europe and even in the United States, that are empty on Sunday's but during the week they are filled with sightseers and not worshipers of God. Across the doors of those buildings that have removed God by turning from Him are the words Ichabod, the glory of God has departed.

Let me close with these words. In II Corinthians 3:18 we are told, "**But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.**" You can live in the past if you want, but why do you want to. You see, the days we are living in right now exceed the past days. Today we are more like Christ, this Temple, our body is better today than it was yesterday, a week ago, ten years ago because we are being transformed daily into the image of Christ. At least we should be! Don't long for the former days but rejoice in what God is doing here and now because the Lord is good, His mercy endures forever!