



Sunday, June 26, 2022: “The Service of Godly Leaders” Commentary
(The UGP Curriculum)

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Lesson Text: Ezra 6:13-22; **Time of Action:** about 516 B.C.;
Place of Action: Jerusalem

Golden Text: “And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia” (Ezra 6:14).

I. INTRODUCTION. In this week’s lesson we see God working to unfold His divine plan for mankind. Through the prophets, God had given His prophecy that the children of Israel would go into captivity for seventy years because of their sin (see Jeremiah 25:4-11). Our lesson shows God having moved on the hearts of pagan rulers as well as His own people to get them out of captivity and back to the Promised Land. Once back home, the Israelites were to rebuild the temple and re-establish the prescribed worship at Jerusalem. Out of the chaos of defeat and captivity, God was restoring worship and great joy to His people who were led by His godly leaders.



II. BACKGROUND FOR THE LESSON. During the reign of the Persian King Cyrus, he allowed many Jews to return to Jerusalem who laid the foundation of the temple (about 536 B.C.). However, work had stopped on the temple until the second year of King Darius which was about 520 B.C., about 16 years later. There was both outside and inside opposition that caused this delay. The opposition from outside came from Judah's enemies who's request to help in the building project was denied (see Ezra 4:1-5). The delay in completing the temple also had opposition from within Israel as the people put their own interests first and became lax in finishing the work (see Haggai 1:2-11). Because of this, the LORD sent a famine throughout Judah draining the people of their resources. When the building project was resumed some sixteen years after the foundation was finished (see Ezra 5:2; Haggai 1:12-15), the Persian officials placed in Israel wanted to know who gave the returning captives the authority to rebuild the temple. They sent a letter to King Darius and asked him to investigate this (see Ezra 5:3-17) and when he did. He found the decree that King Cyrus had made authorizing the rebuilding project along with the specific instructions for rebuilding the temple (see Ezra 6:1-5). Then King Darius issued his own decree commanding his officials in Israel to stop hindering the work (see Ezra 6:6-7). In addition, he also ordered them to use tax money for building supplies as well as for sacrifices (see Ezra 6:8-10). Darius even issued a decree of capital punishment for anyone who changed his decree and hindered the work (see Ezra 6:11-12). This is where our lesson begins.



III. THE TEMPLE IS FINISHED (Ezra 6:13-15)

A. Cooperation by the Persian officials (Ezra 6:13). Our first verse says **"Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily."** After receiving the decree from **"King Darius"** (see The Lesson Background), the Persian officials described as **"Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions"** carried out his orders **"speedily"** or as quick as possible. The phrase **"governor on this side the river"** means that **"Tatnai"** was the lead Persian official in Judah, west of the Euphrates River. These officials were directed by **"the king"** to allow the project to continue without delay. No matter how these Persian officials felt about the Jews, they had no choice but to obey. Besides, *"the law of the Medes and Persians"* referred to in verse 8 (not a part of our printed text), was known for not being able to be changed, therefore the decree that Cyrus made years earlier allowing the rebuilding of the temple was still in effect and was now being obeyed.

B. Other encouragements to rebuild the temple (Ezra 6:14-15).

1. (vs. 14). This verse says **"And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and**



Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." Now, with the support of the Persian officials (see verse 13), the Jewish "elders" continued work on the temple. The phrase "**and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo**" means that the people were encouraged by the preaching of the prophets "Haggai" and "Zechariah." **Note:** *Earlier, "Haggai" rebuked the people for stopping the work on the temple to build their own houses (see Haggai 1:1-4). However, now he encouraged the leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua (see Haggai 1:1) by prophesying the glorious future of this second temple (see Haggai 2:1-9). "Zechariah" also prophesied about Israel's future in order to encourage the people. He prophesied about a glorious future for Jerusalem (see Zechariah 2:10-12) as well as the power Zerubbabel would receive from the Holy Spirit (see Zechariah 4:6-10).* Although, we are told that the people also completed the temple "**according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia,**" it was by the power of God that those kings issued their decrees to get the temple completed. Although men ruled, God overruled to bring about His will. **Note:** *One may wonder why "Artaxerxes" is mentioned here since he actually ruled after the temple was completed. He did give Nehemiah permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 2:1-8). "Artaxerxes" also decreed that financial support be provided to assist in carrying on the temple services (see Ezra 7:12-17). Ezra wrote his account some years after the temple was completed and his primary idea was to show that no*



matter what part these kings played, it was God who moved them to do what they did.

