

## Freedom to Worship

Alphonso looked out at the small, eclectic group of people sitting on rickety metal chairs. He smoothed the edges of his Bible down again with steady hands—hands that had been steady for the past three years, thank God!

Alphonso was a minister who had come back to the Lord after years of struggling with alcohol. It was the Lord who met him face down in his own mess, somewhat like the biblical prodigal son, and caused him to take an honest, brutal assessment of himself. The pain of it drove Alphonso back into the arms of the Lord.

The Lord had put caring people in his life, one of whom was a member of the church he now attended. For more than two and a half years, Alphonso has been a member at Renewal Christian Church. When Pastor Goode learned that Alphonso used to be a minister, he told him that he would one day have to get back to his calling.

“We are all misfits,” Pastor Goode had said. “We love you for who you are. God has given you yet another chance. Don’t waste it.”

Certainly, Alphonso didn’t want to waste it, which is why he desired his relationship with Christ with a new intensity.

“How glorious it is to be in the House of God,” Alphonso said to the audience. “I know it’s only because of God’s grace that I’m saved, and for that I’m thankful!”

**1.** *Would you describe your worship of God as fresh every week or the same old routine?*

**2.** *What do you enjoy the most about worshipping God? Explain your answer.*

**3.** *Why does worshipping the Lord free you from personal anxieties and other troubling thoughts?*

## Cyrus's Scroll

*Ezra 6:1-5, KJV*

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits;

4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house:

5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

*Ezra 6:1-5, NIV*

<sup>1</sup>King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon.

<sup>2</sup>A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it:

Memorandum:

<sup>3</sup>In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide, <sup>4</sup>with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. <sup>5</sup>Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.

Though Cyrus had authorized the building of the temple, after about six years, the work stopped for almost 10 years due to opposition from the non-Jews living around Jerusalem (Ezra 4:1-5, 24). In Ezra 6, we see the hunt for Cyrus's decree to allow the temple building to continue, which would give the current Persian king, Darius, the right and motivation to allow the work to continue. Cyrus's was specific in terms of some dimensions of the temple. Height and width was to be 60 cubits. A cubit was about the length of fingertip to elbow, about 18 inches.

A symbol of God's healing was the return of the temple treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated. With the temple artifacts returned, the people of God would be reminded of their deep spiritual roots in the law of Moses.

**4.** *What was in the decree of Cyrus?*

**5.** *What did Cyrus tell the people about the rebuilding of the temple?*

## Temple Funding

*Ezra 6:6-10, KJV*

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence:

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 in his place.

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the

*Ezra 6:6-10, NIV*

<sup>6</sup>Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you other officials of that province, stay away from there. <sup>7</sup>Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.

<sup>8</sup>Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:

Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal

tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered.

9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:

10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop.

<sup>9</sup>Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail,<sup>10</sup> so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.

Darius began his own decree by telling Tattenai, the governor in the region, and all of his officials to stay away from Jerusalem all together. To emphasize the seriousness of his orders, Darius issued a decree. For the Persians, a king's decree was irrevocable. First, Tattenai was to fully fund the rebuilding of the temple. This may have taken Tattenai off-guard, because it meant he would be taking a cut from the profits of his trade in the Trans-Euphrates province. The key objective here was that the work was not to stop or be delayed in any way.

This resourcing would include building materials, plus the livestock necessary to keep the temple sacrifices going. Anything the priests needed was to be provided for them. Darius had an ulterior motive here. He hoped to gain the favor of the God of Israel for himself and his family.

**6.** *How was the rebuilding of the second temple to be funded?*

**7.** *What strong instructions did Darius give about not interfering with the rebuilding efforts?*

## Strict Warnings

*Ezra 6:11-12, KJV*

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

*Ezra 6:11-12, NIV*

<sup>11</sup>Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. <sup>12</sup>May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem.

I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

Not only was the king's decree irrevocable, there were stiff penalties associated with either disregarding the mandate or fulfilling it halfheartedly. The idea of the defiant man being impaled on a beam from his house was a precursor to the practice of crucifixion. The fact that it was a from part of the man's home was to add to his humiliation. The idea of his house becoming a pile of rubble was related to the beam that had been removed from it.

Interestingly, Darius assumes that God is going to back him up in this decree. He assumes that God will overthrow anyone who attempts to prevent or stall the rebuilding of the temple. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Darius might be conceding here that the God of Israel is all-powerful and worthy of worship and obedience.

**8.** *What would happen to the man who did not comply with Darius's decree?*

**9.** *Why did Darius appeal to the God of Israel to back him up?*

## The Wonder of Worship Revived!

“I can safely say, on the authority of all that is revealed in the Word of God, that any man or woman on this earth who is bored and turned off by worship,” declared A. W. Tozer, “is not ready for heaven. We’re here to be worshipers first and workers only second.”

On the one hand, Tozer is noting that the central activity in heaven is worshipping God; on the other hand, he is stressing the powerful impact worship should have on our souls. Each is vitally connected to the other. Indeed, worshipping God is the outward expression of our humble gratitude and praise to the Almighty Creator and is the inward exultation of His awesome and transforming effect on our lives.

Christian theologian R.C. Sproul provides additional insight when he noted that “It is the pleasing of God that is at the heart of worship.” In other words, when our eyes are fixed on Christ instead of ourselves and our motivation during worship is to bring joy to our Lord God, then worship becomes truly uplifting and impactful.

Without water there is no spring to nurture the soul, but when we express our deep love for the Lord in worship, Christ’s water of life springs up within us and nourishes our spirits to renewed heights. This dynamic exchange of love between the God who is worshiped and those who worship Him is unique and priceless.

Therefore, let us heed the words of the psalmist when he urged God’s people to “worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (Ps. 95:6-7, KJV).

**10.** *How do you overcome the feeling of boredom during a worship service?*

**11.** *How do you please God during a worship service?*

**12.** *How does a worship service enhance the love between Jesus and you?*

## A Commitment Letter

Darius affirmed the decree of the former king to erect a temple in Jerusalem. The Jews were overjoyed that they could once more have the freedom to worship God in a house built for Him. Likewise, we as Christians should rejoice because we can freely worship the Lord, and such worship should renew our spirit and refresh our soul.

► *Take a few minutes to write a letter to God. Begin by thanking Him for having the love He has for you and giving you the freedom to worship Him without the fear of persecution or harmful derision. Next, ask Him to help you engage in worship more faithfully and sincerely. Finally, promise to allow each worship service to be refreshing to your spirit.*

### KEY VERSE

And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. —Ezra 6:12a, KJV

May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. —Ezra 6:12a. NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

#### Week of March 14 through March 20

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Leviticus 23:4-8—Keep Holy Convocations.
- Tue.** Exodus 12:1-14—God Institutes the Passover.
- Wed.** Exodus 12:21-28, 50-51—Instructions for the Passover.
- Thu.** Psalm 113—Praise the Name of the Lord.
- Fri.** 1 Corinthians 5:7-8; 10:1-4—Christ Our Passover.
- Sat.** Psalm 114—Praise for God's Liberation.
- Sun.** Ezra 6:13-22—Returned Exiles Keep the Passover.