

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

Ezra Nehemiah Esther

People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Ezra

Chapter Six

"Take 'Dead' out of Dedicated"

Introduction

Christians have a reputation for being dull, boring, and not knowing how to have any fun.

Do you resent that remark? **Or do you resemble it!**

I hope you resent it and are enjoying your walk with the Lord. I must say, however, that I have encountered a lot of believers over the years who really don't have much fun at all. They would be offended at the mere suggestion that the word 'fun' be used in conjunction with Jesus.

We need to get beyond our images of the Lord as the somber individual who never laughed or joked around. Too many of us see Him as He was portrayed in the TV miniseries, *Jesus of Nazareth*. I've told you before that the actor who played Jesus never once blinks on screen. It gives Jesus an eerie look, as if He is some kind of zombie.

Did Jesus ever have fun?

1. Jesus was completely filled with the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is joy. So we know Jesus was overflowing with supernatural joy.
2. There is humor in many of the Lord's sayings and parables. Jesus could even be sarcastic at times, towards the Scribes and Pharisees.
3. We need also to remember that Jesus was a Jew. The Jews are a singing, celebratory people. Rent *Fiddler on the Roof* to

remind yourself how they loved to party – even in the grip of oppression.

The Jews rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem worked hard, *and they played harder!* They were dedicated to the work; but, as you see them celebrating at the completion of the building, you understand that they took ‘dead’ out of dedication and knew how to rejoice in the Lord.

Our goal isn't to simply cut-loose of all restraint to have more of what the world calls ‘fun.’ It is to recognize that the Christian life is, or ought to be, a life that is anything but dull and boring, one in which it's more than OK to celebrate and enjoy ourselves.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Dedicate Yourself to the Hard Work of Constructing God's Building, and #2 Dedicate Yourself to the Happy Work of Celebrating as God's Building.

#1 Dedicate Yourself to the Hard Work
Of Constructing God's Building
(v1-14)

When last we left them, the Jews had begun rebuilding the Temple after a sixteen year delay. The local, non-Jewish population had challenged their authority to build, and even sent a formal letter to the king of Persia. Chapter six begins with the response to their letter.

Ezra 6:1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and a search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.

Ezra 6:2 And at Achmetha, in the palace that *is* in the province of Media, a scroll was found, and in it a record was written thus:

Initially they could not locate the authorization to rebuild the Temple. It wasn't in the archives in Babylon. They kept looking and found it at a second location, Achmetha.

The government isn't always against you. We should work within it, obeying its laws, unless and until they conflict with the furthering of the Gospel.

Each week I point out that you are God's Temple on earth:

1. Each individual believer is the Temple of the Holy Spirit
2. Every gathering of believers is a Temple in which the Lord dwells spiritually.

Today we're going to be talking about being dedicated to the hard work of building those spiritual structures. As we read the following decree, I want us to think about the hard work that rebuilding entailed. Think about what it would have really been like to be a laborer on that construction site. It will put your own dedication into focus.

Ezra 6:3 In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree *concerning* the house of God at Jerusalem: "Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices; and let the foundations of it be firmly laid, its height sixty cubits *and* its width sixty cubits,

Scholars point out that the finished Temple did not follow the square footage suggested by King Cyrus. Still, there was a plan for the rebuilding. I suggest to you that planning can be very hard work.

When I was in sales, we had a saying: "Plan your work and work your plan." I think sometimes Christians feel it somehow quenches the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit if they have a plan. To the contrary: It gives Him all the more freedom. Besides, why can't planning be an activity led by the Spirit?

Dedicate yourself to planning. Planning involves the praying and preparation no one else sees, but that God blesses.

Ezra 6:4 *with three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber...*

Those *stones* and *timbers* were heavy! There is a lot of hard physical work necessary when you are busy building for God. Dedicate yourself to volunteering where and when you are needed.

Ezra 6:4 *with three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber. Let the expenses be paid from the king's treasury.*

In their case, they were blessed to have their project underwritten by government funding. That is not the usual manner of support for a work of God on earth. God wants His work supported by His people.

We must dedicate ourselves to supporting God's work with our finances. God doesn't need your money; but you need to give it to Him.

Ezra 6:5 Also let the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which *is* in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and taken back to the temple which *is* in Jerusalem, *each to its place*; and deposit *them* in the house of God" –

Each to its place reminds you that some things are preset by God and should not be altered or tampered with. We must give an honored and cherished *place* to the reading and teaching of God's Word; and to the worship of God; and to the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. There is a lot of freedom within those things; but we must be dedicated to the hard work of maintaining them.

Ezra 6:6 Now *therefore*, Tattenai, governor of *the region* beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Persians who *are* beyond the River, keep yourselves far from there.

Ezra 6:7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site.

Tattenai and Shethar-Boznai get hammered in this letter! We don't really care about them; we care about what this meant for the rebuilders of God's house.

The leaders of the Jews are mentioned. Leadership is hard work! It requires real dedication. It should only be attempted by those called, raised-up, and gifted by God. In the Church, we should not be looking for the same qualities we would look for in the world. We should be waiting upon God and looking (as much as possible) upon the heart.

