

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 3

by Dr. Ralph Davis

God's People in Gray Times (Ezra 3)

Calvin Coolidge published some truisms in his 1930 news column. These were observations like: Our banking system is not yet perfect; public officers are not infallible; the future may be better or worse. Such conditions roughly typified life for the Jewish remnant around 538 B.C. It was hopeful — but hard; encouraging to a point — but tough. There were sort of gray times. But Ezra 3 seems to indicate that God's people can live through their gray times. What can we expect as God's people, and what are our duties in such times?

I. The Circumstances We Will Face – Ezra 3:1-6

The focus here is on the altar not the temple itself (note Ezra 3:2). Observe how the text describes Israel and, by implication, us.

They are *fearful* (Ezra 3:3). They “set up the altar,” then note the causal connection: “for [it was] on account of dread upon them because of the peoples of the lands.” The NIV obscures the connection (see the NASB). The “peoples” apparently mean not only the Samaritans, but also those of the lands around.

They are *faithful* (Ezra 3:2,4). Joshua and company joined Zerubbabel and company in building the altar to offer burnt offerings “as it is written in the torah of Moses the man of God” (Ezra 3:2). Then verse 4 relates that they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles “as it is written.” Their worship was inaugurated and carried out in accordance with what God required of them (“as it is written”). Indeed, they established a program of regular, ongoing worship (Ezra 3:5-6). Now bring in verse 3 again – that verse implies that their fears drove them to worship, to seek God. Is that legitimate? Should we have higher motives? Maybe. But what's wrong with this? In our fears, what better recourse can we have than God? Why shouldn't we take our fears to his altar (cf. Jacob's very candid prayer in Gen. 32:11-12)? In their altar building they unashamedly assumed that God was their refuge. Together these two sub-points make a crucial point: you can be fearful and faithful at the same time.

They are *fragile* (Ezra 3:4). Note the reference to observing the “Feast of Booths” or “Feast of Tabernacles.” The “seventh month” in verse 1 indicates the time for this festival. Pay special attention here to Leviticus 23:39-40,42-43 (cf. also Num. 29:12-38, where the types and amounts of sacrifices for the Feast of Tabernacles are outlined). The Feast of Tabernacles was meant to remind Israel of their wilderness experience post-Egypt; during this week they were to live in lean-tos or huts (“booths”), which conjured up so vividly their precarious existence during the wilderness years, to remind them of how fragile their life was at that time. It was as if God

were saying to Israel, “That’s always the situation of my people. Don’t ever forget that your life hangs by a mere thread.” The Feast of Tabernacles, or “Wilderness-Reminder Week,” was Yahweh’s annual reminder that our lives can often be bleak, uncertain, and insecure, and that he is our only sustainer. Strange, isn’t it, how God often makes us combine worship with fear and uncertainty?

II. The Restoration We Can Expect – Ezra 3:7-11

This description goes beyond restoring the altar – now Israel looks to rebuild and restore the whole temple. So, there is preparation (obtaining materials [3:7]), organization (providing oversight [3:8-9]), and celebration (over the beginning of the work [3:10-11]).

Pay special attention to verses 10-11, especially verse 11, and then look at the promise of Jeremiah 33:7,10-11:

“I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first...” Thus says the Lord, “Yet again there will be heard in this place, of which you say, ‘It is a waste, without man and without beast,’ that is, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who say, ‘Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, For the Lord is good, For His lovingkindness is everlasting’; and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the Lord. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first,” says the Lord.

Think what it must have been like when the Babylonians finally creamed Jerusalem and the temple (the situation Jeremiah’s word presupposes). In that heap of rubble and smoking destruction, who would ever have thought that this day (of Ezra 3:10-11) would come? Do you see why the lyrics of Ezra 3:11 are so important? They show that Jeremiah 33:11 was beginning to be fulfilled! Against all human likelihood, God’s people saw God’s goodness again! It’s very simple in one way, but sometimes you need to hear that word in your despair and sadness: you will yet see the goodness of God again. That is, by the way, typical of God (cf. Ps. 30:4-5; Joel 2:25 RSV).

Initially, rebuilding the temple here might not strike you as terribly exciting. But you should look at it differently once you realize that from the perspective of the people in Ezra’s day, it looked like the temple had no chance of being rebuilt. Christians are no strangers to these things, for our lives are as sin-racked as Israel’s and Judah’s. Consider the man who has engaged in pre-marital sex, brought shame on Christ, and decimated his own life. Yet, he is brought to repentance, is restored, and later is able to establish a home with a loving spouse. Or think of a daughter in her twenties who seems to have left behind and forgotten all the claims of Christ. She is long in the far country, and then the Father brings her back. Then there are relationships so

marred that it looks like they will never be healed, and yet... Yahweh can make you sing again. This is the restoration you can expect.

III. The Disappointment We Must Control – Ezra 3:12-13

What a mixed response! From Ezra 3:12b it looks like the memory of the first temple clouded the day for some (see 1 Kings 5-7 on Solomon's temple). The older folks could still recall that magnificence. And they could tell from the foundation of this projected temple that it would have none of the "pizzazz" of Solomon's. There is no problem here with the candor of their weeping, but there is a danger in it — it could color the whole occasion. But you can understand them, can you not?

In 1953 my father purchased a new car, a 1953 Chevrolet. As usual, he selected the most basic, stripped-down, economical model. He bought the "150" model, which had black rubber instead of chrome trim on the back fender. There was no radio. It had only regular hubcaps, no wheel covers, and a standard transmission, no "Power Glide." It was nothing like the fine looking "Bel Air" model. This second temple was a "150" model, and a major disappointment to those who had seen Solomon's Bel Air style.

Sometimes nostalgia like this can kill a church. We can also have problems if a church does not meet our expectations in its ministry or fellowship. In our culture of hyped-expectations, we tend to think that what is low-key, ordinary, plain, simple and quiet must be rather worthless — and this attitude can infect God's people. Sometimes we can be so caught up in desiring revival (not a series of meetings, but when God's Spirit is poured out in a striking way) that we may forget that it's possible to be faithful even when God doesn't send revival. We can still engage in family worship, sincere public worship, loving intercessory prayer, consistent Christian living in school or workplace. Don't despise the "day of small things" (Zech. 4:10). What matters is not whether the church is grand, but whether she is genuine. The question is not "Is it jazzy here?" but "Is Jesus here?"

Can the people of God live through their gray days? Yes, by running with their fears to worship their Savior; by expecting that though God has dashed their hopes they will yet see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living; and by being content when God prefers to work in plain, ordinary, non-sensational ways.