

Celebrate Passover Liberation

Printed Text • Ezra 6:13-22

Devotional Reading • Exodus 2:23-25

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE the celebration prompted by the completion of the new Temple, IDENTIFY reasons to celebrate God's goodness, and JOIN TOGETHER as believers in celebrating and sharing the Good News of God's love.

In Focus

Pastor Perry in Illinois was called of God to build a church, both the congregation and the building. Neighbors came to hear Pastor Perry share the Word encouragingly, and the congregation soon tied together in bonds of love. Then, Perry purchased land with cash and the next step was to build the church. But that process would prove to be difficult. Before any construction could begin, the village had to approve a church building being constructed on the land. Did it have the correct zoning codes? Did the village really need another church? Was there a way to use the land that would get the village more capital? After several village meetings the board voted against a church structure being constructed.

There were times when the pastor became discouraged and wondered if God really told him to build a church for His glory. The congregation would try one more time to get the village to approve the construction of the church building. Seeing such a groundswell of local support, the village finally approved the building project. Everyone rejoiced. Even after the village approved the construction, the church faced other obstacles. But the will of God prevailed! Finally, the construction was completed and a dedication service was held. The people rejoiced, and felt in their hearts that God was pleased.

How have you seen a large project, like this building project, bring people together?

Keep In Mind

"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." (Ezra 6:16, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Captivity (Ezra 6:19) golah (Heb.) – Anyone who has been deported as a slave or taken into captivity

B. Purified (v. 20) taher (Heb.) – To be clean, whether from a disease or from sin

Say It Correctly

Artaxerxes. Ar-tuh-ZURK-seez

Adar. Ah-DAR

Iddo. EE-doe

Persepolis. Per-SHE-poe-liss

Tishri. TEESH-ree

KJV

Ezra 6:13 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.

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.

NLT

Ezra 6:13 Tattenai, governor of the province west of the Euphrates River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues complied at once with the command of King Darius.

14 So the Jewish elders continued their work, and they were greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. The Temple was finally finished, as had been commanded by the God of Israel and decreed by Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia.

15 The Temple was completed on March 12,[a] during the sixth year of King Darius's reign.

16 The Temple of God was then dedicated with great joy by the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the people who had returned from exile.

17 During the dedication ceremony for the Temple of God, 100 young bulls, 200 rams, and 400 male lambs were sacrificed. And 12 male goats were presented as a sin offering for the twelve tribes of Israel.

18 Then the priests and Levites were divided into their various divisions to serve at the Temple of God in Jerusalem, as prescribed in the Book of Moses.

Celebration of Passover

19 On April 21[b] the returned exiles celebrated Passover.

20 The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were ceremonially clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves.

21 The Passover meal was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile and by the others in the land who had turned from their corrupt practices to worship the Lord, the God of Israel.

22 Then they celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days. There was great joy throughout the land because the Lord had caused the king of Assyria[c] to be favorable to them, so that he helped them to rebuild the Temple of God, the God of Israel.

The People, Places, and Times

Sin Offering. This offering is also known as a guilt offering. It was presented for unconscious or conscious sins for which there was no possible restitution. This offering signified repentance and a search for divine forgiveness. For example, if one did not give his servants their due, such a person could make a sin offering. Usually this offering was also accompanied by a fine.

Darius's Building. An effective organizer and administrator, Darius I of Persia developed trade; built a network of roads; established a postal system; standardized a system of coinage, weights, and measures; and initiated fabulous building projects such as Persepolis, Achmetha, and Babylon. Darius continued Cyrus the Great's policy of restoring the Jewish people to their homeland. In 520 BC, Darius's second year as king, the Jews resumed work on the still-unfinished Temple in Jerusalem. Darius assisted with the project by ordering it to continue and even sending a generous subsidy to help restore worship in the Temple. The Temple was completed in 515 BC, in the sixth year of Darius's reign.

Think of the stories from the prophet Daniel.

