

Pretended Obedience or Joyful Obedience?

Ezra 6:13-22

June 17, 2012

Rev. Greg L. Price

One of the blessed graces that is implanted in the very being of every Christian at the moment of regeneration and that is to characterize the life of a Christian in his/her service, worship, and obedience to the Lord is JOY. Christians are not to be characterized by a sad and gloomy disposition, but rather by a cheerful and hopeful disposition even in the midst of life's suffering, heartaches, afflictions and trials. Dear ones, whatever you may face in this life, Christ has overcome it (by His death and resurrection)—the gloom and doom, and the evil and despair of even the most agonizing set of circumstances that any of you may face has already been legally defeated by our glorious Savior ("In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of **good cheer**; I have overcome the world" John 16:33).

Beloved child of God, the integrity and credibility of Scripture, as well as the faithfulness of Christ as the Son of God, hinge upon the veracity and truthfulness of that declaration by Christ. Has Jesus Christ truly overcome the world for the good of everyone who trusts alone in Jesus Christ for his/her eternal salvation? If it is true (and it is), then the grace of "good cheer" belongs to you (as your inheritance, and as one aspect of your Christian character). And yet we daily walk through this life, and in effect deny the "good cheer" that is our inheritance purchased for us by Jesus Christ, because we forget that Jesus has legally overcome the world (and the evil of all of its trials, tribulations, and suffering).

And yet there may be the objection that no one knows the pain, the sorrow, or the suffering that you or I daily experience due to our particular, unique lot in life. No one knows what we suffer from a failing marriage, from a prodigal son/daughter, from watching a loved one slowly suffer or gradually die, from the physical and emotional afflictions that continually afflicts us to the point of desiring death, from the pressure of financial need or lack of work in providing for our family (and we could add much more to that list). Dear ones, it is time for us to pack up all such groundless objections that we feel, and to cast them (day by day as they arise) upon our glorious and patient Savior who declares to us by His Word and Spirit: "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

This Lord's Day the Holy Spirit would have us focus our attention upon the grace and duty that is ours (as God's people) to "rejoice in the Lord alway" (i.e. in all circumstances that we face). We may not take delight in suffering for the sake of suffering, but we can take delight and joy in knowing that our sovereign Lord is going to use our suffering to teach us to trust Him and to wait upon Him, to bring us into a precious and most blessed communion with Christ, and to prepare us to anticipate with the greatest expectation the joys of heaven. Just as "contentment" is a grace we are given at the time of our regeneration, and yet we must "learn" to apply it in our daily lives (Philippians 4:11); so likewise is joy or good cheer a grace that we are given in our regeneration, and yet we must learn to apply it in our daily lives ("For the joy of the LORD is your strength" Nehemiah 8:10).

In our text from Ezra 6:13-22, let us learn to distinguish between (1) The Hypocrisy of Pretended Obedience (Ezra 6:13), and (2) The Blessing of Joyful Obedience (Ezra 6:14-22).

I. The Hypocrisy of Pretended Obedience (Ezra 6:13).

A. In the previous sermon, we saw how the Lord caused the wicked governor, Tatnai, to fall into the pit that he had dug for God's people. Tatnai and his confederates in opposing the work of rebuilding the temple had written to King Darius in order to obtain a royal decree that would once and for all forbid the Jews from the work of reforming the one true religion in all of its purity. Tatnai did not request that search be made to locate the decree of Cyrus in order to confirm that the Jews had royal warrant to rebuild the temple, but to the contrary, Tatnai requested that search be made to locate the decree of Cyrus in order to prove that the Jews were liars and had no royal warrant to rebuild the temple. However, the decree of Cyrus was found, and in it was stated that King Cyrus had in fact decreed that God's house be built in Jerusalem. However, the bad news for Tatnai did not end with finding the decree of Cyrus, for King Darius also added his own decree to the decree of Cyrus. King Darius decreed that no one (especially Tatnai) go near the temple in Jerusalem so as to hinder their work in the least, and that all building materials and all worship materials (including animals to sacrifice) be paid for out of Tatnai's treasury. Tatnai thought to bring the work of biblical reformation of the true religion to an end, but he was rather compelled by King Darius to pay for it all out of his own treasury. And King Darius concludes his orders to Tatnai with these words: "Let it be done with speed" (Ezra 6:12). That is where we left off in the previous sermon.

