

Ezra – Building the House of God

Our recent readings of the book of Ezra bring us to consider the circumstances in which the house of God was being rebuilt. The record is filled with principles and exhortations for us to ponder: in our present considerations, we shall examine some of them.

Isaiah chapter 44 describes how at the appointed time, Cyrus would be instrumental in bringing about the restoration of Israel to their land, and the rebuilding of the Temple there: “he is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid” (Isa. 44:28).

Ezra chapter 1 illustrates the fulfilment of that prophecy:

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, Yahweh, God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (Ezra 1:1-2).

According to Josephus, Cyrus was shown the Isaiah prophecies – which included naming him years before he was even born - and was “seized with an earnest desire and ambition to fulfil what was written ...” (Antiquities of the Jews (11:1:2)). This Gentile Ruler was thus stirred up to fulfil the words spoken and bring about a restoration of the Jews. Ezra chapter 2 proceeds to describe those who went back to the land “every one unto his city”.

The returning exiles had an unusual zeal for the things of their God. They were united as one: “when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together *as one man* to Jerusalem” (Ezra 3:1). This is reflected in the situation of those who would be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ: there is “one body” (Rom. 12:4-5), made up of those who have a zeal for the truth. They “stand fast in *one spirit*, with *one mind* striving together for the faith of the gospel; And in nothing terrified by your adversaries ...” (Phil. 1:27-28).

The first thing that the people did, was to re-establish worship before Yahweh their God:

“Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, *and builded the altar* of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God. And they set the Altar upon his bases ...” (Ezra 3:2-3).

There is an important significance here: the faithful leaders recognised that the restoration could only be accomplished with Yahweh’s favour and blessing. Hence the first thing they did was to build the Altar, before laying the foundation – which was the second thing they did, an event accompanied with great joy and rejoicing:

“when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of Yahweh, they set the priests in their apparel ... to praise Yahweh, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto Yahweh; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel” (Ezra 3:10-11).

Even so, there is a counterpart in our situation, as we seek to build up “the house of God, which is the ecclesia of the living God, the pillar and ground of the Truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). The most important aspect is to ensure that we worship according to the Father’s commandments. We “offer the Sacrifice of Praise continually, that is the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his Name” (Heb. 13:15), as did Israel in the days

of their restoration. But we also must subsequently lay a foundation: "... the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God ..." (Heb. 6:1). It is upon the basis of a faithful repentance, that a foundation is laid, something which forms a basis for future work in building up a spiritual house.

Ezra 3 describes the mixed response of the people toward the laying of the foundations:

"But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people ..." (Ezra 3:12-13).

It would seem that the weeping was not the expression of tears of joy. Haggai describes how that there were those who compared the building with that of the first Temple that Solomon built – and found it to be inferior:

"Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? And how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" (Hag. 2:3).

And Zechariah also described those "who hath despised *the day of small things*" (Zech. 4:10).

We live in such a circumstance. Compared with the Apostolic preaching when there were many who joined themselves to the household of faith, in our day there are very few. There is a spiritual dearth across the world, when lovers of the Truth are hard to find. There are those who ridicule and despise the fact that there are only a few left who hold fast the testimony of sound doctrine, but they will be found wanting at the last. To despise a day of small things is not good: it is rather necessary for the faithful few to continue the work to the best of their abilities and leave the results to their God. Such is the example of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Ezra.

Ezra chapter 4 continues the narrative, describing how there were certain outsiders who wanted to build the Temple with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the others:

"Let us build with you: for we seek your God as ye do ..." (Ezra 4:2)

Even so, in our day, there are moves to join all churches in worshipping and building together, regardless of their doctrinal differences: after all, don't we all worship the same God? But what should be our response? Surely that of Zerubbabel and Jeshua: "ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God ..." (Ezra 4:3).

The Apostle Paul wrote of this class:

"Be not ye unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? ...and what agreement hath *the temple of God* with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God ...wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:14-17)

In Zerubbabel's and Jeshua's day, those who wanted to build with them turned out to be their adversaries (Ezra 4:1). We need to have the same commitment to building up the Temple of the Living God, but we can have "nothing to do with" those who pretend to support us, yet who remain in darkness. They will prove to be our adversaries at the last, and the children of light cannot fellowship with them. We therefore need to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them ..." Eph. 5:11). This is the dual aspect of the disciples' work: to build up the house, and contend against the adversaries.

The record in Ezra chapter 4 describes how the opposition began, and a letter of protest against the Jews was sent to the king. Another decree was made, and it became illegal to continue in the work of the Truth. But how did the Jews cope in such circumstances? Did they present the matter before the Lord in faith, and prayer, continuing in his work? No, rather they gave up. And so, we read that the work “ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia” (Ezra 4:24).

We find then, that although the work had commenced, and the foundations had been laid, the work of building had now ceased through lack of faith and trust in the Lord. But the Lord did not leave the matter there. In verse 1 of chapter 5, we read, “then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews ... in the name of the God of Israel”. Here, the work of the prophets began, to reprove the people for their apathy, and to encourage them in the Lord, and to cause His House to be built. And so we read, “Then rose up Zerubbabel ... and Joshua ... and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem, and with them, were the prophets of God helping them” (Ezra 5:2). Once again, the leaders, Joshua and Zerubbabel rose up, and led the people in rebuilding the house. The work recommenced, with the prophets themselves assisting in the work. Notice that in practical terms, the circumstances had not changed. It was still illegal for them to work: there was no change in the commandment yet. But now they became stirred up by the words of the prophets to build, and so the work recommenced in earnest.

