

Sermon – 16/11/2008 pm

Temple Completed

Study Text: Ezra 6

‘The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass’. This is the answer to question seven of the Shorter Catechism.

It was God’s will for the temple to be rebuilt. He stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus to send the Jews back to Jerusalem. He stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel to get on with the work after sixteen years of neglect (Haggai 1:14). The eye of God was upon his people and no one could stop them or touch them without God allowing it. The sovereign God has his appointed time for all things and he is powerful to accomplish all that he has ordained from all eternity.

Even as God was sending his rebellious and disobedient children into exile he declared through his prophet Jeremiah that they would return after 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11, 12). As we will see in this chapter of Ezra the temple would be rebuilt after some 70 years. The return in 539BC was not 70 years after the destruction of the temple in 587BC, but the completion of the rebuilding of the in 515BC was.

Right back in the Garden of Eden when sin entered the world God declared that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent or Satan. And so *in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law* (Galatians 4:4). God planned our redemption in eternity even before the Garden of Eden. Such knowledge is too high for us to understand but it is the truth, and it is wonderful knowledge as the Psalmist says. God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Favourable Reply

When the people of God got back to rebuilding the temple, Tattenai soon appeared to question them. He could have obstructed them in different ways but did not. The Jews told him they had royal permission for the work and so Tattenai proceeded to check on this. He wrote to the king asking specifically that this assertion of the Jews be verified, and for king Darius to make his ruling.

The king acceded to this request and ordered a search to be made. He was thorough in this search because when nothing was found in Babylon he went to the original palace of Cyrus in the land of Media. There a scroll was found on which the edict Cyrus made in 539BC was recorded. This edict was referred to in the opening chapter of this book as Cyrus speaking to the Jews. Here it is given as the written record of the edict – written and recorded in Aramaic.

The two accounts agree; this written record simply has additional details about the dimensions of the building and the funding arrangements. Cyrus ordered for project expenses to be met out of the royal treasury. Darius short cuts this funding process by ordering Tattenai to pay directly from the royal taxes collected in the Trans-Euphrates region (6:8).

The claim of the Jews was substantiated. King Cyrus had issued an edict for the temple to be rebuilt. Darius upheld this edict. In his reply to Tattenai and his companions he sternly warned them not to interfere with the Jews in their work – *keep yourself far from there* (6:8). Darius went on to make his own decree that Tattenai immediately give money to the Jews and supply whatever they needed for making sacrifices to the God of heaven. Darius, like Cyrus, wanted the Jews to pray to their God for the welfare of the king and his sons.

The decree of Darius concluded with a penalty clause typical of the time. Anyone daring to alter this decree and not heeding to its directions would be summarily dealt with. His house would be torn down and he himself impaled or hanged on a beam torn from his own house. Darius even bound himself and other kings under the terms of this decree (6:12). He subjected himself to a greater power, the power of God.

It is amazing but wonderful to see the ruler of the greatest kingdom on earth at the time submitting himself to the power of God. How blessed the people are when the king fears the God of heaven and earth. Many who attain power and authority regard themselves as being above the law and have no fear of God. We must thank God that our laws reach to the very top of society even if there is a measure of abuse along the way.

Finish the Temple

The Lord truly works all things together for the good of those whom he has called, even those who love and obey him. The people prospered in the work of rebuilding the temple and in everything they did at this time. They prospered at the hands of the local governor who obeyed the decree of King Darius. They prospered at the hands of the prophets of God, namely Haggai and Zechariah, who remained with them.

They prospered under the hands of the greatest kings on the earth, firstly Cyrus and then Darius. The mention of Artaxerxes in this context is rather strange since he had not yet come to power – but his rule was referred to back in chapter 4 as the king under whose authority the work of rebuilding the walls was stopped but also then completed when Nehemiah came along.

So the temple that was begun in the second year of Cyrus was finished 21 years later in the sixth year of the reign of Darius. It may not have been as grand as the original temple built by Solomon but it was still the house of God, the place in which they could worship the Lord their God as he commanded them.

They rejoiced as they dedicated this temple just over 70 years after the original was destroyed. They made sacrifices to the Lord, hundreds of bulls and rams and lambs, with a special sin offering of twelve goats for the twelve tribes of Israel. Although only Judah and Benjamin are mentioned (4:1), this remnant represented all Israel.

Orderly worship, worship according to the will of God declared through Moses, recommenced after the ordination priests and Levites to their divisions. What a joyous day of celebration it was with the people of God once again worshipping God as he required. They were in Jerusalem and in the temple as God ordained at that time.

Under the new covenant God has declared through Jesus that worship in Jerusalem is not important. Yet we still worship God according to his will and not according to our own

imaginations. Worship is now in spirit for God is Spirit. It is in truth, the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. We worship the living God and the risen Jesus who is now seated upon the throne in heaven.

Feast of Passover

The temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar (6:15) which is the last month of the Jewish calendar. Passover was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year – our April. In this special feast they remembered the night when the angel of death passed over the homes of those who had blood on their doorposts. It was the night in which Moses led the people of God out of bondage and they began the journey to their own land.

Passover was the most important of their remembrance feasts yet had fallen by the wayside as the people fell into sin and forgot the Lord who brought them out of bondage. With the restoration of the temple and the priesthood true worship was restored in Israel, including the feast of Passover. The priests and Levites had been properly cleansed and consecrated. They were fit to slaughter the Passover and lead the people in this feast and in worship. Passover was the beginning of the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Whilst this community was exclusive and the people separated themselves from the idol worshippers who lived around them they were also inclusive. They included those who came out of other nations to seek the Lord God of Israel (6:21). In the first Passover servants and strangers who were circumcised could eat along with the people of Israel. In the course of time Gentiles like Ruth and Rahab were included in Israel. This inclusion of proselytes points to Israel being inclusive of any who seek the God of heaven and earth, the true and living God.

This chapter, and the first half of this book of Ezra, concludes reaffirming the sovereignty of God. The book began with God stirring up the spirit of Cyrus and this closing verse reminds us that the Lord turned the heart of the king of Assyria towards them (6:22). This unusual title probably refers to Darius, but may be meant to include Cyrus and Darius. Assyria no longer existed as an empire but the name of the region may have lived on.

The sovereign God also brought joy to his people, who after a long time in exile could now worship him again. They had rebuilt the house of God and were determined to worship according to what was written in the book of Moses.

Post-exilic worship was not dictated by cold legalism as some think. There was a desire to worship God according to what he had revealed for by worshipping in this manner they could be confident they were worshipping God acceptably. But orderly worship does not mean ritualism or legalism. When the Lord is present by his Spirit worship will be orderly and it will be joyous. Let us rejoice in the Lord as we worship him today and every day until he comes. Even after he comes we will continue to worship him with great rejoicing.

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