

MUCH TO CELEBRATE

SERIES: RETURN & REBUILD



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Ezra 6

Sixth Message

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Ezra 6

Why do you get yourself up and come to church on a Sunday morning? No doubt there are many good reasons. Listen to Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopalian priest:

You don't go because the tankful of Jesus you got last Sunday has now been used up and you need a refill. You go to do precisely what the church has always been smart enough—or lucky enough, or guided enough—to call it all along: you go to celebrate the Holy Mysteries . . . You go to taste and see how gracious the inveterately hospitable Lord is. To share still another bottle of the great old wine he's always kept your cellar full of. And to relish once again the old tall tale about how he came to his own party in disguise and served the devil a rubber duck. You go, in short, to have a ball—to keep company while your roll over your tongue the delectable things that have been yours all along but that get better every time you taste them.¹

I'm intrigued by Capon's reason for going to church. When I get myself up and come to church on a Sunday morning, I don't think that I'm going to a party. But maybe, if Capon is right, a worship service is sort of like a party. Maybe, when I'm driving to church on Sunday, I'm going to celebrate. In reality, we have much to celebrate.

In Ezra 5, the Jews, after a fifteen-year hiatus, resumed work on the temple. When questioned by leaders of people of the land, the Jews responded that they were ordered to rebuild the temple by Cyrus king of Persia, who ruled the land. The leaders then asked Darius, the current king of Persia, to search the records and see if the this was so.

The kings' decree

Ezra 6:1-12:

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. 2 And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which

this was written: "A record. 3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God 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, 4 with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 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."

6 "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. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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, 10 that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. 11 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. 12 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.'"

Darius complies with the request of the leaders in Canaan and orders a search of the archives. He turns up a decree and discovers that the Jews were right: Cyrus indeed not only ordered the Jews to rebuild the temple; he also made provision for them to do so.

After discovering Cyrus' decree, Darius issues his own decree. First, he orders the leaders of the people of the land not to interfere with the Jews as they rebuild the temple. Second, he orders that the people of the land contribute to the building of the temple with their taxes and other provisions.

Like Cyrus before him, Darius, though he worships other gods, also seeks the favor of the Lord, whom he, like Cyrus, calls "the God of heaven" (Ezra 1:2). He hopes that the Lord will be favorably disposed to him if the Israelites offer sacrifices and pray for him and his dynasty. The Persian kings cover all the bases.

Moreover, Darius protects the Jews and their work by pledging to execute, in rather gruesome fashion, anyone who violates his edict. Moreover, in order to protect the Jews and their work, he also invokes divine punishment for any king or people who go against his orders. The Lord said to Abraham that "him who dishonors you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3).

Celebrate freedom

Cyrus and Darius, Persian kings, allowed the people of God to worship freely. There are many places in the world where the people of God cannot worship freely.

During one of our regional pastors' meetings at PBC a few years ago, the pastor of an Armenian-American church, who had previously pastored a church in Lebanon, told us, "You Americans are so spoiled. Here we are, a group of pastors, meeting openly, and we're not worried about someone coming through these doors to gun us down." Well, I had never really thought of it that way.

Here, we can worship freely. That's amazing. That's something to celebrate.

Of course, there is no guarantee that we will always be able to worship freely. Historically, God has raised up both friendly rulers, such as Cyrus and Darius of Persia, and unfriendly rulers, such as Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Who knows what's ahead? For now, we can worship freely, and that's something to celebrate.

How do the people of the land, and how do the people of God, respond to Darius' decree?

The work continues

Ezra 6:13-15:

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. 14 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; 15 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.

The leaders of the people of the land comply with Darius' decree, and the Jews, inspired by their prophets, who themselves were inspired by God, continue work on the temple.² Finally, they finish the temple twenty-one years after the foundation was laid and seventy-two years after the first temple was destroyed.

Celebrate the Scriptures

Likewise, prophets inspire us to build the temple:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Some of the apostles and prophets Paul refers to are responsible for the New Testament. Indeed, the Holy Spirit inspired them to write the New Testament Scriptures, which inspire us not least to continue the building project they began. Of course, we're not building a brick-and-mortar temple; we're building a flesh-and-blood temple, "the household of God," a "holy temple in the Lord," a "dwelling place for God."

We build this house not least by teaching what the apostles and prophets taught. Thank God for the Hebrew Scriptures! Thank God for the New Testament! Thank

God for the word of God, which is complete. How else would we know how to live? We wouldn't. Those who do not give heed to the Scriptures are building their lives on sinking sand. If we give heed to the Scriptures, however, we are building our lives, and our church, on a firm foundation. Listen to the old hymn:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word
What more can he say than to you he hath said
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled

Once the temple builders finish their work, they decide it's time to celebrate.