How else did God influence Darius during his reign in Persia?

Background

The decree had gone forth from King Cyrus for the Children of Israel to rebuild the Temple after their captivity in Babylon. Unfortunately the job was not completed under Cyrus's reign. Because of this, when the Jews were trying to complete the Temple later on, local leaders raised concerns about who told them to rebuild it. Darius was king at the time, and he issued an order that the archives be searched for the decree made by King Cyrus. The decree was discovered. King Darius in turn issued his own decree to finish the work (Ezra 6:8).

The expenses of this project were to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work would not stop. Whatever was needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given to them daily without fail, so that they could offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons. Thus begins today's lesson.

At-A-Glance

1. The People Finish and Rejoice (Ezra 6:13–16)
2. The People of Israel Offer Sacrifices (vv. 17–18)
3. The Feasts Celebrated (vv. 19–22)

In Depth

1. The People Finish and Rejoice (Ezra 6:13–16)

The Temple was finally completed! God's people had been through so much. They had endured many obstacles, but the finished product was now visible and they rejoiced! They rejoiced because the favor of the Lord had been upon them as they sought to honor God by re-instituting worship at the

Temple. To start a work and see it to completion is a sign of the grace of the Most High. Israel knew this.

The Temple was completed, but not by human powers. From the touching of the hearts of Cyrus and Darius, to providing funds to complete the work, it was all of God. It was God who initiated the project by His Spirit. It was God who guided their hands to its completion. The house belonged to God. It was therefore logical to dedicate the building back to God. All our victories and accomplishments are because God has favored us.

How many times do we complete a task after many struggles and then get it in our head that it was by our own strength?

2. The People of Israel Offer Sacrifices (vv. 17–18)

The Children of Israel did not just sing and dance and shout; they brought an offering. They could have said, “We have already worked. We gave our time and we gave our talent; we do not need to give any more sacrifices.” But they went a step further and offered sacrifices.

The Children of Israel were doing things in order and according to what was written in the books of Moses. During the dedication of the new Temple, they offered sacrifices. Sacrificial offerings in the Old Testament were a means to atone for human sins and restore people back to God. Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, did away with all of that when He died for us once and for all on the Cross. The Children of Israel offered what is called a sin offering. This included the blood from bulls, rams, lambs, and goats.

3. The Feasts Celebrated (vv. 19–22)

In a sense this was a second exodus. The freed captives had just been delivered from the house of exile. The Passover, as celebrated by Hebrew people, is the archetype (or pattern) of divine intervention in the life of God’s people. It is not a coincidence that the Temple’s dedication occurred just before Passover. What better time to declare the glorious grace of the Most High who rescues the lonely and restores those who are accounted dead?

It was the 14th day of the first month, and everyone was ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their brothers, the priests, and for themselves. They separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel. For seven days they celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread joyfully because the Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Persia, so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel. When the Lord blesses us to complete a task, may we rejoice in hope and rededicate ourselves to God.

Why were purification rites important before celebrating Passover?

Search the Scriptures

1. When was the Temple completed (v. 15)?
2. What was offered during the dedication (v. 17)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why was it important for those returning from exile to celebrate the Passover?
2. God used three pagan kings to do His will in rebuilding Jerusalem. What does this reveal about God and His plans for His nation?

Liberating Lesson

Often we start projects and do not complete them in a speedy manner. If God gives us a command, we must complete the job speedily. A lot of our obstacles can be avoided if we do things in a timely manner and not procrastinate. In today's lesson we see that the Temple was completed, but what obstacles could have been avoided if the elders had moved swiftly after they received the first command from King Cyrus? What are you procrastinating?

