

“Great Joy”

The Sixth in a Series on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 6:13-22 (sermon covers all of chapter 6); Acts 4:23-31

When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC and destroyed both the city and the temple, everything changed for Israel. The surviving inhabitants were forced to endure a humiliating captivity in Babylon. While in captivity, they found themselves under the domination of the Persian empire which defeated the Babylonians. Cast from their land because of their disobedience to their covenant with YHWH, those Jews who returned to Jerusalem in 538 to rebuild their temple find themselves facing a new reality. The land which they once ruled, is now part of the Persian empire, with a well-established system of Satraps and local governors in place. Although the Persian king, Cyrus, had decreed to free the Jews from their captivity and return them to Jerusalem to rebuild both the city and temple, the Jews were no longer free to self-govern—they are accountable to their Persian landlords. To add insult to injury, the returning exiles must live adjacent to the so-called “people of the land”—a mixture of Canaanites, apostate Jews, and transplanted Assyrians. Israel’s neighbors will do everything in their power to disrupt whatever progress the Jews make in rebuilding their city and their temple. Through his prophets, God promised his people that they would return to their land, rebuild Jerusalem, and their temple. If God is to keep his covenant promise to his people and restore his temple, he must do so through a small remnant of Jewish exiles now returned home, and by demonstrating his sovereign power over the Persian king (and his successors), and this despite sustained opposition from the people of the land. Everything changed for Israel in 587 BC.

As we continue our series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah we come to Ezra 6, the first half of which recounts the official response from the Persian king Darius (Cyrus’ successor) to a letter sent to the Persian royal court by the local governor, Tattenai, requesting a search of the state archives to see if the Jews were telling the truth—that they had returned to the land upon the decree of Cyrus, who also decreed to fund the rebuilding of both the city and the temple. The second half of Ezra 6 (vv. 13–22) describes how work on the temple—which came to a halt in 520—got underway again, with the second temple finally completed in 516 BC, during the sixth year of the reign of Darius.

The completion of the rebuilt temple marks a major turning point not only in the Book of Ezra, but also in the history of Israel. Throughout the first six chapters of this book, Ezra is recounting events which occur nearly sixty years before his own return to Jerusalem in 458 BC to help ensure that now that the temple has been rebuilt, Ezra’s people, the Jews, continue the purposes for which God has called them—to be his covenant people and a light to the Gentiles—and that the Israelites living after the exile not repeat the sins of their forefathers which led to them being cast from the land of promise (Canaan) in the first place.¹ A rebuilt temple not only ties the Jews to Israel’s previous history, the construction of a so-called “second temple,” opens a new future to the Jewish people. Ezra and Nehemiah will play a role in this.

For us, as readers and students of this book, the rebuilding of the temple brings to an end the first twenty-one years of Israel’s history after the people are back in the land (after returning from Babylon). This chapter also brings to a close the Ezra’s account of those years when Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Joshua) led the people in rebuilding, preparing us for the accounts of Ezra (from chapter 7 to the end) and the Book

¹ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 86.

of Nehemiah. To quote one writer, Ezra chapter 7 and the Book of Nehemiah are “a lifetime away” from the events of Ezra chapters 1-6.² As just mentioned, Ezra arrives upon the scene in 458, some sixty years and nearly two generations after the events took place which he has been recounting associated with the exiles returning home and rebuilding their temple.

The rebuilding of the temple also marks a new era in Israel’s history—the beginning of so called “second temple” Judaism. The Israelites have returned to the land promised them by YHWH—but that land is now under Gentile control. The Jews will rebuild their temple, and they will celebrate the feasts, and offer the sacrifices as required by the law of Moses. But as we will see, even though this temple stands in direct continuity with the original temple built back in the days of David and Solomon, we will see that things are not the same, that something has been lost. Throughout this process of rebuilding, it becomes clear to the people of Israel, that YHWH keeps his promises—the rebuilt temple is proof. His prophets warned of exile (Jeremiah) and YHWH guaranteed that his temple would be rebuilt when his people return (Isaiah). And yet, the former glory of Israel is diminished and but a remnant of the nation remains.

Once the exiles returned home, YHWH sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to speak his word to the discouraged Israelites to stir the hearts of his people to begin rebuilding, and bring the project to completion in the face of constant opposition from the people of the land. It will fall to Ezra and Nehemiah sixty years later to encourage the Israelites to see themselves as standing upon YHWH’s promise made to Abraham nearly a thousand years before, that Israel is indeed a great nation, a distinct people, and who, despite the presence of their Persian landlords, will possess the land which YHWH promised them. But Ezra knows that the people cannot go back to former glory days—as with the kingdom of David and Solomon, which is why Ezra also exhorts the Israelites to strive to be faithful to YHWH and his covenant promises now that they are back in the land.³ You cannot recover the lost glories of the past, but you can seek to build a better future, when the Messiah will come and all of God’s covenant promises will be a reality for his people.

