

GOD ORDAINS RESTORATION

Ezra 3:1-11; 6:19-22

Sometimes we hear about someone who will find an old house and will undertake a serious remodeling project to restore it to the condition it was maybe a hundred years ago. These old houses may have a grand foyer and even a spiral staircase with ornamental molding and high ceilings. Usually, when people do this, they have a strong appreciation of the architecture of the past and they may want to get in touch with their roots. Before taking on such a project, they would prefer to have a building that was structurally sound and much of what they do in the restoration is related to cosmetics and upgrading the electrical wiring and plumbing. Such a project requires a lot of dedication since there is usually a lot of work in tackling such a job.

It is hard to imagine someone taking on such a project when the only thing left of the old house was the base of the chimney and some of the foundation blocks. To take on such a project would be much more difficult than a remodeling and fixing up an old house. This is essentially what the Jews encountered when the initial group returned to Judah from Babylon to restore their nation. It would be similar to having your house burn down and needing to start all over again.

The first group of Jews was taken captive and exiled in Babylon in 605 BC and 70 years later (535 BC) a large group had returned to Judah to begin a project of restoration. Historical details of this return are recorded in the first six chapters of the Book of Ezra. Cyrus had conquered the Babylonia Empire and made it a part of his vast Persian Empire in 539 BC. One of his first decrees (538 BC) was to begin restoring the captured people groups back to their lands where they had previously lived. Nearly fifty thousand Israelites (mainly of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) embarked on a 900-mile trip that probably took four months to go from Babylon to Judah based on the amount of time it took a smaller group led by Ezra eighty year after this initial return. This large group of people was led by Zerubbabel who had been appointed by Cyrus to be the head of the civil government for that area.

They left Babylon in the spring and since it likely took four months to get there, it was in the summer when they arrived. There are some similarities in this account and the account of the Israelites leaving Egypt. It takes a lot of provisions to make a long trip when you have a collection of adults and children as well as animals. Cyrus had instructed the Persian people to provide the Jews with the equivalent of money (silver and gold), material goods . . . livestock, and freewill offerings. The freewill offerings were for the temple and the other gifts were for the people themselves. I'm sure they had temporary shelter of tents which they used on the trip, but they needed to build housing for themselves as the first order of business. We are not told how they accomplished that, but we know they did not have a Home Depot or Lowe's nearby. This would have been a difficult situation. Most of the people would have been accustomed to a fairly civilized society with housing and market places common to the Babylonian cities and then they found themselves in what was practically a wasteland that had not had a lot of infrastructure work for the past seventy years.

For this restoration to work, there had to be a lot of dedication of the people involved and real leadership in both the civil and religious arenas. This dedication was bolstered by seventy years of separation from their homeland and from the customs and practices of their culture. It was also strengthened by a resolve of the people to do the right thing in their relationship to God Who had promised to bring them back from captivity. Many people long for a chance to start over with their life or at least a part of their life. We all learn from past errors and we have enough optimism that we believe that we could do it better the next time. This resolve led them

to restore worship of God even before they had a building they could call a Temple.

The Altar Rebuilt – 3:1-7

¹ Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel *were* in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. ³ So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴ They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and *offered* the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required; ⁵ and afterward *there was* a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD. ⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. ⁷ Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia. Ezra 3:1-7 (NASB95)

The main thing that we think about the Jews returning to Judah is that they were going to rebuild the temple, the city and the city walls. They were also rebuilding their lives that had been disrupted so much by the exile. Worship is a very important part of a person's life. Some may disagree and say that they don't believe in the supernatural and consequently don't worship. Nevertheless, they will give their devotion to something – material possessions, self, another person, and/or fame. Worship as the Jews had known it prior to the exile involved sacrifice at an altar and they had not been able to practice that while they were in Babylon. They had met in neighborhood groups on the Sabbath for study and fellowship and this was probably the origin of the synagogues.

When they first got to Judah, the people naturally went to visit their ancestral homes in the various cities. At the beginning of the seventh month (thought to be about three months after they arrived) they all came together in Jerusalem.

The timing of their coming to Jerusalem was likely in preparation for the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. It was traditional that people came to Jerusalem for this occasion. Both these religious observances required the presence of an altar on which animals were sacrificed and their first task was to build that altar. This was done even before the foundation of the temple was built. They realize that their relationship to God as symbolized by the sacrifices was more important than having a building in which to worship.

Since the edict issued by Cyrus specifically mentioned the rebuilding of the temple, the people realized that they would need to be close to God in order to be enabled by Him for the work that needed to be done. Since sacrifices were the traditional way of approaching God, this made the need for an altar for burnt offering all the more important. These sacrifices provided a way for them to make atonement for their sins as well as to obtain God's blessing on their preparations for the temple. Another benefit would be to create a good sense among the people that they were restoring the worship practices that had set them apart as a nation and would motivate them to do the work they had been sent to accomplish.

One of the important aspects of this occasion was that the spiritual leader (Jeshua) and the civil government leader (Zerubbabel) worked together in a cooperative fashion. Jeshua was the grandson of the last High Priest to serve before the Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David. Not only did they both support and provide leadership in the same direction, the people were unified in purpose. They came together as one man. This may be the secret of success in getting anything of real value accomplished by any type of organization. This may also explain the lack of progress we see in

much of the world today. We are divided rather than being unified and that applies to almost every level of interaction from worldwide concerns down to the family in some cases.