Notice also this, “with them were the prophets of God helping them”. Neither Haggai, or Zechariah were like some today, full of condemnation and rebuke for other men’s failings, but never engaging in the work themselves. These men led the way, both by word and example. They were men of faith and action.

The prophecy of Haggai is interesting to consider against this background. In this record, we have an insight as to the state of mind the people were in:

“Thus saith Yahweh of hosts, saying, This people say, the time is not come, the time that Yahweh’s house should be built” (Hag. 1:2)

This is what the people said in their hearts, “the time is not yet come”. They were familiar with the prophecies of Jeremiah, given just before and after the Babylonian invasion. He prophesied that in addition to the seventy year period of servitude, there would be another seventy years during which the Land would be desolate (2 Chron 36:21).

To the faithful, such as Daniel, the promise of a restoration after 70 years of destruction was something to long for. We know that Daniel understood “the number of years, whereof the word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Dan 9:2). And toward the end of this period, we have the marvellous prayer of faith that he gave, earnestly beseeching the Lord to “cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary which is desolate” (v 17). This was the prayer of all the faithful, that the restoration would come, that the mercies of God would once again be in abundance upon His People.

But, it would appear that the people had worked out that the 70 years were not yet ended. That the time had “not yet come”, there was some time to go. And so they concluded that there was no need to work yet. They had begun to do the work of God, but opposition had arisen, and they had to stop. What further proof did they need, that the time had not yet come? When the time came, surely the opposition would cease, and they would be able to continue?

Such is the reasoning of the flesh. How subtle, how logical to the natural mind, which finds no satisfaction in the work of God. Yet, how contrary to the mind of the Spirit. What a contrast this is to the response of David, who earnestly desired to build the original house (Ps 132:3-5, 2 Sam 7:2).

David was commanded by Yahweh through Nathan the prophet that he could not build. The time for the house to be built would not come until David slept with his fathers, and the reign of Solomon had

begun. But David did not use this as a reason not to engage himself in the work. Although he could not actually build the house, he set himself to work in preparing all the materials necessary (1 Chron 22:14-19). And so, when the time came for the temple to be built, Solomon could start immediately, everything being ready, and prepared.

But the Jews of the restoration said, No, the time to work “is not yet come!” But then came the Divine Rebuke: “Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now, therefore, thus saith Yahweh of hosts; Consider your ways.”

They dwelt in “ceiled houses”. The word means “to cover over” and refers to the wood panelling they had covering the interior of their houses. The word is used in Jeremiah 22:14 speaking of those “that saith, I will build me a wide house and large chambers, and cutteth him out windows; and it is ceiled with cedar, and painted with vermilion”.

And so rather than to build God’s house, they built their own houses! But even worse than this, the cedar panelling they used came from materials originally prepared for use in God’s house!

We read of this wood being given in Ezra 3:7, “cedar trees from Lebanon ... according to the grant that they had of Cyrus, king of Persia.” But now, in their apathy, and self-indulgence, they had stolen the wood for use in their own houses. Truly they needed to consider their ways. The fact that they used the wood, indicates a lack of belief that the time would come. They thought the wood would never be needed. But, the command came for them to get more wood: “Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house” (Hag 1:8). They had brought additional work upon themselves by their own foolishness.

But how easy it is for us to do likewise. We live in the last days before the return of our Lord, when there will be a second, greater restoration. But as yet, the time has not yet come. How long remains, we do not know, but what are we doing? Are we diligently striving to overcome all opposition, in our efforts to build up the House of God? Are we like Daniel, earnestly desiring that day to come soon? Like David, labouring in preparation for that great day? Or are we like the people who were concerned only with their own affairs, in making their lives more comfortable?

Let us not say within our hearts, “the Lord delayeth his coming” (Mat 24:48), or “the time has not yet come”, using this as an excuse to engage in fleshly pursuits. But let us rather be stirred up to action by the word of the prophets, that we might be ready when that day comes.

There is a feature of the building work that reminds us of tomorrows readings in both Colossians and Hosea. Ezra 4:12 describes the adversaries claim that: “... the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations.” The marginal reference indicates an alternative rendering of: “**finished** the walls, and **sewed together** the foundations”. How that worked in practical terms is not clear, but this aspect of the foundation being “sewed together” is significant. Colossians chapter 2 describes the believers: “That their hearts might be comforted, being **knit together in love**, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding ...” (Col. 2:2, see also vs 19). Like as the foundations of the Temple were “sewed together,” that which unites the spiritual house together are “the cords of a man, with **bands of love:**” as Hosea has it (Hos. 11:4). This is what unites the true body of Christ: a mutual love and zeal for the things of the Truth: a reflection of the Love of Messiah in laying down his life for his friends. The exhortation is plain: in the few days that remain, the faithful minority must continue earnestly in the work, seeking to both build the house, and contend against the enemy. And they must do so in the overriding spirit of love, that unifying principle which holds the body of Christ together as one man.

Christopher Maddocks