Ezra 6:8 Moreover I issue a decree *as to* what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes *on the region* beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered.

Ezra 6:9 And whatever they need – young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who *are* in Jerusalem – let it be given them day by day without fail,

Ezra 6:10 that they may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

Notice that the Jews were supplied with animals and food for offering daily sacrifices. It was a lot of hard work performing all of the functions in the Temple; and these guys were dedicated to doing it while the Temple was yet unfinished.

Conditions for serving God are often less than ideal. You can't afford to wait until the conditions get better. You need to work hard with the resources, and in the circumstances, God has provided.

Ezra 6:11 Also I issue a decree that whoever alters this edict, let a timber be pulled from his house and erected, and let him be hanged on it; and let his house be made a refuse heap because of this.

Ezra 6:12 And may the God who causes His name to dwell there destroy any king or people who put their hand to alter it, or to destroy this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I Darius issue a decree; let it be done diligently.

I had in mind a picture of Darius dictating this letter. When he gets to the end, he tells his secretary, "Just add the standard clause about hanging folks and making their house a refuse heap if they fail to comply."

What do these verses reveal about God's people? If you were a Jew, this kind of talk would remind you that no foreign power could ever overthrow you if you were walking in obedience with God. The Jews had fallen to Babylon, and then into the hands of the Persians, because of their own sin against God.

The same is true of us. We fail and fall when we are asleep spiritually or grow sluggish in our walk with God. He has given you great victory; He has provided you abundant spiritual resources. But they must be believed and appropriated. Dedicate or rededicate yourself to God, and work hard at growing in the Lord.

Ezra 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.

Ezra 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.

There are at least two things we want to mention in these verses about their dedication:

1. First, they **prospered** when they listened to the prophets. We must remain dedicated to hearing from the Lord.
2. Second, if you do the math, it took them about twenty-one years to rebuild the Temple. That's a long time to remain enthused, and to stay dedicated.

Are we having fun yet? You shouldn't think that dedication to working hard somehow cancels-out having fun. Quite the contrary! It leads to greater celebration.

#2 Dedicate Yourself to the Happy Work Of Celebrating As God's Building (v15-22)

Joyful celebrations mark the remaining verses of this chapter. Joyful celebrating should mark our lives as Christians, and as a Church. In fact, *any* time and *every* time we are together, it is cause for a joyful celebration.

Ezra 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.

Ezra 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.

They held a building dedication service. I like that because it shows they weren't building just to get back on God's calendar. They weren't building just because they had to. They wanted to rebuild. They were genuinely excited about what they were doing.

There is certainly a place for special services – like our **H20** celebration last May, or the upcoming **Calvary 21** birthday bash. We should grow in the understanding that services are always special times to celebrate since the Lord is here with us as we gather.

We should be excited about coming to Church; and happy we are here. If you are not, ask yourself, "Why not?"

Ezra 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.

Ezra 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.

Everyone had a role in the building dedication. It's the same today; only you are the building being dedicated! You and I are to be living sacrifices, wholly dedicated to God.

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

Ezra 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.

Ezra 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.

Ezra 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.

Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately following Passover are specifically mentioned. They are shorthand for the fact that the Jews started keeping all God's prescribed feasts and festivals. *being changed to bring change -*

We want to highlight the repetition of the idea that all of it was *joyful*. It's mentioned three times in these few closing verses. They worked hard for the Lord; I would dare say that they played hard for Him in their celebrations.

You can go through the motions of attending Church, and serving in the Church, as an act of obedience or obligation; or you can be joyful about serving the Creator of the universe, who is your personal Savior.

It gets tough because this kind of spiritual happiness cannot always be gauged outwardly. In other words, I wouldn't say you are happy

just because you are exuberant, or boisterous. Singing louder, or standing while you worship, don't prove you have the joy of the Lord.

All I can say is what I said earlier. I have encountered a lot of believers over the years who really don't have much fun at all.

It's getting worse. There has been, over the last few years, a movement among Christians to get more 'reverent' in Church:

1. It comes in the form of criticism of services which seem too casual. Music has especially become a target of this kind of criticism. Unless a song is filled with doctrine and theology, it is considered trite and irreverent.
2. It comes in the form of Churches rediscovering religious traditions that they say have mystical meaning. More-and-more Protestant churches, for example, are observing Lent in ways similar to the Roman Catholic Church – by giving up certain things and even receiving ashes on the forehead.

I'm against this movement towards formalism! I came out of formal religion, with ancient mystical traditions. All it did was keep me from knowing God.

Being formal does not make you more reverent. It may seem that way; but it always leads to an outward form of godliness that has no inward, transforming power.

Yes, we can become too casual, I suppose; we can even be irreverent if we're not careful. But those are matters of the heart – *not* outward ritual. Getting more ritualistic will not change our hearts for the better.

Let's take 'dead' out of dedicated. Work hard; then play hard – for the Lord!