



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Ezra 6:13-22

Topic

The prophets Haggai & Zechariah encourage the Israelites as they work to complete their stone and timber Temple

Title

*“The Stone Temple Prophets”*

If I never hear the phrase, “Eye of the tiger,” again, it will be too soon. Or the song.

I concede that it is iconic. And, like every true Italian-American, I love the *Rocky* franchise.

I try to avoid using those kind of popular expressions. [Just sayin’](#).

Did you know that both Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney used the song on the campaign trail?

Just for fun, I Googled “Eye of the Tiger sermons.” To my dismay, there are a ton of them. And not just from the 1980’s. One I found was preached in 2014. It began, “God is looking for men with one trait...The Eye Of The Tiger!!!”

I know what you're thinking: “Gene, **Keep calm and give the Bible study.**”

“Eye of the tiger” worked when it was first used in *Rocky 3*. Enamored by the world, Rocky lost his way, so Apollo Creed returned him to his humble roots, where he recaptured what he had lost.

In our verses, the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem had come back in humility to their roots. They recaptured what they had lost:

- They completed building the Temple, and dedicated it with a joyous celebration.
- They kept the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, as prescribed by Moses in the Law of God.

Not tigers, but *lambs* were predominate:

- 400 lambs were among the 712 animals sacrificed at the Temple's dedication.
- One lamb was slain for each household for Passover.

After seventy years captive in Babylon; and twenty-one years constructing the Temple; they were back to where they belonged.

If you are in Christ, there are going to be times you get off course. It may be a full-on backslide into sin; or it may be a slight, but nonetheless significant, detour off the path.

It may even involve works of diligent service to the Lord, but ones that are fleshly rather than Spirit-empowered.

You'll want to get back.

That will be our theme as I organize my comments around two points: #1 Get Back To Celebrating The Joy Of Your Salvation, and #2 Get Back To Celebrating The Joy Of Your Savior.

# #1 Get Back To Celebrating The Joy Of Your Salvation

(v13-18)

Getting “off-track” is an expression I can live with. Apparently getting off-track was a common problem among the first generation of Christians:

- The apostle Paul said to the Galatians, “You were doing so well. Who caused you to stop following the truth?” (5:7 ERV).
- The church in Ephesus started well, but Jesus wrote to them, saying, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen” (Revelation 2:5).

There are multiple exhortations in the New Testament to awake from spiritual slumber; to remain sober, alert, and watchful. Others tell you to complete the race you’ve begun.

We’re told of the returned exiles, in verses sixteen and twenty-two, that they returned to **joy**. We will know we have returned if we have joy.

Ezr 6:13 Then Tattenai, governor of *the region* beyond the River, Shethar-Boznai, and their companions diligently did according to what King Darius had sent.

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The local Persian authorities wanted proof that the Jews had permission from the government to rebuild their Temple. A letter of inquiry was sent to King Darius. A search of the archives yielded the previous decree of King Cyrus giving the Jews permission, and funding, to return, and to build.

Ezr 6:14 So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished *it*, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

“They prospered through the prophesying.” I imagine Haggai and Zechariah going around and encouraging the workers with the Word of

God. It created a soundtrack, a playlist, that encouraged their joy.

Hobby Lobby - not my favorite store; it's a guy thing. But I love their music soundtrack. It's mostly old *Maranatha Music!* songs that remind me of when I first got saved. It's hard not to sing along.

I'm not saying you can't listen to secular music, or to talk radio. But I will challenge you to get back to listening to more praise music; and to solid preaching.

Ezra mentioned both God and the Persian kings. It reminds us God superintendents history to ensure the outcome He has promised in His Word will surely come to pass; but that He does it without violating our free will.

Artaxerxes belongs to the next century - to the next phase. Ezra mentions him here thematically, not chronologically.

God turned the hearts of all these kings to keep his plan on track. *You go, God!*

Ezr 6:15 Now the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

The Temple was completed twenty-one years after it was begun. Just in case you thought your contractor was slow.