Application for Activation

Examine your own life. Think of some projects you are currently working on that you can speed up the process. Pray for God to make a way to finish the project.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ezra 6:13-22

When the Jews originally started work on rebuilding the Temple, their Samaritan neighbors opposed them. The Samaritans brought court cases to Persian officials and were able to halt the Israelites' work on the Temple (Ezra 4:5) and Jerusalem's walls (vv. 6-24). Work on the Temple stopped for 16 years until God sent His prophets Haggai and Zechariah, during the second year of the reign of Darius of Persia, to encourage the Jews to resume rebuilding the Temple (Haggai 1:1-3; Zechariah 1:1). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel (governor) and Jeshua (the high priest), the people immediately went back to work rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 5:1-2).

When word of the rebuilding reached Tatnai, the Persian governor west of the Euphrates River, and Shethar-boznai his aide, they sent a letter to King Darius informing him of the Jewish activities and asking if there was any legal basis for the work. Darius had his officials search the royal archives in Babylon to find Cyrus's original decree without success. The order was finally found in the city of Achmetha (or Ecbatana) in the province of Media (6:1-2).

When Darius read the decree, he allowed the rebuilding work to continue and added his own order to it. The Persian officials were not only ordered not to interfere with the Jews but to help finance the

operation from their treasury and to supply the Jews with any animals they needed for sacrifice (vv. 8–9).

13 Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shethar-boznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily.

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.

Tatnai and Shethar-boznai had been opposed to building the Temple previously, but once they received the orders from King Darius, they helped the Jews instead of hindering them. They complied with the king's decree, and work on the Temple continued and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. "Prophesying" refers to preaching, teaching, or predicting the future. The word written here is *nebuah* (neh-vooh-AH), and is in Aramaic, rather than Hebrew. Aramaic is a language closely related to Hebrew, and was originally spoken in Upper Mesopotamia and became the most widely used language in the Babylonian and subsequent Persian Empire. Jews returning from exile spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic. The books of Daniel and Ezra contain both Hebrew and Aramaic sections of text.

Ezra asserts that their prosperity was "through the prophesying," not to be credited to chance or to King Darius's kindness but to God alone. It was God acting through His prophets who had required and encouraged the people to proceed in the work, and it was His mighty power that moved Darius's heart to allow the work to continue.

In the end, the Jews were following various decrees to build the Temple, but there is an order to Ezra's list of whose commandment they were following. First and most importantly, they built "according to the commandments of the God of Israel." God had given instructions as to how His sanctuary should be built, with specific dimensions and materials. These commandments had to be obeyed. Secondly, they also chose to obey the commandments of the earthly rulers, the kings of Persia. Here Ezra reviews all three different rulers who favored the Jews in their return from captivity and the rebuilding of the Temple.

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.

On March 12, 515 BC in the sixth year of the reign of Darius, the Temple was completed—20 years after the foundation had been laid during under the reign of Cyrus. When they completed the Temple, which became known as Zerubbabel's Temple, it was 90 feet high and 90 feet wide (6:3). This was much smaller and far less grand than Solomon's original Temple. However, this Temple would stand for 100 years longer than Solomon's Temple did.

The Israelites celebrated the dedication of the Temple with a great feast similar to the one that Solomon had when he dedicated the original Temple (1 Kings 8:23). The reference to the "children of Israel" affirms that there were members of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who returned from Babylonian captivity along with the vast majority from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This is also likely given that one goat for each tribe is given as a sin offering during the dedication (v. 17). The

priests and the Levites led the Temple dedication. Of the 12 tribes, the tribe of Levi, was set aside for ritual religious service. Within the tribe of Levi, only those descended from the bloodline of Aaron could serve as priests. Other families from the tribe were assigned various duties linked with Tabernacle or Temple worship.

The priesthood was vital to the practice of Old Testament faith. The Aramaic word for priest is the same as the Hebrew word: kohen (koh-HANE), which occurs over 700 times in the Old Testament. The priest had a trifold ministry of (1) watching over and guarding the covenant, (2) teaching God's precepts and law, and (3) offering incense and offerings at God's altar (Deuteronomy 33:9–10).