With this bit of background in mind, we turn to the first part of our text, Ezra 6:1-15. Having received the official request from Tattenai (the local governor), in verse 1 Ezra tells us that “*then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored.*” Recall, that Tattenai reported the elders’ account of Israel’s previous dealings with Darius’ predecessor, Cyrus, and then asked (as recorded in Ezra 5:17), “*therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.*” Apparently, Tattenai’s request did seem good to the king, and so Ezra reports in verse 2, “*and in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found.*” Ecbatana is the modern city of Hamedan in Iran. It was capital of Median empire and the logical place (given its cool and dry mountain climate) to store official state documents.

The scroll in question was found, “*on which this was written: `A record.`”* In verses 3-12, Ezra reports Darius’ official response to the letter sent to him by Tattenai.

In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God

² Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 56.

³ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 87.

at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.” “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

There are a number of important pieces of information found in Darius’ letter. The most obvious of which is the fact that Darius did indeed find a copy of the original decree from Cyrus in 538 BC (v. 3), which confirmed the accuracy of everything the Jewish elders had told Tattenai about the rebuilding of their temple. Darius’ response is to reaffirm the decree of Cyrus. The king tells Tattenai to leave the Jews alone so that they might complete the temple, and that the king would provide the funding, along with anything else necessary so that the Jews could not only finish rebuilding, but so that the temple could function as it had before—as the “*house of God in Jerusalem*.” Darius tells Tattenai that he is not worried about the presence of large stones or large cedar timbers, since Darius understands that these are for the rebuilt temple, not defensive fortifications.⁴ Darius even authorizes payment for such materials.

In Ezra 1:7-11, we read that in 538 that Cyrus had authorized Sheshbazzar to return to the Jews in Jerusalem the temple vessels and furnishings which had been taken from them by Nebuchadnezzar when he sacked the city in 587—a point reaffirmed by Darius. Darius even goes so far as to authorize severe penalties for anyone who alters his decree, and presumably, to anyone who violates the terms just spelled out. “*Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.*” Sounds like Darius is pretty serious.

It is hard not to think of the words of Isaiah 49:6-7,⁵ where the prophet speaks forth the word of YHWH well in advance of these events: “*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*” *Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and*

0. Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 56.

⁵ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part five).

arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” The people have returned to the land, the temple rebuilt, and Gentile kings are responsible for ensuring that this remarkable event comes to pass, just as Isaiah had foretold.

As Paul put it in Ephesians 3:20, this is yet another instance when YHWH shows himself to be the one who “*is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.*” A similar sentiment is found in Acts 4:23-28, part of our New Testament lesson. After Peter and John had been arrested by the Sanhedrin, we are told that

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Given the sustained opposition the exiles have faced from the people of the land, and in light of the reminder from the early church—citing Psalm 2, that the Gentiles plot in vain, because God’s plan will come to fruition—this is a remarkable letter from Darius. The Israelites now have both the king’s permission to rebuild and his credit card—although the payments will be made with taxes collected by the Persians from the Israelites. God’s purposes will come to pass. The Israelites can rebuild their temple without further interference from local officials, or from the people of the land—although in chapter 4 Ezra recounts the continuing efforts by the people of the land to stir up trouble with the Persian officials between the time the temple was completed in 516, and when Ezra shows up on scene in 458.

The outcome of Darius’ decree, explained in verses 13-15, is, no doubt, mixed. According to verse 13, “*then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered.*” We are left to guess how this news was taken by the people of the land. Not well, probably. But, in verses 14-15, Ezra does tell us how the Jews took the news. “*And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.*” Because God’s eye was upon his people, YHWH prevented Tattenai and his associates from hindering the completion of the temple.

Ezra even gives us the exact date as to when this came to pass—March 12, 516 B.C. The temple was completed during the last month in the Babylonian year (Adar) which is the equivalent of our February-March. This means that the rebuilding of the temple was finished a little over seventy years after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. The efforts to rebuild had restarted on 21 September 520 B.C.,⁶ which means that from the time Haggai began to prophesy during the days of the people’s discouragement until the temple was finally completed, more than four years of sustained effort was

⁶ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part five); Yamauchi, EBC, 4:645.

required to complete the work. The days of discouragement become a time of great joy.

Through the word of promise (blessing) and the word of warning (curse) spoken through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, YHWH stirred the hearts of his people and they complete the rebuilding process. God's sovereign power extends even to the Persian royal court, where the proper records have been preserved, and where Darius himself—acting freely and with his own purposes in mind—brings to pass the very thing God has decreed for his people and foretold through his prophets. It is interesting to notice that in the second half of verse 14, the word *te'em* (“decree”) is used twice. God decreed this to come to pass, and Darius issued his own “decree.” The point is being made rather subtly that the mighty king of Persia (Israel's landlord) is YHWH's servant even if he does not know it, or confess it.⁷ His decree comes about only in light of YHWH's decree. This is especially remarkable in light of the prophecy found in Zechariah 1:12-16.⁸

Then the angel of the LORD said, ‘O LORD of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?’ 13 And the LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. 14 So the angel who talked with me said to me, ‘Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. 15 And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. 16 Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem.