Here is an interesting tidbit for you scholars. It's likely that the completion of the Temple is the event that marks the end of the seventy-years prophecy given by Jeremiah, and discovered by Daniel. Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 586<sub>BC</sub>. The Second Temple was completed "in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius," which was seventy-years later, in 516<sub>BC</sub>.

Ezr 6:16 Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Reporting on the dedication, the writer could have chosen any number of descriptions, but Ezra settled on the one word most appropriate: Joy. All of their hopes and dreams; all of their many emotions; everything they felt; could be summarized as joy.

It's hard to describe or to define our joy in Christ. One author put it this way: "Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as He causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the Word and in the world."

Ezr 6:17 And they offered sacrifices at the dedication of this house of God, one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

The commentators make a big deal out of how much grander the dedication of the First Temple was. There were something like a hundred times more animals sacrificed.



On a practical level, there were fewer Israelites to offer sacrifice in the Second Temple. They didn't kill animals for no reason.

Spiritually, grandeur doesn't matter. You can't build a house for God; not really. The thing that matters is His presence.

Today, we are His Temple - both our individual bodies that are in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit, and our gathered 'body' of believers. The building is of no real consequence - unless it takes away from His glory. All of our decisions ought to take into account what will point us to God, and what He's done for us, and not what we've done for Him.

Ezr 6:18 They assigned the priests to their divisions and the Levites to their divisions, over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

After the dedication, the daily sacrifices and offerings kicked-in.

It may have been a let-down after such a big celebration. The mundane can get monotonous.

It shouldn't. How can it seem monotonous to be in a relationship with the Living God? How can we grow bored serving Him?

Here are a few ways. First (and perhaps foremost): Sin. Nothing like sin to rob you of your joy. For one thing, sin grieves the Holy Spirit, so He can't produce the fruit of joy.

Second: Suffering; and trials in general. We initially think our troubles to be strange and out of character for God. Without a solid theology of suffering, joy immediately goes out the window.

What do I mean by a theology of suffering? This will summarize it. The same night Jesus told His disciples, "I have told you these things so that My joy will be in you and your joy may be complete," He said, "in the world you will have tribulation" (John 15:11 & 16:33).

Joy doesn't depend on circumstances. It transcends them as the Holy Spirit shows us the beauty of Jesus in the Word, and in the world.

Over the years I've come to the conclusion that neither sin nor suffering is the major joy-killer. Self-righteousness and self-effort are often overlooked.

I quoted the apostle Paul writing to the Galatians. They had been born-again, by grace through faith. Certain legalistic teachers, called Judaizers, came and convinced them they must also keep the Law of Moses. It was an appeal to their self-righteousness as opposed to the righteousness of Jesus. So Paul said, "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (3:3).

What is self-effort? You see it in the church in Ephesus. I quoted Jesus, telling them that they had fallen. He first talked about their many good works. He described them in a way any church would love to be described.

They weren't returning to the Law of Moses. But they had left their first love for Jesus. Their motives were wrong. You might say they were building with wood, hay, and stubble rather than things that were precious.

Whether your joy was lost to something obvious, or subtle, you need to get back to the joy of your salvation.

When the Jews dedicated the Second Temple, with all of the animal sacrifices, it was a reminder of what God did to provide salvation. He promised in the Garden of Eden to come as a man and die for the sins of the whole world; to be the Savior of the whole world - especially those who believe. Each sacrificed lamb pointed to the coming of Jesus as the final Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world.

The joy of your salvation involves the assurance you are saved. You've been born-again, with your name written in the Book of Life never to be blotted out.

You could be raptured at any moment; but since that is unpredictable, and you might die, it is knowing that to be absent from your body in death is to be immediately present with Jesus.

It is knowing that everything in your life is being worked together for your ultimate good, because Jesus promised He would complete the work He started in you - which is nothing short of you being made into His image.

It is trusting that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you, where you will be reunited with your believing loved ones, and enjoy an eternity of love and bliss.

**Whether** you're in sin, or suffering, or being self-righteous, or relying on self-effort - recognize it and repent and return to joy - a joy unspeakable and full of glory.