The high priest had two mediatorial functions which summed up the role of the priesthood. In his vestments the high priest had the Urim and Thummim (Deuteronomy 33:8). God spoke to the people through these twin instruments to provide guidance for His people and to communicate His will. The second function of the high priest involved a unique sacrifice. Once a year on the Day of Atonement the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle or Temple, carrying the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkling it on the cover of the Ark. This was done to atone for all the sins of all of God's people (Leviticus 16).

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.

The Aramaic word for "dedication" is hannukkah (KHAN-nuh-kah). Jews today have a different holiday called Hanukkah, honoring the re-dedication of the Temple after a political revolt in 160 BC, hundreds of years after this. The word hannukkah, however, is simply the word for dedication and is used in the Old Testament to describe a kind of sacrifice. The Old Testament emphasizes the dedication ceremonies that inaugurated the use of something for God's service. The joyful offerings at this dedication consisted of 100 male bulls, 200 rams, and 400 male lambs. Solomon offered 200 times more animals at the dedication of the original Temple, but because of the poor circumstances, this offering was limited. Their hundreds meant just as much to them as Solomon's thousands.

The Aramaic word for sin offering is the equivalent of the Hebrew khata'ah (chah- taw-AW). The sin offering, as explained in Leviticus 4–5, was sacrificed for those who committed a sin unintentionally or out of weakness or negligence as opposed to outright rebellion against God. The person sacrificing the animal would lay their hand on the animal's head to symbolize passing the person's sins onto the sacrifice. The animal would then die instead of the person. Blood would be sprinkled before the Temple's inner sanctuary and on the altar. Then all the animal's entrails and fat would be burned on the altar. The remaining carcass was taken outside of the camp to the dump heap and burned. This sacrifice showed blood covering sin, a pleasant smell of repentance rising to God, and the rest of our efforts being only worthy of burning with the rest of the trash. Different animals were sacrificed as sin offerings for different people: a young bull for a priest or for the entire congregation, a male goat for a leader, a female goat or lamb for any other individual, or two doves for those too poor for a lamb.

At this dedication celebration, they sacrificed one male goat for each tribe. This could mean that a leader from each tribe was present to lay his head on the goat's head as part of the sacrificial rite. Note also that purifying the entire congregation with a sin offering could have been done with a single young bull. The returning exiles, however, chose to show their devotion by selecting 12 goats, a more costly sacrifice and one that was more personal as each individual tribe was represented with its own goat.

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.

King David divided the descendants of Aaron who served as priest into 24 classes as the basis for rotating priestly duties (1 Chronicles 24:3, 7–19). Some of the classes died out or had to be consolidated with others, and new ones were formed to take their places. In the return from exile only four registered classes were represented (Ezra 2:36–39). By the time of Nehemiah’s return, 22 classes had been reinstated (Nehemiah 10:2–8). The Levites were also divided into groups, or courses, corresponding to the bloodlines of Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Exodus 6:16). The duty of the Levites was to assist Aaron’s descendants in the service of the Temple (Exodus 38:21; Numbers 3:6–7).

19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month.

With this verse Ezra’s text switches back to Hebrew from Aramaic. The switch is abrupt, but relevant. While the language of the Empire was used to discuss the building and completion of the Temple with imperial funds, the native language of the Hebrews is used to recount the celebration of this most formative of Jewish holidays: the Passover.

The “children of captivity” is a translation of the Hebrew *ben golah* (ben go-LAW). In this case *ben* is used idiomatically to denote children or descendants. *Golah* refers to anyone who has been deported as a slave or taken into captivity. In this case the phrase describes the descendants of those carried into Babylonian captivity. It is also a telling name for the Jews to use just before observing Passover, when they remember their freedom from captivity in Egypt.

