**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**EZRA-004. THE NEW TEMPLE AND ITS WORSHIP by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"14. 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. 15. 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. 16. 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, 17. 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. 18. 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. 19. And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 20. 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. 21. 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, 22. 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."*

*Ezra 6:14-22*

There are three events recorded in this passage,--the completion of the Temple, its dedication, and the keeping of the passover some weeks thereafter. Four years intervene between the resumption of building and its successful finish, much of which time had been occupied by the interference of the Persian governor, which compelled a reference to Darius, and resulted in his confirmation of Cyrus charter. The king's stringent orders silenced opposition, and seem to have been loyally, however unwillingly, obeyed. About twenty-three years passed between the return of the exiles and the completion of the Temple.

**I. The prosperous close of the long task (vers. 14, 15).**

The narrative enumerates three points in reference to the completion of the Temple which are very significant, and, taken together, set forth the stimulus and law and helps of work for God.

It is expressive of deep truth that first in order is named, as the cause of success, the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. Practical men, no doubt, then as always, set little store by the two prophets fiery words, and thought that a couple of masons would have done more for the building than they did. The contempt for ideas is the mark of shallow and vulgar minds. Nothing is more practical than principles and motives which underlie and inform work, and these two prophets did more for building the Temple by their words than an army of labourers with their hands. There are diversities of operations, and it is not given to every man to handle a trowel; but no good work will be prosperously accomplished unless there be engaged in it prophets who rouse and rebuke and hearten, and toilers who by their words are encouraged and saved from forgetting the sacred motives and great ends of their work in the monotony and multiplicity of details.

Still more important is the next point mentioned. The work was done according to the commandment of the God of Israel. There is peculiar beauty and pathos in that name, which is common in Ezra. It speaks of the sense of unity in the nation, though but a fragment of it had come back. There was still an Israel, after all the dreary years, and in spite of present separation. God was still its God, though He had hidden His face for so long. An inextinguishable faith, wistful but assured, in His unalterable promise, throbs in that name, so little warranted by a superficial view of circumstances, but so amply vindicated by a deeper insight. His commandment is at once the warrant and the standard for the work of building. In His service we are to be sure that He bids, and then to carry out His will whoever opposes.

We are to make certain that our building is according to the pattern showed in the mount, and, if so, to stick to it in every point. There is no room for more than one architect in rearing the temple. The working drawings must come from Him. We are only His workmen. And though we may know no more of the general plan of the structure than the day-labourer who carries a hod does, we must be sure that we have His orders for our little bit of work, and then we may be at rest even while we toil. They who build according to His commandment build for eternity, and their work shall stand the trial by fire. That motive turns what without it were but wood, hay, stubble, into gold and silver and precious stones.

The last point is that the work was done according to the commandment of the heathen kings. We need not discuss the chronological difficulty arising from the mention of Artaxerxes here. The only king of that name who can be meant reigned fifty years after the events here narrated. The mention of him here has been explained by the consideration that he contributed to the maintenance, though not to the building, of the Temple. Whatever is the solution, the intention of the mention of the names of the friendly monarchs is plain. The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord as the watercourses; He turneth it whithersoever He will. The wonderful providence, surpassing all hopes, which gave the people favour in the eyes of them that carried them captive, animates the writer's thankfulness, while he recounts that miracle that the commandment of God was re-echoed by such lips. The repetition of the word in both clauses underscores, as it were, the remarkable concurrence.

**II. The dedication of the Temple (vers. 16-18).**

How long the dedication was after the completion is not specified. The month Adar was the last of the Jewish year, and corresponded nearly with our March. Probably the ceremonial of dedication followed immediately on the completion of the building. Probably few, if any, of the aged men, who had wept at the founding, survived to see the completion of the Temple. A new generation had no such sad contrasts of present lowliness and former glory to shade their gladness. So many dangers surmounted, so many long years of toil interrupted and hope deferred, gave keener edge to joy in the fair result of them all.

We may cherish the expectation that our long tasks, and often disappointments, will have like ending if they have been met and done in like spirit, having been stimulated by prophets and commanded by God. It is not wholesome nor grateful to depreciate present blessings by contrasting them with vanished good. Let us take what God gives to-day, and not embitter it by remembering yesterday with vain regret. There is a remembrance of the former more splendid Temple in the name of the new one, which is thrice repeated in the passage,--this house. But that phrase expresses gratitude quite as much as, or more than, regret. The former house is gone, but there is still this house, and it is as truly God's as the other was. Let us grasp the blessings we have, and be sure that in them is continued the substance of those we have lost.