B. Now as we consider where our text (in Ezra 6:13) begins this Lord's Day, we note (with a smile on our face) that Tatnai and his wicked associates did in fact carry out the decree of Darius to assist God's people with all building materials and all worship materials, and they did so "speedily": "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." Darius decreed that Tatnai carry out his words "with speed" (Ezra 6:12), and Tatnai did so "speedily" (Ezra 6:13).

1. Here we see an adversary to Christ and to His people aiding them in promoting reformation—but doing so reluctantly, doing so from coercion applied by King Darius and not from love for the Lord or from love for the one true religion taught in Scripture. This is an obedience that is wrung out of Tatnai and his conspirators (like water wrung out of a sponge by sheer force). There is no delight to do the will of God in promoting reformation on the part of Tatnai. This (I submit to you) is a pretended (or feigned) obedience. It is an obedience of mere duty to King Darius, and not an obedience of love to King Jesus. If Tatnai had his own way (no doubt), the Jews would be immediately and forcibly stopped in all of their efforts to rebuild God's house, and there would certainly be no help coming from his treasury to aid them in their pure worship of Jehovah. Thus, although there is outward conformity to assist God's people in promoting reformation, there is no burning zeal or holy passion to do so.

2. Wicked Haman (in the Book of Esther) did not want to clothe godly Mordecai with the the royal garment and place upon his head the royal crown (for Mordecai's service rendered to the King), and the conspiring Haman did not want to see the Jewish Mordecai placed upon the royal horse or to go before Mordecai and proclaim to all, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor." However, that is precisely what Haman was forced to do, and he did so with hatred in his heart for Mordecai and for the one true religion which Mordecai embraced.

3. At the beginning and during the time of millennial blessing that is yet to come, the Lord Jesus will bind Satan for a figurative thousand years so that he cannot deceive and seduce the nations of the world by false religion (Revelation 20:1-3), and the Lord Jesus will from His royal throne in heaven subdue the nations of the earth to Himself so that they officially covenant to be God's people (Zechariah 2:11; Isaiah 19 [Assyria, Egypt, and Israel will all be God's people by national covenants]; Revelation 11:15 ["The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ."]). The fact that neither of these two prophesied events has yet occurred indicates that the prophesied millennium has not yet begun. During this time of millennial blessing and gospel prosperity, we read with great joy that all the earth will worship the Lord (according to Psalm 66:4). However, note carefully that in the immediately preceding verse (Psalm 66:3),

it is made clear that there will yet be enemies of the Lord in the nations of the world who will “feign obedience” to the Lord due to the excellence of His might and power that is exercised by both church and state (the Hebrew verb for “submit” literally means “deceive” or “lie”). So even in the most glorious time of not only individual salvation, but even of national conversion and national covenanting to be God’s people, there will be those enemies who deceive and lie by their outward acts of profession, worship, and obedience to the Lord. Obviously, this feigned obedience is not morally good in itself—it is rank hypocrisy. However, it is good whenever the obstinately wicked so dread the Lord and His civil magistrate as God’s minister for the good of God’s people (Romans 13:4) that they hide their wickedness from all public scrutiny, and must go underground to practice it secretly. What a blessed thought that the Lord will yet cause His enemies to cower in fear and to hide their wickedness for fear of righteous judgment against them. At that time, it will not be those who stand for Christ and His covenanted reformation who will be fleeing the unjust wrath of the civil magistrate, but rather those who oppose Christ and His covenanted reformation who will flee the just wrath of the civil magistrate.