Dedicating the house

Ezra 6:16-18:

And 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. 17 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. 18 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.

When the foundation of the temple had been laid, some rejoiced, but others wept, presumably because they perceived that the new temple would not be as glorious as the first temple (Ezra 3:12-13). Now, however, as the finished temple is dedicated, no sadness is reported as the people celebrate with joy.

The sons of Israel dedicate the temple, just as their forbears dedicated the first temple. The people this time are only able to offer up one hundred bulls, in contrast to the one thousand bulls that were offered up when the first temple was dedicated. Nevertheless, the narrator wants us to see continuity between the two temples and between the people of God from both eras.

Even though only the two southern tribes, plus a smattering of Levites, have returned from exile to rebuild the temple, the twelve goats correspond to the twelve tribes. The sin offering for the tribes means that God has forgiven Israel for the sins that led to the exile (Ezekiel 4:13, Hosea 9:3, Amos 7:17). Israel—"all Israel"—is back in the land. Likewise, Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ constitute "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

Moreover, the narrator notes that the appointment of priests and Levites accords with the commands that came through Moses, which were given before they got to the promised land.

Celebrate the church

The temple builders finished what the Lord gave them to do, and when they finished, they celebrated. It's important for us to celebrate. We face enough challenges in life that when we're given an opportunity to celebrate, we should celebrate. In fact, we face enough challenges that we should be on the lookout for opportunities to celebrate—big things, little things, anything.

Really, if you keep your eyes open, you will see all sorts of things that are worth celebrating. It's especially important for us to celebrate what God does among us, who constitute the house of the Lord.

I've probably shared too much the last few weeks about the Fall Retreat—but I'm going to do so again anyway! After the retreat was over, I wanted to celebrate what God had done—not only what God had done during this retreat but what he had done for the last several retreats.

So, my wife Karen and I invited the planning team over for dinner last week, and we celebrated. We meet several times a year to plan and pray. After all that planning and praying, I didn't want to let what we planned and prayed for pass without celebrating the fruits of all that planning and praying. At dinner, each person shared how he or she had seen the Lord at work during the retreats. It was a rich time.

The returning exiles celebrated the dedication of the temple, but they're not through celebrating.

Keeping the Passover

Ezra 6:19-22:

On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. 20 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. 21 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. 22 And they 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 Passover, which featured the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, commemorated the exodus, when the Lord rescued the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Now that the Lord has rescued his people from Babylon and enabled them to rebuild the temple, they celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread again. The return from exile is akin to a new exodus. The returning exiles are joined by other Jews who had remained in the land and also by some Gentiles—everyone who separated themselves from idolatry to worship the Lord.

Just as the returning exiles celebrated the dedication of the temple “with joy,” everyone—returning exiles, Jews who remained in the land, and Gentiles—celebrates the Feast of Unleavened Bread “with joy.” After decades in exile and after all the challenges they’ve faced, they’re back in the land and they’ve rebuilt the temple. There is much to celebrate.

In fact, the Lord “made them joyful.” The Lord encouraged them and enabled them to rebuild the temple, not least by moving in the hearts of pagan kings.³ The Lord has created circumstances that the people could properly rejoice in, but in the end, it is not the circumstances that make them joyful; it’s the Lord who makes them joyful.

Celebrate Christ

The new exodus evoked by the book of Ezra anticipates an even greater exodus in the New Testament: liberation not from Egypt or Babylon but from Satan, sin, and death. Israel of old sacrificed the Passover lamb. Like Israel of old, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples, but shockingly, he said the meal was all about him. He said the bread represented his body and the wine represented his blood.

We remember Jesus’ sacrifice when we celebrate the Lord’s Table. The apostle Peter says we have been ransomed with “the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19). Paul says, “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

Let us therefore celebrate the festival . . .” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Just as the Lord made the people in Ezra 6 joyful, Jesus makes us joyful: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11).

When we partake of the Lord’s Table, we have every reason to celebrate. Especially, we have every reason to celebrate Christ. You could even drink a toast to Jesus!

Israel completes the temple and then dedicates it. But something is missing.

Something’s missing

The author of Exodus reports what happened after the tabernacle, the portable precursor to the temple, was finished: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34-35).