2. (vs. 15). In this verse, Ezra writes **"And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king."** The month **"Adar"** was the twelfth **"month"** on the Hebrew religious calendar. It coincides with our mid-February to mid-March. **"The sixth year of the reign of Darius the king"** was about 516 B.C. This was twenty years after they began the construction on the temple, and almost seventy years after the first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. **Note:** *Even though there were some Jews who were unhappy with the size of the new temple based on its foundation (see Ezra 3:12), when compared to the first one built by Solomon (in 960 B.C.), this second temple would stand longer than Solomon's did. The first temple stood for almost 400 years (from about 960 B.C. until 586 B.C.), but the second one stood for about 586 years (516 B.C. until 70 A.D.) and included improvements made by King Herod. It's interesting that the second temple stood for about 586 years and the first temple had been destroyed in 586 B.C. It's very hard to believe that this is a coincidence. More likely than not, it is further proof of the presence of the hand of God.*

IV. THE TEMPLE IS DEDICATED (Ezra 6:16-18)

A. The joyous celebration (Ezra 6:16-17).



1. (vs. 16). This verse says **"And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy."** The phrase **"the children of Israel"** is the name applied to the twelve tribes **"of Israel."** Even though most of the returning captives were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, worship was restored on behalf of all the tribes. There was no longer a Northern Kingdom and a Southern Kingdom that had once divided the nation for so long. The groups noted here that made up **"the children of Israel"** were the **"priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity,"** meaning all those who returned from **"the captivity."** The **"priests and Levites"** served the LORD constantly in worship activities. **"The rest"** of the people were the worshippers. These groups, which included everyone that returned from captivity, were the only ones authorized to rebuild the temple (see Ezra 1:3), and they were the only ones involved in dedicating it. None of the surrounding peoples who were brought in after the Assyrian invasion were allowed to take part in building the temple (see Ezra 4:1-3). Ezra went on to write that the returning captives **"kept the dedication of this house of God with joy."** They dedicated the second temple with great **"joy"** and excitement. The older men who wept when the foundation was laid (see Ezra 3:12) were now dead, and the younger generation celebrated the finished temple with pure **"joy."** The worship that identified **"Israel"** as **"God's"** people could now be restored completely.

2. (vs. 17). This verse says **"And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks,**



two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel." At the "**dedication**" of the temple, the people "**offered**" as sacrifices to "**God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs.**" The priests also offered "**for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats.**" The "**sin offering**" of "**twelve he goats**" was given for the whole nation which is the meaning of "**according to the number of the tribes of Israel.**" All twelve "**tribes**" were represented by the "**twelve he goats**" even though all "**twelve tribes**" were not represented. The "**sin offering**" was probably included because it was Israel's "**sin**" that led to the destruction of the first temple and the end of worship during the seventy years of captivity. The "**sin offering**" demonstrated the people's recommitment to "**God**" and godly worship. **Note: The "sin offering" is described in Leviticus 4:5-13 and 6:24-30. This sacrificial "offering" acknowledged that sinfulness is inherent in man and there is a need for a sacrifice to renew the broken covenant between God and man. The "sin offering" symbolizes Christ bearing the believer's "sin" completely in the sinner's place. As our "sin offering," God made Jesus "to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (see II Corinthians 5:21).** It may appear that the number of animals offered at the "**dedication**" of this second temple was quite large, but it was small compared to the number Solomon offered at the "**dedication**" of the first temple. He offered more than 200 times as many cattle and sheep (see I King 8:63). The smaller number of animals offered at this "**dedication**" was probably because the



people didn't have many resources at this time.

B. The assignments of priests and Levites (Ezra 6:18). This verse says **"And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses."** Now that the temple was restored, the leaders, Jeshua and Zerubbabel (see Ezra 2:1-3; 3:2, 8) **"set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses"** to carry on the service of the LORD **"as it is written in the book of Moses."** King David had set up the system of **"divisions"** and **"courses,"** or times to serve, for the **"priests"** and **"Levites"** after the ark was brought to Jerusalem (see I Chronicles chapters 23 and 24). This was the structure of the responsibilities and duties for the **"priests"** and **"Levites."** However, Ezra's emphasis was not on David's instructions, but **"as it is written in the book of Moses."** As the one who gave the original instructions for priestly and Levitical duties, **"Moses"** was held in the highest esteem among the Jews. **"The book of Moses"** probably refers to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible that includes Leviticus which gives more details of the many offerings made by Israel. These returning captives and their leaders knew that it was necessary to be obedient to the directions in the Mosaic Law. They realized that what had happened to their forefathers who took the Law lightly could also happen to them.

V. THE PASSOVER IS OBSERVED (Ezra 6:19-22)



A. Preparation by the priests and Levites (Ezra 6:19-20).

1. (vs. 19). This verse says **"And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month."** After the returning captives dedicated the rebuilt temple during the twelfth month of Adar (see verse 15), they **"kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month."** The **"first month"** on the Hebrew religious calendar was Abib, also called Nisan. It correlates with our mid-March through mid-April. The **"Feast (or festival) of Passover,"** according to the Law was to be followed directly by the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the fifteenth day of Nisan and lasted seven days (see Leviticus 23:5-7). These two feasts were often celebrated as one.