4. But there is also a word of warning and exhortation to us all that is to be found in the example of Tatnai and his fellow hypocrites, who feigned a willing and whole-hearted obedience to King Darius.

a. Dear ones, let us (as Christians) not be those who outwardly perform our duties, while inwardly wishing they were not our duties. Let us not be those who have an outward form of godliness, but who deny, neglect, and ignore the inward power thereof. Let us not be those who make a profession of Christ with our lips, but whose hearts are lukewarm and apathetic to Christ. Let us not be those who stand for truth and righteousness when there is a crowd watching, but who love to indulge secret sins when only the Lord is watching. It is not only those who are the outspoken and conspicuous enemies of Christ and His kingdom that are guilty of feigning obedience. It is we who are outspoken and conspicuous friends of Christ and His kingdom that may also be guilty of feigning obedience to varying degrees.

b. Dear ones, I want you to know that hypocrisy (and a feigned or apathetic obedience) is in us all to varying degrees (even though we may hate and despise all such hypocrisy, just as Paul stated that the lust he hated was the lust that he practiced in Romans 7:15). Was there not hypocrisy in David (a man after God’s own heart) in concealing and not confessing his adultery and accessory to murder for about 9 months? Was there not hypocrisy in Peter in pretending he could embrace and teach that there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ, and yet refuse to eat with Gentiles when certain Jews from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch?

c. Hypocrisy (like lust, like anger, like pride, like fear) must be acknowledged as sin and must be taken to the cross of Jesus Christ in our daily experience (just as it has been legally and once and for all taken to the cross in the death of Christ). Beloved, we who trust alone in Jesus Christ as our justifying righteousness are united to Christ in the Covenant of Grace, so that when Christ died, He legally died to sin for you and me (as our covenant Head). And when Christ bodily arose from the dead, He legally arose to newness of life and sanctification for you and me (as our covenant Head). There will be no sanctification in overcoming our hypocrisy in outwardly feigning obedience to Christ if we act as though we are beyond falling into the sin of hypocrisy, and therefore do not set a watch over our hearts (that is hypocrisy as well). We will rather find ourselves being blinded by self-deception to that sin and other sins like it (“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” 1 Corinthians 10:12).

d. Hypocrisy proceeds from a pride to have the applause of others in outwardly practicing our religion before others. Hypocrisy wants the spotlight to be shined by people upon our knowledge of doctrine, upon our evangelistic skills, upon our gifts and abilities, upon what we have accomplished, but hypocrisy hates the spotlight of God’s Word and God’s Spirit to be shined upon our secret and cherished sins that we hide from public scrutiny (like watching pornography, cursing God and our neighbor in our hearts and under our breath, envying the gifts and graces of others, cowering in fear before

man, tribulations, afflictions, and trials, using double standards in judging others more severely than we judge ourselves, and treasuring the things of this world more than we treasure Christ). Oh, dear ones, be warned that hypocrisy is hypnotic—it spellbinds you, it deceives and lies to you until it becomes a lifestyle. However, hypocrisy cannot stand in the presence of Christ and His truth (John 3:20-21). Hypocrisy hates the light, and takes refuge in darkness. David knew his own proclivity toward hypocrisy (and a feigned obedience) and for that reason he prayed and taught us to pray the same prayer found in Psalm 139:23-24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

II. The Blessing of Joyful Obedience (Ezra 6:14-22).

A. The Holy Spirit would not have us miss the thrust of these final verses in Ezra Chapter Six, for in these verses we see a wondrous contrast between the pretended obedience of Tatnai and the joyful obedience of God’s people.