The Jews have returned to their land, the seventy years of Israel's banishment from Canaan has run its course, and YHWH's house has been rebuilt in Jerusalem—exactly as Zechariah and the other prophets had predicted.

The completion of the temple requires that be consecrated to the YHWH. In verse 16, Ezra states that *“the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.”* Ezra's account is, at first reading, a bit understated—as we can only imagine the kind of emotion that would have welled-up in every Jewish heart on the day the temple was dedicated. But upon closer inspection, this section of Ezra reveals the joy associated with the dedication, seen in the renewed celebration of Israel's feasts according to the law of Moses, which is the sign that the people of God are no longer a divided nation, they are back in their land, and worshiping according to the mandates of the word of God. As Ezra tells us in verses 17-18, *“they offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.”*

Although the Jews are faithful in their desire to worship in accordance with God's word, we know from verse 9, that the sacrificial animals were likely provided by Darius according to his decree. *“And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail.”* This is very different than the day when Solomon—a Jewish king and David's son—dedicated the first temple. We read

⁷ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part five).

⁸ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 56.

in 1 Kings 8:62–63, “*then the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the LORD. Solomon offered as peace offerings to the LORD 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the LORD.*”

The scene in Ezra 6 is that of a small remnant of a once great empire, back in their land, with a rebuilt temple, making an offering to YHWH using animals provided by a Gentile king, which pales in comparison to that offered by Solomon whose riches were vast. In the contrast between Solomon’s dedication and this one, we see continuity with Israel’s past—the nation will live on as the covenant people of God, and while there are many who believe in YHWH’s covenant promises—we also see many differences. The people of Israel now live in their land under Gentile rulers, using Gentile credit and resources, as a struggling remnant striving to be faithful, no longer a great nation.

It is also important to notice that the priests and Levites make a sin offering to YHWH as written in the law, on behalf of the whole nation—one goat is offered for each of the twelve tribes, even though the vast majority of the returning exiles were from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. This is not only an acknowledgment of sin and a sign of repentance, it is also a confession of faith.⁹ YHWH is faithful to his promises, he has returned his people to the land, and he has allowed them to rebuild their temple, and sacrifice again, as one nation. This is an indication that the days of the divided kingdom are over, and that focus among the people shifts from the glories of the past to the promise of the future.

Shortly after the dedication of the temple, Ezra tells us that the people celebrated the Passover. In verses 19-21, we read that “*on the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel.*” If the people dedicated the temple with great joy, it is safe to image that the Israelites enjoyed an especially meaningful Passover that year.

Ezra’s account also indicates that great care was taken to ensure that things were done in accordance with the law and with Exodus 12-13 in mind. We can but wonder if the people regarded this Passover as commemorating a second Exodus, i.e., as their own exodus from Babylon—Ezra does not say.¹⁰ We also learn that the Israelites did not include the people of the land in these celebrations. The Jews actively separate themselves from their pagan neighbors who claim to worship YHWH and sacrifice to him, but do the same with all of their own local gods. To worship YHWH in Spirit and in truth requires that his people worship him, and him alone, in accordance with his commandments.

In bringing this section to a close Ezra recounts in verse 22 that the Jews also, “*kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.*” The reference to the “king of Assyria” is probably a reference to Darius, whose empire defeated and then assimilated the Babylonian empire; which, previously, had defeated and assimilated the Assyrian empire. The irony is that the Assyrians were used by God to chasten Israel (the northern kingdom), but now the

⁹ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 60.

¹⁰ Davis, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (part five).

current king of Assyria (Darius), is used by God to bless his people.¹¹ If the dedication of the temple was a day of joy, so too, Ezra says, was the celebration of this week-long feast of booths. The people celebrated with great joy because YHWH has given them reason to be joyful. He has kept his covenant promises to his people. Once again, the Israelites have a temple, priests and Levites, all of which prepare God's people for the coming Messiah, who is the true temple, and whose once for all sacrifice for sin will put an end to sin's guilt and power, and ensure that each and every member of Christ's church is a priest with access to the throne of God the priests and Levites of Ezra's day could not imagine.

This episode as reported by Ezra is a pivotal moment in Israel's history. The Israelites celebrate with great joy because the rebuilt temple is the proof that YHWH is with them, despite all of the efforts of their adversaries to keep this day from coming to pass. The Israelites can only offer a small sacrifice to YHWH compared to the one offered by Solomon. But they are a nation again, they are back in their land, and although they are but a mere remnant of the once great nation, they are purified and chastened.¹² The dedication of the second temple, followed by the celebration of the Passover, is the sign that the people back in their land (as YHWH promised) tying them to their glorious past. Yet a new future awaits, for a Messiah will come.

It is remarkable that this section of Ezra (from 1:1-6:22) begins and ends with reminders of the work of the sovereign and merciful God, bringing his people back to the land, and ensuring that the house of God is rebuilt. God stirs the hearts of his people. God stirs the hearts of pagan kings. He will fulfill his decree, and there will be great joy!

¹¹ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part five).

¹² Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, 780.