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“The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house: his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto you” (Zechariah 4:9).

Faith to Build

Central Truth: Faithfulness in Christian duties is rewarded by spiritual success.

L542. Date: January 1980. **Text:** Ezra 2:1; 3:10, 12; 4:4, 5; 5:1, 2; 6:13-15.
Topic: Faith: Of Believers; Israel: Captivity of; Temple: Rebuilding of.

What is the most sacred place on earth? The Old Testament Jew would have no hesitation in giving an answer: “The most sacred place on earth is the temple of God which stands on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.”

Imagine their amazement, therefore, when God permitted the pagan army from Babylon to tear the temple stone from stone, strip it of its precious metals, and desecrate its precious furniture. Through all the years of the Babylonian captivity, devout Jews remembered their temple and prayed for its restoration.

The temple had an illustrious heritage. Moses received its blueprint from God himself on Mount Sinai. At first, the design was developed in a portable tent called the tabernacle. The design, material, and place of the tabernacle were designed of God. Upon settlement in the land of Canaan, Israel kept the tabernacle as their center of worship for many years.

Then King David and Solomon prepared and erected the temple as the permanent “house of God.” It was dedicated with great joy and solemn acts of worship. The Lord accepted it as His house and His glory filled it. The temple was the most glorious building in the land and was under construction seven and one-half years. It was the center of Jewish worship for almost three and three-fourth centuries.

The devout Jews must have felt incomplete without the temple or God standing in Jerusalem. Therefore, the first major project undertaken by the

remnant of the restoration was the rebuilding of the temple.

I. FAITH AND PROSPECTS

Faith is often encouraged by the presence of opportunity. Bitterness must have added to the homesickness felt by many Jews in captivity. With their temple destroyed, sacrifices were no longer being offered. Without sacrifice, there was a vital element missing from their religion. They sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept in remembrance of Zion (Psalm 137:1-6). How bright dawned the faith of the devout when they learned the king would permit their return.

The return from Babylon captivity was foretold before the deportation was effected. God announced it through the prophet Isaiah a full century and a half before it happened, even naming the king who would effect it. (Isaiah 45:1). Cyrus came to the throne on March 24, 538 B.C. In the first year of his reign, he issued a decree permitting the Jews to return to their homeland and instructing them to rebuild the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem.

God had fifty thousand people ready to return. He had a prince of the house of David, named Zerubbabel, to lead them. Zerubbabel was chosen of the Jews and approved by Cyrus as the leader and governor of the land when they were settled there (Ezra 1:8, 11; 5:14). Authority was given that the people might draw upon the resources of the kingdom for supplies needed to build the temple. Vessels of gold and silver taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar at its fall were returned to the Jews for use there once again.

It was too good to be true! The temple of the Lord was to be raised again. For the first time in decades the rituals of the Jewish religion would be performed on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. How the people rejoiced and trusted God to bring to pass every detail of the promises He had made concerning the restoration.

Faith is always encouraged by the signs of opportunity. The Christian experiences that also. It is important to believe God, however, whether signs are present or not.

II. FAITH AND PROBLEMS

What a discouraging sight met the eyes of the remnant of Judah who returned from the captivity. For fifty years the city of Jerusalem had largely remained uninhabited. It still contained the wreckage from the battle which led to its overthrow. Weeds and vines grew over the remains of once-stately

buildings. Rubbish was piled on the site where the glorious temple built by Solomon once stood. It was a sight to dampen the spirits of the most hearty souls.

Faith is not based on appearance, however. It is that quality which makes us certain of realities we do not see. There is no biblical promise that faith will automatically solve all problems or banish all disappointments. Faith gives assurance to face problems and overcome disappointments.

Many of the Jews who were left in Palestine (called “the poor of the people, which had nothing” in Jeremiah 39:10) had fled to Egypt. Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites had pushed into the territory once governed by the Jews. Even the mixed-breed Samaritans moved southward and occupied some of Judah's territory. Only scattered communities of Jews remained in the once prosperous nation.

It was a time to try men's souls. It might be like a young man today who returned to his ancestral home. He had heard glowing reports of the productive land, the beautiful farmhouse, spacious barns, and herds of livestock. He found the house in ruins with leaking roof, broken windows, sagging boards, and doors off their hinges. The barns were falling down from decay and neglect. The fields were overgrown with weeds and trees. The herds of livestock were all gone. What a discouraging sight!

It was seven months after the return when the people of Judah were ready to begin work on restoring the temple. It had taken them that long to get satisfactory housing for their families and to establish means of livelihood.