Even though these Israelites were unified and working toward a common goal, there was opposition around from the people who had moved into the land while the Jews were in exile. Just as in the late 1940's when the present-day nation of Israel was reestablished, they were not welcomed by the people living in that region of the world. It really did not make a lot of difference to those people that Cyrus had issued a declaration that the Jews should return to their homeland and rebuild their temple so they could worship their God. Consequently, the Jews were fearful of being attacked as they all came together in this time of worship.

These were the first sacrifices made there in 50 years—since 586 B.C. when the temple was torn down. Other sacrifices were offered in connection with all the appointed feasts, including the Feast of Tabernacles on days 15-21 of that seventh month. The sacrifices showed that the people wanted to be responsive to the Law of God.

They placed great importance on the temple and seeing that it was built. They gave their money and possessions to pay craftsmen and skilled workmen to do the work. They used the best materials that they could find because this was to be the Temple of God.

These two events and the order in which they were carried out remind me of what Paul said of the Christians in Macedonia with regard to giving. He said that they first gave of themselves to the Lord (this is like the sacrifices that the Jews did as a first priority) and then they gave a freewill offering to help out with the work of the church. I think that this is a key to giving: if we give ourselves first to the Lord then all the other giving will take care of itself.

Planning and Preparation – 3:8-9

⁸ Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began *the work* and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. ⁹ Then Jeshua *with* his sons and brothers stood united *with* Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah *and* the sons of Henadad *with* their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God. Ezra 3:8-9 (NASB95)

The task of constructing a building such as the temple was no trivial matter. They didn't have a building supply store to call up and have the material delivered to the building site. It took a lot of organizing and planning. The leaders of the people, both civil and religious, cooperated in the effort of getting the people organized. Apparently, the priest and the Levites were given leadership roles in the construction of the temple.

There was a period of preparation that took seven months for building the temple foundation. The work did not begin till the second month of the second year after their arrival (May-June 536, exactly 70 years after the first deportation in 605).

The wood (cedar logs) came from Lebanon, shipped along the coast to Joppa and then carried overland to Jerusalem. Lebanon was well known for its cedar forests and its fine wood workers. For the first temple, 430 years earlier, Solomon had received much of his building materials such as cedar, pine, and other logs from Lebanon. Solomon began his project in the second month, the same month this rebuilding began under Zerubbabel. Since Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon were under the Persian Empire, Cyrus had to authorize this transaction (Ezra 6:3-4), in which the logs, as was done in Solomon's time, were paid for by money, food, drink, and oil.

Temple Foundation Reestablished – 3:10-11

¹⁰ Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King

David of Israel. ¹¹ They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, *saying*, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:10-11 (NASB95)

We have no indication of what all was done in the actual process of laying the temple foundation or the length of time involved. The emphasis in this account was on the results of the project on the people who had come back from Babylon and had given up the easy life they had there because they realized that what they were doing was critically important.

They were part of the fulfillment of the prophecy that God would restore Israel. God had used Cyrus but they knew that God was in control and they had a dedication to be obedient to Him.

Even in the celebration of the milestone of completing the foundation, they were careful to follow what they could discern had been done as prescribed by David when the Ark of the Covenant was brought back to Jerusalem and what had happen when it was brought into the temple that Solomon had built. They put on the right clothes, they blew trumpets and they played cymbals, harps and lyres. They even sang the same song of praise to God.

Work such as they were doing took a long time and progress was slow. It was a significant event when the foundation was completed and they had a celebration. It is good to celebrate the intermediate accomplishments in our lives. Such events are uplifting and they are occasions to give thanks to God who gives us the little victories as well as the big ones. Their celebrating was carried out with signing and shouting and praising God.

Worship should touch our emotions and our emotions should respond in childlike exuberance and it must come forth from our wills in that we choose to worship this One who loves us more than we can ever know. We can realize that it is He who has given us a new beginning in our salvation. As Paul wrote in II Cor 5:17, “If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away, behold all things have become new.” We ought to be in a celebrative mood each and every day because of the fact that Christ is dwelling in us by the Holy Spirit and that we know that the Creator of all the universe loves us and cares for us.

The building of the foundation was completed and celebrated but there remained a lot of building activity needed to complete the temple. Because of opposition and changes in the central government of Persia, delays were encountered so much that it took twenty-one years to complete the work. As it turned out, it was finished just in time for the Passover to be observed seventy years after the destruction of the former temple that had been built by Solomon.

Worship Restored – 6:19-22

¹⁹ The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. ²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover *lamb* for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves. ²¹ The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to *join* them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate *the Passover*. ²² And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. Ezra 6:19-22 (NASB95)

This was the first time in seventy years the Passover had been observed by the Jews in a setting of a central place of worship. The priests and Levites were careful to observe all the practices that had been prescribed by Moses some 900 years before this particular observance in the restored Temple. Not only did the Jews who returned from Babylon participate in the Passover, but also the Jews who had lived in the land of Israel during the time of exile were allowed to join in the observance on the condition that they had turned away from any practices that were not allowed for devout Jews.

They also observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread which was a testimony of being separated from the influence of the world and being devoted to God. God had not only delivered them from Egyptian slavery and Babylonian exile but had influenced the king of the pagan nations to assist them in restoring them to their land and reestablishing worship as prescribed by God through Moses.

The people have returned (compare that to repentance), the foundation has been laid (compare that to Christ being the foundation of our salvation), the temple has been constructed (compare that to each one of us being the temple of God), and worship started (compare that to our being in continual communion with God). The next thing that was to happen in the events of the Israelites was a restoration of the practices of God's covenant with the nation. We can relate that to the process of sanctification that is to be happening in the lives of every Christian as we are transformed by the renewing (restoration) of our minds that starts with a sacrifice of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice unto God.