Note: *God instituted the "Feast of Passover" while Israel was in bondage in Egypt (see Exodus 12:1-11). After a series of plagues failed to convince Pharaoh to free the Hebrews, God said that He would "pass through the land" and kill the firstborn in every household. However, God also said that He would "pass over" every home that had blood from an unblemished male lamb placed on the top and door frames of the homes (see Exodus 12:12-30). In New Testament times, "Passover" became a pilgrim festival. Large numbers of Jews gathered in Jerusalem to observe this annual celebration. Jesus was crucified during one of these "Passover" celebrations and instituted the LORD's Supper while He ate the "Passover" meal with His disciples on the eve of His death (see Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:1-20). Like the*



blood which saved the Hebrew people from destruction in Egypt, Jesus' blood, as the ultimate and final "Passover" sacrifice, redeems us from the power of sin and death (see I Corinthians 5:6-7; I Peter 1:18-19).

2. (vs. 20). This verse says **"For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves."** These returning captives were able to celebrate the **"Passover"** at the proper time because **"the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure."** In order to perform their duties, the **"priests and Levites"** had to be **"purified"** or cleansed from ceremonial uncleanness according to the Law of Moses (see Exodus 29:4; Numbers 8:5-8). The purification of the **"priests and Levites"** was so important that during King Hezekiah's reign in Judah prior to the Babylonian Captivity, the **"Passover"** was put off until the second month because they had not been properly cleansed (see II Chronicles 30:1-3). One of the duties of the **"Levites"** after they went through the ceremonial cleansing was that they **"killed the Passover."** This refers to the **"Passover"** lamb that was **"killed."** The **"Levites"** were the ones who **"killed"** lambs for **"all the children of the captivity"** which refers to all the returning exiles. The **"Levites"** also **"killed"** lambs for their brothers, here referred to as **"their brethren the priests."** Finally, the **"Levites"** offered lambs **"for themselves."** Therefore, everyone was covered by the sacrifices. **Note: At the very first "Passover" in Egypt, each family had to kill a lamb and place its blood over**



the doorposts to insure their deliverance from death. The family then ate the meat (see Exodus 12:1-10). The head of each household was responsible for killing the lamb. At the "Passover" that was celebrated under Hezekiah one month later than the Law directed, the "Levites" killed the animals because many heads of families had not cleansed or sanctified themselves (see II Chronicles 30:15-19). Also at the "Passover" celebrated by King Josiah it appears that the "Levites" killed the animals as a normal part of their duties (see II Chronicles 35:1-6, 10-11). Since the "priests and Levites" were purified, the "Levites" killed and skinned the animals and the "priests" sprinkled the blood. Therefore, there was no chance of an unclean person offering the sacrifices.

B. The celebration by the people (Ezra 6:21-22).

1. (vs. 21). This verse says "And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat." We are told that everyone who returned to "Israel" from captivity "did eat" the Passover meal. Ezra also says that they were joined by "such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel." These persons may have been Gentiles who had settled in the land and had taken on the Jewish faith by turning to the "God of Israel." However, it is also likely that Ezra was referring to Jews who were already living in



the land and had taken on the **"heathen"** practices of their Gentile neighbors. But now they **"had separated themselves,"** or turned away, from those **"heathen"** practices such as idol worship, in order to **"seek the LORD God of Israel."** Thus the Passover celebration brought about the reuniting of Israelites from the various tribes.

2. (vs. 22). Our final verse says that everyone mentioned in the previous verse **" (And) kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel."** As noted earlier, the day after Passover was the **"Feast of Unleavened Bread"** which lasted **"seven days."** Ezra writes that the people **"kept (or observed) the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy."** They all shared in both the Passover and the **"Feast of Unleavened Bread"** joyfully (see Exodus 12:14-20). They were especially **"joyful"** that God had **"turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel."** Even though they were allowed to return home to rebuild their temple, the Jews were still under Persian control. However, the LORD had moved on the heart of King Darius I (see Ezra 6:1-12) to show favor to the returning exiles, and he also gave them all that was needed to finish the temple. This is what is meant by the phrase **"to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God."** **Note: In this verse, Ezra called the Persian king Darius "the king of Assyria." As king over the Persian Empire, Darius was**



also the king over what once was the Assyrian Empire and could therefore be called "the king of Assyria." However, the Scriptures don't tell us why Ezra chose to refer to Darius, the King of Persia as "the king of Assyria." But maybe it was to show the difference between the earlier Assyrian kings who God used to chastise Israel, and this king Darius who God used to bless Israel.

VI. Conclusion. Too often believers simply go through the motions of worship and fail to get joy from it. But in order to experience joyful worship we must have a right fellowship with God. This involves the confessing and forsaking of our sins. It also means that we have to seek Him in order to know the true worship of owning Him as our Creator and Sustainer. We must seek Him because He is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, the supreme Judge of all the earth. We must seek Him because He alone is worthy of praise and obedience. We must also leave the joy and blessings up to Him since He knows us and how best to manage our lives.

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