1. First, note that the house of God was finally completed by God’s people in the sixth year of King Darius (Ezra 6:14-15). After various delays (some which were due to the sinful neglect and procrastination of God’s people, and some which were due to the sinful hostility of God’s enemies), God stirred up the hearts of God’s people through the prophesying and preaching of Haggai and Zechariah to complete the work which had been begun some 20 years earlier. Since preaching is God’s ordinance by which Jesus Christ speaks to His people, it is often by means of faithful preaching that God’s people are encouraged to see their own inadequacy to bring reformation to their own lives, to their families, to the church, and to the nation, but it is always the case that faithful preaching turns the focus from the hopelessness and powerlessness of man to bring reformation to God’s house, to the promise and power of God’s Spirit to bring reformation to His own house. God’s people in the Book of Ezra became weary of fighting the enemies within and the enemies without, and the work of reformation came to a screeching halt. But by means of faithful preaching, God’s people were renewed in their courage and perseverance to complete the holy work that they had begun. Dear ones, we are all prone to grow weary in well doing when the eye of faith and the eye of hope are not on Christ and His promises. But faithful preaching is used by the Lord to take our eyes off the adversaries that have discouraged us, and to look afresh in faith and hope to Christ who has promised, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6).

2. Second, after the temple is completed, it is dedicated and consecrated to the Lord with JOY (Ezra 6:16-18). This was a time of joyful celebration to the Lord for His faithfulness in providing the courage, steadfastness, and perseverance to face and overcome their enemies, rather than cowering before their enemies. All of the adversaries (within and without) that had attempted to thwart all progress in reforming the one true religion revealed in Scripture, and the grace the Lord gave to overcome each of those adversaries only made the dedication of the temple a more joyous celebration of God’s faithfulness. Dear ones, had the Lord not brought adversaries to war against God’s people in rebuilding and reforming the one true religion of Jehovah, there would not have been such a glorious occasion to rejoice in God’s rich mercy, in God’s sustaining grace, and in God’s faithfulness to keep His word and His promises. Dear ones, adversity and suffering are the schools in which the Holy Spirit takes us from a pretended obedience to a joyful obedience. Beloved, are you flunking these courses in Christ’s school, because you are not learning and growing in the face of adversity? We also see here that all of the priests and Levites were given their specific responsibilities in the rebuilt temple, in accordance with what was written in the revealed will of God (“as it is written in the book of Moses” Ezra 6:18). There can be no real joy from the Lord where there is no sincere obedience to worship the Lord in agreement with what He has authorized in His Word. Beloved, a joyful worship is an obedient worship (in both spirit and truth).

3. Third, the people of God celebrated with JOY the Feast of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ezra 6:19-22). God's people removed themselves from the idolatry, false religion, and immoral practices of the heathen around them. As was noted earlier in this sermon, without seeking the grace and forgiveness of Christ, without mourning over sin in light of God's mercy to us, without removing ourselves from those temptations to sin (into which we have fallen so many times), there will be no joyful worship, no joyful obedience, and no joyful Christian life.

4. But is it not conspicuous from our text how the Holy Spirit emphasizes the joyfulness of their worship, service, and obedience to the Lord? Although the Lord is a God to be feared and held in the highest awe and wonder, He is also a God of unceasing mercy, a God of unfailing faithfulness to His word and promises, a God who delights and who rejoices in sinners (like you and me) who were once lost, but now are found (the Parables of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son), a God who as it were sings with joy over His people whom He loves: "The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

a. Dear ones, joy and delight in the Lord's goodness and faithfulness to His people was to be that which primarily characterized the worship of God's people (Nehemiah 8:9-12; see also Deuteronomy 12:7,11-12; 2 Chronicles 7:10; 2 Chronicles 30:21, 26; Nehemiah 12:43). All that we offer to the Lord in formal worship and in life in general is not to be offered begrudgingly (Romans 12:1).

b. Dear ones, if our mourning and sorrowing over our sin is not leading us to a joyful celebration of God's mercy to us in worship, we are making an idol of our mourning and sorrowing of sin. Though we weep over our sin, the joy of God's comfort and mercy in Christ Jesus swallows up our grief and sorrow.

