

Hurst Green

23rd Jun 19

Ezra 6

God's providence (again) and joy

So what do you remember from last weeks sermon?

The key question was:

“What did you do to extend the Kingdom of God this week?”

The Israelites had been prophesied to by the so called minor prophets Haggai and Zechariah and had regained the vision at last.

They had the decree of King Cyrus but had allowed their enemies to force them to stop.

Strangely enough that sounds familiar today.

For several decades now the Church in the UK has allowed our enemies to force us to stop. The state took over much of our work in the early part of the 20th Century and since WW2 has tried to drive us out of everything else.

In many areas our work has stopped particularly our social work. They have tried to drive us out of education and, as I mentioned last week, our street preachers are arrested while other faiths can preach much more hatred.

However! We have not gone away. Our work has continued in food banks and night shelters, in Christians Against Poverty, work with the disadvantaged and social outcast. It is all going on.

The word of God is also being faithfully preached in many churches through this land.

The media reports of falling congregations only applies to those traditional churches who report their congregations and hides many traditional churches that are thriving.

Village halls throughout this land are filled this morning with congregations that are thriving. Schools are welcoming us to teach parts of the curriculum that they do not know and we go in and teach not only the pupils but also the teachers what our faith is about.

Christianity is not dead in this land and never will be. O Church Arise and put your armour on.

We have a fight on our hands but our strength is in the Lord and he that is in us is mightier than he that is in the world. 1 John 4 if you want to know where that is.

Never forget it as these Israelites forget it for nearly 16 years.

Now last week I only really touched on the first few verses of Chapter 5 so just turn back to it and look at the letter to Darius in verses 6 to 17.

Darius the King must have been asked to settle many such seemingly petty scores throughout his empire but here, for us, is a momentous one.

How many times have you read these letters and not found them to be momentous? Many people just skip over them but that is because they have lost the habit of looking for God at work in all we do, see and experience – not just the bible.

Is that you? Have you stopped looking for God at work? If so you have impoverished your life and are missing out on the joy that God intended for you when you see him at work and become lost in wonder and praise.

Lesson 1 for today – Look for God at work and praise him for what he does – that is worship

Here the prophets have put the backbone into people that they should already have had – they knew the scriptures – they knew the mighty works that God had done in the past – they even knew of the mighty works he had done in their lives.

They knew of Cyrus giving them the temple treasures; they knew of their neighbours giving them at least £17M in treasure which they gave to the temple. That is £340 per person!

But the prophets spurred them into action.

Now they did not stop but gave that incredible answer to Tattenai which we see in Chapter 5 verses 11 to 16

But that is last week and the 15 verses I didn't fit into the sermon and so on to this week.

This week is **providence and joy** in Chapter 6.

Darius orders a search of the archives – imagine the work that entailed.

No search engines in those days – this was all manual and on clay and stone tablets!

But it had to be done because these decrees could not be revoked and Darius needed to know what had been said and they found it in Ecbatana – the Kings summer palace.

Remember Cyrus had had his heart turned by God and had provided the temple goods from his temple and at least £17M of gold and silver to the returning Jews – God's providence and showing that he resources his work.

Last week we saw them get a kick up the backside from Haggai and Zechariah and restart the work and not stop. The challenge for you was whether or not you are building the temple today – the temple of God which is you and your spiritual life. Are you building that or your own panelled houses?

Now we see the amazing providence of God **again**.

Darius could just tell them to carry on but he does so much more than that. He turns the threat of their enemies into making their enemies bless them once again.

Ezra 6:8-9 (ANIV)

⁸ *Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop.* ⁹ *Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male*

lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail,

All of their expenses are to be paid from the taxes and you can bet this wasn't deducted from the tribute sent to Babylon.

It is as if the Surrey had to pay for all the expenses of the Church. Salaries and all the running costs. He even provided all they needed for the sacrifices and food – whatever the priests requested was theirs!

The providence of God! We live under a bountiful God.

And so the temple of God was built and it says the elders prospered – not surprising because their enemies had been turned into great supporters – maybe reluctant but still great supporters.

God can do anything and he provides for his work. His providence in our lives shows his love and care for us and that is why we love and worship him.

But the main theme of this chapter is **Joy**.

God is portrayed in the media and in society as a kill joy God. A God with a long list of demands about what we should do and what we should give up but they never mention the reason which we comply with our God – because it gives us **JOY**.

They measure our God by the standards that other gods use. All the other Gods they use whether other religions or the more subtle gods of money, social standing, drugs or even compliancy demand that they give up certain things.

Yes even things like money and social standing. They demand that you give up time, relationships and the ability to do certain things in order that you can obtain more of the god you serve.