## #2 Get Back To Celebrating The Joy Of Your Savior

(v19-22)

You should know this about the seven calendar feasts of Israel. The feasts are in a perfect prophetic order that itself is a picture of God's plan for the redemption of human beings and the restoration of creation:

- There are four spring feasts and they were fulfilled by Jesus - to the very day - in His first coming.
- The final three fall feasts will likewise be fulfilled by Him in His Second Coming.

What do I mean by fulfilled? Jesus died just as the Jews were sacrificing the Passover lambs; He was in the tomb but suffered no corruption, as pictured by the Feast of Unleavened Bread; He rose from the dead on First-fruits as the first-fruits of the future resurrection; and He sent the Holy Spirit upon the church on Pentecost following His ascension.

Wow!

Ezr 6:19 And the descendants of the captivity kept the Passover on the fourteenth *day* of the first month.

Centuries earlier, the Jews were slaves in Egypt. After sending nine plagues upon the Egyptians, the tenth and final plague was the death of the firstborn. You'd be saved if you killed a lamb, and put its blood on your doorposts. The Angel of the Lord would see the blood of your substitute, and 'pass over' your house.

I've already mentioned that Jesus is the final Lamb, whose death on the cross saves all who trust in Him. The apostle Paul even says Christ is our Passover (First Corinthians 5:7).

Ezr 6:20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them *were ritually* clean. And they slaughtered the Passover *lambs* for all the descendants of the captivity, for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.

They celebrated their first Passover in the new Temple. How cool was that? To be among that crowd was something special.

**We do not celebrate the feasts of Israel.** They are not for us. Observing them is a step backward into Judaism, with its self-righteousness. We can learn about Jesus by studying the feasts without observing them.

Ezr 6:21 Then the children of Israel who had returned from the captivity ate together with all who had separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land in order to seek the LORD God of Israel.

“The filth of the nations of the [promised] land.” Like what? Like infant sacrifice. Here is a quote from an archeological website:

Put together the Biblical evidence, the evidence of multiple highly regarded ancient historians, the archeological evidence and the conclusion becomes overwhelming and inescapable. The



Canaanites really did practice child sacrifice. Human sacrifice was widespread amongst many cultures in ancient times but infant sacrifice was relatively unknown outside of Canaanite civilization. The deliberate murder of infant children was a pronounced feature of Canaanite religion. The Bible does not exaggerate the crimes of the Canaanites.

Some of the recent, more liberal, proposed abortion legislation puts our generation in a position worse than the Canaanites. USA Today, reporting on proposed legislation in Virginia, said, “Democrats in Virginia calmly describe their ghoulish plans to murder babies as they were being delivered, and after.”

BioEdge, which reports on medical ethics, posted a story titled, *After-birth Abortion Already Exists in the Netherlands*.

They celebrated “Together with all who had separated themselves...” Anyone, from any tongue or tribe or nation, could be saved.

God has never been willing that any should perish. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but instead seeks to bring them into salvation by His Creation speaking to them, and by the testimony of His people.

Ezr 6:22 And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the LORD made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The Medo-Persian empire included Assyria. Why Ezra refers to it here, I can't say. But it again reminds us of God's providence. He didn't start being involved in history with Babylon; no, the former Assyrian Empire was used by Him to discipline His people before the Babylonians and the Persians. [God's got this.](#)

**When** we here the phrase, "the joy of your Savior," we rightfully think of the joy He desires *for* us, and that abiding in Him produces *in* us.

**It can also be the joy we bring to Him.** In Zephaniah 3:17 we read,

Zephaniah 3:17 The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will **rejoice** over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will **rejoice** over you with singing."

True - Zephaniah was writing about Jews in the future Kingdom of Heaven on earth. But it establishes that God's people can bring Him joy.

Jesus is going to one day present us to His Father, like a Bridegroom introducing His bride:

Ephesians 5:27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

I'd say that it will bring Him joy to do so.

We need to **think outside the box** and realize that we can bring joy to our Savior's heart.

Who wouldn't want to bring Him joy, considering all He has done?

If you are not in Christ - it would bring Jesus and all Heaven joy for you to get saved.

For us in Christ... ask Him where *you* can bring Him joy.