The first act of restoration was to rebuild the altar of burnt offerings, located in the courtyard of the temple. The destruction had been so complete that they had to get new stones and timbers. But the house was erected, and the old system of offering morning and evening sacrifices was reestablished.

How discouraging it must have been. They stood before the altar to offer their sacrifices. Before them stood the mound of rubble where the once-glorious temple had stood. Their joy must have been mixed with sorrow at each worship ceremony. How could they keep faith? They could keep faith because of the nature of faith. Faith is founded on the person of God and not on the circumstances of man. Faith is not dependent on that which is seen, but upon Him who is not seen. Faith is that assurance which gives substance to our hopes and makes us certain of realities we do not see. Faith is not conquered by the presence of problems.

III. FAITH AND PROGRESS

At last, construction began on the restored temple! (1) Stone masons and carpenters were hired. (2) Money was paid out for material to be used in construction. (3) Contracts were entered with people of Tyre and Sidon to provide cedar from the forests of Lebanon. And then, delay. Months passed without any progress. They waited for materials to be brought from the granite quarries and from the mountains of Lebanon. Delay breeds discouragement. But they waited in faith. Slow progress must never cause the faltering of faith in the promises of God. Fourteen months after the first group returned to Palestine, they were ready to lay the foundation of the new temple.

Much ceremony attended the occasion. Priests and Levites dressed in their official apparel. People came to Jerusalem from the surrounding countryside. When the stones were put in place the priests blew trumpets, the musicians played the cymbals, and the Levitical choir sang the praises of God. *“And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD”* (Ezra 3:11). They sang the words recorded in Psalm 136, *“O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever”* (verse 1). At the conclusion of the song all the people shouted for joy because the foundation of the house of the Lord had been laid.

IV. FAITH AND OPPOSITION

Sorrow accompanied the joy of laying the foundations of the temple. Some of the older men of the congregation could remember the ornate and glorious temple of Solomon. They wept because they saw how inferior the new house of worship would be. *“So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off”* (Ezra 3:13). Disappointment challenged faith.

Then political opposition arose. At first, the foreigners who lived in Palestine sought to draw the Jews into a union with themselves and their religion. Claiming a desire to seek God, they asked for a part in building the temple. (The reason for their being refused is explained in the base nature of their religion as described in II Kings 17:24-41.) Next, they slowed delivery of materials to the workmen, creating problems in construction. Finally, they made false accusations to the king, charging that the Jews were not building a temple for worship but a fortress for rebellion. That brought an order from King Artaxerxes to stop construction.

How disappointing those circumstances were. Attempts to pervert their religion and accusations which were false had stopped the work they were

sure was of God. Could they keep faith in spite of their problems?

V. FAITH AND PERFORMANCE

Faith had to be stirred by a message from God. He sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stir up the people. (Their ministries came between the events mentioned in chapters 4 and 5 in the book of Ezra.) The people had begun to say the delay was of God; it was not yet time to build the house of God. They made the mistake of interpreting the will of God in the light of circumstances instead of interpreting circumstances in the light of the will of God. Haggai challenged them, *“Is it, time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieleed houses, and this house lie waste! . . . Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD”* (Haggai 1:4, 7, 8). Inspired by the message from God, their faith was stirred and they began anew to build.

At last, the work was finished. Resumption of the work was begun on December 18, 520 B.C. (Haggai 2:18). It was continued with zealous haste. Finally, on March 15, 516 B.C., the temple was completed (Ezra 6:15). That was exactly seventy years after its destruction in 586 B.C. It was a great day of rejoicing. Once again the house of God stood on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

Look back over the outline of the lesson comments and relate the ideas to your faith. Is your faith aroused when you see opportunities to serve God? Does your faith persist in spite of problems which arise? Is your faith encouraged by signs of progress, even though it is slow? Does your faith endure in spite of discouraging opposition? If the answer to each of these questions is a sure yes, then your faith will be rewarded by performance of that which you attempt. *“According to your faith be it unto you”* (Matthew 9:29).

1. What was the importance of the temple in Jerusalem?
2. How can prospects for service encourage faith?
3. How can faith be strong in the face of problems?
4. Why is a place of worship important to faith?
5. How can one keep faith when he sees no victory?
6. How can faith be strong in face of opposition?
7. What message does God send to strengthen your faith?
8. What is the meaning of faith?

9. How can you increase your faith?

10 In what areas of Christian service are you challenged to trust God?