Other religions demand that you earn your place in the favour of that god by giving up things.

The other gods are about demands and edicts.

Our God is about Joy and Love and the things we give up are so that we have more of that Joy and Love in our relationship with our God.

CS Lewis has a book “Surprised by Joy” that is well worth a read if you have any doubts on this and that great teacher John Piper has a famous sentence “ The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him for ever” which is a slight change from the Westminster Catechism.

In deed the result of the whole reformation when the Protestant Church was formed was to reignite in man the Joy of the Lord.

To quote John Piper again “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him”

Are you satisfied in God?

You should be – not only has he created you but he loves you, he has given you salvation, all that you have and all that is around you.

Hebrews 13:5 (ANIV)

⁵ *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

And Paul

Philippians 4:12-13 (ANIV)

¹² *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* ¹³ *I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

This joy is not a minor theme that crops up now and then in the bible but is a major thrust because back in Deuteronomy when God was laying down the law to the Israelites – when they tried serving our God with a list of do’s and don’ts – right then his theme was to bring them joy

Deuteronomy 12:7 (ANIV)

⁷ *There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.*

And note that it says *in everything you put your hand to* because God does not just want us to be joyful here; he wants us to be joyful in all of our lives.

Most of all in his presence and the bible is full of verses telling the people to be joyful when they worship the Lord. They worshipped at the temple but of course we take the temple with us when we go out into the world because we are the temple of God.

Particularly the Psalms are full of joy in the Lord and they are very clear it is about joy in our lives all the time.

Psalms 92:4 (ANIV)

⁴ *For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at the work of your hands.*

And

Psalms 98:4 (ANIV)

⁴ *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;*

And

Psalms 126:3 (ANIV)

³ *The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

If we look back to our reading

Ezra 6:16 (ANIV)

¹⁶ *Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.*

That was a reason to celebrate.

We will celebrate when our temple is complete and we are with our God in heaven but of course we celebrate with joy as we know more of our God – as we grow in him. That of course was in last week’s sermon but the bible is consistent in its themes.

Then in verse 22

Ezra 6:22 (ANIV)

²² *For seven days they celebrated with joy the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled*

them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

All of the feasts of the Lord were there to bring joy to the hearts of Israel and although we do not celebrate those feasts (apart from Passover) God is there to bring joy to our heart.

Jesus told us to rejoice that our names are written in heaven (Luke 7) and that is not something to only think about on a Sunday but that is a fact every minute of every day.

That was said when the 72 had been sent out and returned rejoicing that the spirits had submitted to them and we can very easily turn that on its head.

I have been using that verse

James 4:7 (ANIV)

⁷ *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

If I use it often enough you may remember it and even believe it because the devil will and does flee and he knows that verse. However we tend to rejoice when we see that happen far more than we rejoice in our salvation. If you doubt that consider how people flock to those ministries where they see healings and deliverance. That should be daily bread and butter.

Our Joy is in the Lord, not in what he does in these minor things but in what he has done in his love for us. As Jesus teaches us in John

John 15:11 (ANIV)

¹¹ *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

And

John 16:24 (ANIV)

²⁴ *Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*

And as Peter says

1 Peter 1:8-9 (ANIV)

⁸ *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

And of course joy is a fruit of the spirit which we should be seeing in ever increasing measure in our lives as we let the Spirit move through us changing us from one degree of glory to another

This only skims the surface of the theme of Joy in the bible but so much of this book of Ezra is to prove to us that our joy is in God

1. Joy at the providence of God
2. Joy at the provision of God
3. Joy at all we put our hand to
4. Joy at praising him together
5. Joy in our obedience to him

That is an awful lot of Joy that penetrates every aspect of our live and makes us totally different to those who worship other Gods (and do not forget everyone worships some sort of God, although they may deny it, even if, in our society, it is only their own comfort).

That joy will ensure that you stand out and will work towards the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations.

That joy will energise you in ways that you cannot imagine – it truly is life transforming.

To summarise John Piper in his book “Desiring God” God must find our desires not too strong but far too weak because we go about things in a half-hearted manner fooling around with things of the world and other gods when our God has offered us infinite joy.

Which do you want in your life? Half-hearted attempts to find joy in the things of the world or the incredible joy of letting God into all aspects of your life?

That is not one that I can answer for you or one that you can have a bit of both. God gave us all that we have that we may have joy in him and live joyful lives here on earth before having that ultimate joy of being in heaven with the God we love and who gave us salvation.

Jesus told us all about himself and the Kingdom of Heaven touching earth that his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete and we have joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit and so joy is an integral part of our faith.

Romans 14:17 (ANIV)

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

And we are the Kingdom of God touching our culture today.

Be joyful and go and make disciples of all nations.