B. Now as we come to the close of this sermon, let us apply this joyful obedience that we have observed in the worship of God's people in Ezra 6 to our own lives.

1. The grace of joy is worked within us by the Holy Spirit, and for that reason it is called a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. As a fruit of the Spirit, it is not a natural disposition or a personality trait that is common to Christians and non-Christians alike. It is a grace that is unique to all who are justified by faith alone—it is the joy of the Lord (i.e. it is the joy that comes from the Lord and the joy that is found only in the Lord). All Christians have the grace of joy, but not all Christians exhibit the grace of joy to the same extent. Why? Because all Christians do not eye the God of mercy with a steadfast faith and hope to the same degree, and because all Christians do not abide daily in a blessed communion with Jesus Christ to the same degree.

2. Dear ones, we strangle the joy of the Lord in our lives when we only have eyes to behold that which is done under the sun (from an earthly and worldly perspective). When we walk by sight in believing and hoping in only that which we can see with our natural eyes, rather than walking by faith in the promises of God, which cannot be seen with our natural eyes, we will find that our hope in possessions, circumstances, and people will fail us; for the possessions, circumstances, and people of this world are all changeable and perishable (in fact, the tighter we grip the things and the people in which we hope to find joy in this life because we fear losing them, the more we see that we cannot find a true and lasting joy in them, and that we cannot hold on to them—it's like trying to squeeze ever so tightly in our hands the sand on the seashore—the more tightly we squeeze, the more sand that escapes through our fingers).

3. Dear ones, discontentment with God's providence in your life and despair that your trials and afflictions are meaningless and hopeless result from your expectation that the things and people of this life can actually make you happy. Nothing and no one but Christ can truly make you happy, so that you can truly enjoy that with which God has blessed you in this life. The grace of joy flows from trusting and hoping in Christ as your supreme delight in this life and for all eternity. As Paul said, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). When Jesus Christ is our life and our reason for living, there is joy unspeakable and full of glory—and even death is gain to us, because we go to be with Christ, in whose

presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). But if to me to live is my marriage, my children, my parents, my job, my possessions, or my health, then I will not know the joy of the Lord to be my strength and courage in facing every trial, adversity, and affliction of life.

a. Dear fellow citizens of that heavenly kingdom, the grace of joyful obedience is a delight (not a heavy burden) in pleasing our most gracious Savior who loved us and gave Himself for us and in keeping His good and holy commandments (1 John 5:3). Joyful obedience is not a mere begrudging obedience, but is rather a willing and loving obedience. The grace of joyful obedience is a passion and zeal (not an indifference, apathy, or lukewarmness) to the Cause of Christ (for that which is dear to Christ is dear to all that is joyful obedience). The grace of joyful obedience is a thankfulness in remembering all of the mercies of the Lord bestowed upon His people (and upon you and your family). It is very difficult to be sincerely thankful to the Lord for His tender mercies shown to you and at the same time to merely go through the outward motions of worshipping the Lord. In fact, one way to war against hypocrisy, pretense, legalism, and mere outward conformity is to look in humble gratitude to Christ for the immeasurable wealth of the inheritance He has purchased for a people as undeserving as are we. And from that thankful heart will inevitably flow a joyful heart in taking up your cross, denying yourself, and following Christ in His narrow path of righteousness and truth.

b. Dear ones, the Lord even lays out for us as a condition for receiving what we ask of Him in prayer that we find our delight and joy in Him: "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psalm 37:4). We may have not, because we ask not (James 4:2), but we may also have not, because we delight not ourselves in the Lord, through our thankfulness for all of God's mercies and faithfulness to undeserving sinners who saved by God's grace alone, and through our desire to be found daily in prayer and communion with Christ. Beloved, THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STENGTH in whatever adversity or prosperity you are facing today.

Copyright 2012 Greg L. Price.