The Passover is called *pasakh* (PEH-sakh) in Hebrew. This Hebrew verb means “to skip or pass over; to grant exemption from penalty or calamity.” The Passover is an annual feast that celebrates the day when the Lord selectively passed over the homes of those who put lambs’ blood over the door frames of their homes. On that night the firstborn male of every household who did not have the blood over the door frame was killed. This event precipitated Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The Passover lamb and its saving blood point to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, whose blood takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Israelites are faithfully observing the

feast on the correct day, as recorded in Exodus, which they knew as one of the books of Moses.

There are recorded God’s instructions to always celebrate the Passover on the 14th day of the first month, which corresponds to the beginning of spring. Even though the Jewish “New Year” Rosh Hashanah is celebrated in the autumn, the month of Passover is also remembered as the “first” month, because of its religious prominence. The month of Tishri is the first month on the calendar, but Adar is the “first” and most important month religiously. Similarly, in Christian liturgical calendars, the year begins with Advent on the first Sunday in December, even though more broadly speaking, January is 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.

“The Levites were purified together” means that they were all ready at one time to observe the proper rites and ceremonies. There was no need to postpone the celebration as was prescribed by law. If

circumstances made it necessary, the Passover could be postponed from the first month to the second (Numbers 9:10–11; cf. 2 Chronicles 30:3).

“Purified” is a translation of the Hebrew *taher* (taw-HAYR) and literally means to be clean, whether from a disease or from sin. Outward cleanliness was used to remind priests of their need for inward cleanliness. Those who were considered unclean were not permitted to participate in Temple rituals until they were purified. The ritual for becoming cleansed in this way is recorded in Numbers 19:17–21. The process involves the person (along with all his possessions and household) being sprinkled with holy water once, again on the third day, and again on the seventh day. On the seventh day the person would also wash their clothes and bodies. Only then were they clean. These preparations take a long time, so priests would need to be vigilant to prepare well enough in advance so that they could be ready to lead the people in sanctified worship when the time came.

For occasions requiring special purity, the Levites had to follow a three-fold purification ritual. First, the Levites had to purify the people, then they also needed to purify all the priests, then the Levites would also need to purify themselves. Such rituals reinforce the theological tenet of how far sinfulness divides us from God. The taint of sin effects all, even priests, even the Levites. Even those who help purify the people must be purified themselves. This cumbersome system is how the Jews interacted with God for hundreds of years. Thank God that He sent Jesus to be our perfect High Priest, who does not need to purify Himself of any sin and yet still welcomes us to be a part of Himself.

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.

Those who had “separated themselves” refers to the proselytes who had embraced the Jewish religion during the time of their captivity in Babylon. The proselytes are proof that the Jewish captives had maintained the principles of their religion. The unbelievers saw it, and they converted to the religion of the one true God. These converts and those who were Jewish by birth joined together to eat the Passover meal.

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.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was closely associated with the Passover. In fact, in preparation for the Passover the man of the house would search through the house for leaven (yeast) and remove it. For seven days after the Passover, Jewish families will continue to eat only unleavened bread. With each bite, they could renew their commitment to be free of sin before God. Passover is often a solemn affair when Jews humbly remember the mercy of God upon them. The Feast of Unleavened Bread afterwards, however, is a time of celebration. God had given the people both causes to rejoice and hearts to rejoice. God is the fountain from which all true joy flows.

The Persian king is here called the king of Assyria (two empires back) to emphatically stress the great power and goodness of God in turning the hearts of these present Persian monarchs, whose Assyrian predecessors had formerly been the chief persecutors and cruel oppressors of God’s people.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Keep Holy Convocations
(Leviticus 23:4-8)

TUESDAY

God Institutes the Passover
(Exodus 12:1-14)

WEDNESDAY

Moses' Instructions about the Passover
(Exodus 12:21-28, 50-51)

THURSDAY

Praise the Name of the Lord
(Psalm 113)

FRIDAY

Christ Our Passover
(1 Corinthians 5:7-8; 10:1-4)

SATURDAY

Praise for God's Liberation from Egypt
(Psalm 114)

SUNDAY

Returned Exiles Keep the Passover
(Ezra 6:13-22)