The author of 1 Kings reports what happened after the temple was finished: “And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, 11 so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

The glory cloud represents the Lord’s presence in a visible way. Based on historical precedent, we again expect the Lord to take his seat in the temple among his people in a visible way, but he’s not reported as doing so. Where’s the glory of the Lord? Scholars Donna and Thomas Petter explain:

Solomon’s temple, and the subsequent divine glory manifested in the holy of holies, was a temporary measure attempting to reflect God’s intention of dwelling with his people. No dwelling made by human hands could ever contain the divine presence because only God can create appropriate sacred space for his dwelling (Acts 7:49). As regards the rebuilt temple, God was no longer content to dwell in houses made with human hands. The anti-climactic ending to the second temple’s dedication causes anticipation and expectation. The decrescendo prepares us for a crescendo!⁴

So, does the visible presence of the Lord vanish from the pages of history? By no means! The apostle John reports that Jesus, as the divine Word, “dwelt,” or tabernacled, among us. “[W]e have seen his glory,” John

writes (John 1:14). Paul observes that “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” in Christ (Colossians 2:9). God’s presence comes in a person, no longer shrouded in a cloud. Jesus *is* the temple of God, not made by human hands (Acts 7:48). He is “something greater than the temple” (Matthew 12:6).

Celebrate the Spirit

Jesus worked to expand God’s flesh-and-blood temple to include all those who believe in him. Not long after his ascension to heaven, one hundred and twenty of his first followers gathered in a house in Jerusalem, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, according to his instructions (Acts 1:4-8, 15). Indeed, the Spirit came:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.⁵ (Acts 2:1-4)

What we didn’t get in Ezra 6 we get in Acts 2. Only this time, God fills not the temple in Jerusalem in a visible way but an ordinary house in Jerusalem. More importantly, he fills people in the house with his presence in a visible way. He fills men and women with the Holy Spirit. “This is the crescendo that arises from the decrescendo.” The temple builders in Ezra, then, were setting the stage first for Christ and then for the Spirit. This is breathtaking!

Finally, then, our look at Ezra 6, as it leads us into the New Testament, compels us to celebrate the Spirit.

When I first started as a pastor at this church, I took it upon me to read through the New Testament in search of the Holy Spirit. I was especially struck by how relational the Spirit is, how intent he is on relating us to God. I was especially struck by Galatians 4:6: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” The Spirit is within my crying out for an intimate, trusting relationship with the Father. When I read that verse, I broke into a celebration and cried out, “Yes, that’s what the Spirit is about!”

Have a ball

Celebrate freedom. Celebrate the Scriptures. Celebrate the church. Celebrate Christ. Celebrate the Spirit. My goodness, we have much to celebrate! And with Ezra 6, and where it takes us, we’re only scratching the surface. Be on the lookout. You never know when the Lord will give you something to celebrate.

Maybe Robert Farrar Capon is right. Maybe you go to church to celebrate, “to have a ball—to keep company while you roll over your tongue the delectable things that have been yours all long but that get better every time you taste them.”

Endnotes

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox* (Grand Rapids: MI; Eerdmans, 1995), 363.
2. Darius’s decree, which was based on Cyrus’ decree, are seen as one and the same. Even Artaxerxes, a future king, is lumped together with his predecessors, inasmuch as he will also rule in favor of the Jews (Ezra 7:15-27, Nehemiah 2:1-10).
3. Darius, the king of Persia, is here called the king of Assyria because he ruled over Assyria.
4. Donna and Thomas Petter, *Ezra-Nehemiah: NIV Life Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2021), 168-69.
5. Some say that the gift of speaking with tongues is confined to the miraculous ability to speak in known human languages. However, the apostle Paul writes of a different phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 12-14. There, he defines the gift of speaking with tongues as an inarticulate, non-communicative form of utterance that in theory has the potential to be brought to articulate expression, either by the person speaking or by someone else (1 Corinthians 12:10; 13:1; 14:1-40). One who has this gift speaks to God, not others, and benefits himself or herself, because the Spirit works in deep ways that don’t always pass through the cerebral cortex of the brain. Therefore, Paul encourages people who are gifted in this way to practice the gift in private, but for various reasons, he places strict limits on its use in public gatherings. It is impossible to tell whether the modern phenomenon of “speaking in tongues,” so-called, coincides with the gift that was evident in the Corinthian church. In the end, in my view, it doesn’t matter. People can praise God however they please in private. Bark like a dog if you want to, if it helps you worship God. Just don’t do it when the church is gathered, because you’d be a distraction.