The offerings were poor, if compared with Solomon's two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep (1 Kings viii. 63), and no doubt the despisers of the day of small things, whom Zechariah had rebuked, would be at their depreciating work again. But if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. The thankfulness of the offerers, not the number of their bullocks and rams, made the sacrifice well pleasing. But it would not have been so if the exiles resources had been equal to the great King s. How many cattle had they in their stalls at home, not how many they brought to the Temple, was the important question. The man who says, Oh! God accepts small offerings, and gives a mite while he keeps talents, might as well keep his mite too; for certainly God will not have it.

A significant part of the offerings was the twelve he-goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. These spoke of the same confidence as we have already noticed as being expressed by the designation of the God of Israel. Possibly scattered members of all the tribes had come back, and so there was a kind of skeleton framework of the nation present at the dedication; but, whether that be so or not, that handful of people was not Israel. Thousands of their brethren still lingered in exile, and the hope of their return must have been faint. Yet God's promise remained, and Israel was immortal. The tribes were still twelve, and the sacrifices were still theirs. A thrill of emotion must have touched many hearts as the twelve goats were led up to the altar. So an Englishman feels as he looks at the crosses on the Union Jack.

But there was more than patriotism in that sacrifice. It witnessed to unshaken faith. And there was still more expressed in it than the offerers dreamed; for it prophesied of that transformation of the national into the spiritual Israel, in virtue of which the promises remain true, and are inherited by the Church of Christ in all lands.

The re-establishment of the Temple worship with the appointment of priests and Levites, according to the ancient ordinance, naturally followed on the dedication.

**III. The celebration of the Passover (vers. 19-22).**

It took place on the fourteenth day of the first month, and probably, therefore, very soon after the dedication. They kept the feast, ... for the priests and Levites were purified together. The zeal of the sacerdotal class in attending to the prescriptions for ceremonial purity made it possible that the feast should be observed. How much of real devotion, and how much of mere eagerness to secure their official position, mingled with this zeal, cannot be determined. Probably there was a touch of both. Scrupulous observance of ritual is easy religion, especially if one's position is improved by it. But the connection pointed out by the writer is capable of wide applications. The true purity and earnestness of preachers and teachers of all degrees has much to do with their hearers and scholars participation in the blessings of the Gospel. If priests are not pure, they cannot kill the passover. Earnest teachers make earnest scholars. Foul hands cannot dispense the bread of life.

There is a slight deviation from the law in the ritual as here stated, since it was prescribed that each householder should kill the passover lamb for his house. But from the time of Hezekiah the Levites seem to have done it for the congregation (2 Chron. 30:17), and afterwards for the priests also (2 Chron. 35:11, 14).

Verse 21 tells that not only the returned exiles, but also all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, ate the passover. It may be questioned whether these latter were Israelites, the descendants of the residue who had not been deported, but who had fallen into idolatry during the exile, or heathens of the mixed populations who had been settled in the vacant country. The emphasis put on their turning to Israel and Israel's God seems to favour the latter supposition. But in any case, the fact presents us with an illustration of the proper effect of the presence anywhere of a company of God's true worshippers. If we purify ourselves, and keep the feast of the true passover with joy as well as purity, we shall not want for outsiders who will separate themselves from the more subtle and not less dangerous idolatries of modern life, to seek the Lord God of Israel. If His Israel is what it ought to be, it will attract. A bit of scrap-iron in contact with a magnet is a magnet. They who live in touch with Him who said, I will draw all men unto Me will share His attractive power in the measure of their union with Him.

The week after the passover feast was, according to the ritual, observed as the feast of unleavened bread. The narrative touches lightly on the ceremonial, and dwells in conclusion on the joy of the worshippers and its cause. They do well to be glad whom God makes glad. All other joy bears in it the seeds of death. It is, in one aspect, the end of God's dealings, that we should be glad in Him. Wise men will not regard that as a less noble end than making us pure; in fact, the two are united. The blessed God is glad in our gladness when it is His gladness.

Notice the exulting wonder with which God's miracle of mercy is reported in its source and its glorious result. The heart of the king was turned to them, and no power but God's could have done that. The issue of that divine intervention was the completed Temple, in which once more the God of that Israel which He had so marvellously restored dwelt in the midst of His people.