

EZRA COMMENTARY

The author of this book is the man whose name it bears, EZRA. He is of the priestly line, three of his famous ancestors being Aaron, the first high priest, Zadok, who remained faithful to David in one of the revolts against the king, and Hilkiah who discovered the missing book of the law in the days of King Josiah. This is an estimable ancestry, but Ezra is esteemed also for his achievements for God. Since the Temple was destroyed, Ezra could not function as a priest; he used his time and passion to study God's Word and serve the people (7:6). Ezra was a reformer and revivalist who came back to the land after the captivity in Babylon. Chapters 1-6 cover the period immediately after the return from exile (under Cyrus) to the rebuilding of the Temple (538-515 BC). The final chapters (7-10) deal with events that happened when Ezra himself came home from Media-Persia under Artaxerxes. As there had been three deportations into exile in Babylon, so there were three returns to the land. Zerubbabel led the first (538 BC), and the objective here was to rebuild the Temple. Ezra was in the second (458 BC) and concerned a revival among the people who were not walking in God's ways. Nehemiah was the chief character in the third return (444 BC), and he was the catalyst in rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem and continuing Ezra's spiritual reforms. Like the book of Daniel during the exile, Ezra, post-exilic, was written some in Hebrew and some in Aramaic. Aramaic had become the language of the land, presumably while the Jews were gone into exile. God used this great man to stir the people in a return to His ways and His Word. May He be pleased to use my grandson who bears this name in His service, too!

EZRA, CHAPTER 1

The recent events in the Middle East have occurred where our lessons now take us geographically. Modern-day Iraq was ancient Babylon, while Iran was Persia. These were the countries of Judah's exile, a 70-year captivity away from the Holy Land because of sin. This captivity was to end according to the prophecy of Jeremiah (chapter 25). Now we consider the return from captivity by a faithful remnant.

REQUEST OF THE KING

- 1) Seen here are the omniscience and sovereignty of God. God knew about Cyrus before he was ever born; He spoke about him through the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13). He had predicted the time of the end of the captivity by Jeremiah in 25:11, 12, and 29:10. In His sovereign power, God used Cyrus to accomplish His great purpose and plan for Israel. Behind the king's proclamation was the divine decree of the God of heaven and earth
- 2) While we cannot say that Cyrus was a true worshiper of Yahweh, his words here certainly indicate a fear of God and a recognition of the source of his own greatness. Persia was a greater and stronger kingdom than any before it. Cyrus was made its king by God so that he could send the Jews back home. The king's decree included provision of the wherewithal to begin the rebuilding process. Surely all kings sit on their thrones by the placement of the real King - God.
- 3) Seventy years in a place gives opportunity to put down deep roots. Many would have established relationships and started businesses. Others would have intermarried and established family relationships. Still, Cyrus calls on Jews to join the pilgrimage and return to their homeland to rebuild God's Temple. With email for communication and international flights for visiting, such a decision today would be less painful. In ancient times this would have been a huge decision.
- 4) As is the case today, so it was then. Jews of the *diaspora* who chose not to return - to make *aliyah* - were instructed by the Persian monarch to invest in the project by gifts of silver and gold to help finance the Temple, animals for food and sacrifice, and other gifts as freewill offerings. Some would go, others would help send. Much of the funding for rebuilding the modern state of Israel came from gifts of *diaspora* Jews around the world.

RESPONSE OF THE PEOPLE

- 5) Nearly 50,000 Jews would make the trek back to the land of Israel in the first ancient *aliyah*. God stirred the hearts of leaders in the 2 tribes from the south to return home. Also from the tribe of Levi came priests and Levites who would be needed to re-institute the sacrifices and offerings once the Temple was rebuilt. What a joyous task lay before them - to "go up" to Jerusalem and make known the name of God through obedience to His commands! God had brought the king of Babylon against the Jews; now He gives them opportunity to return home!
- 6) One is reminded of the Exodus from Egypt that happened about a millennium earlier. The Jews at that time had asked their neighbors for jewels of silver and gold (Exodus 11), and God had given them favor in the eyes of their Egyptian neighbors so that they brought out much wealth. The same thing happened here in Persia. King Cyrus encouraged the Persians to be generous with the Jews. This was an encouragement to the returnees, or, as the KJV says, they "strengthened their hands." It also gave them resources for the trip and for the project of rebuilding. As they go to reclaim what is theirs, they do not go in poverty with hat in hand.

RESTORATION OF TEMPLE VESSELS

- 7), 8) The treasurer of Persia met with a Judean prince named Sheshbazzar (was this the exilic name of Zerubbabel? I think it probably was), and they inventoried the items that had been taken from the Temple 70 years ago. **Then**, Nebuchadnezzar had taken these vessels of silver and gold as spoils of victory, and he had committed sacrilege by putting them in his god's Temple. **Now**, Cyrus, whom God raised above Nebuchadnezzar, returns these items to the people who would take them home. I see a parallel between those vessels and the land of Israel. It belongs to the Jews by possession, by purchase, by international act, and the decree of God in the Abrahamic covenant. While it was squatted

upon during the current *diaspora*, when the Jews for the most part were driven out after 70 A. D., it still belongs to them. The cry today for a Palestinian state goes against the Scriptures, history, and any real logic. The day will come when God will make known His will.

9), 10) 11) The major vessels are numbered in groups; then the total number is given as 5,400. This was great wealth returning to Jerusalem, but the greatest wealth was a remnant of faithful people of God doing the will of God. John the Beloved would one day write, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4). Israel was designed to be a trophy of God's grace, a showcase nation in which other nations could see God at work. For seventy years they had shown in exile what it cost to disobey God. Now as they return, they have an opportunity to show the world what God can do through a small group of people who are committed to Him and willing to sacrifice to obey Him. In modern times the demonstration has been more the faithfulness of God to His covenant people than their faithfulness to Him. A largely secular state, Israel has been established against great odds; she has been victorious against larger and usually better equipped armies. She has established a viable, thriving economy in the midst of tens of millions of people who hate and oppose her. How has this happened? By the grace of a God Who promised Israel a land, a seed, and a blessing. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself," said Paul in 2 Timothy 2:13. It is yet true.

EZRA, CHAPTER 2

This very long chapter is a counted list of those who returned to the land under the leadership of Zerubbabel (538 BC). The reader will struggle with name pronunciations, but you will find them interesting in any case. Worship leading will be provided for as there are a number of priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants included in the return. It appears that each returning captive had a town to which to go that had been theirs or their family's ancestral dwelling. There were also mules, camels, and donkeys in the caravan, no doubt the beasts of burden who carried the belongings of the former captives. They were not utterly poor, as they demonstrated in a generous offering toward the rebuilding of the Temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 BC. The Jews set great store by genealogies, giving them the ability to trace ancestry for various reasons. Verses 59 - 63 listed those who could not demonstrate their ancestry by record. Perhaps the priests' Urim and Thummim could and would show God's will concerning placement of these people among the Jews. Perhaps the modern obsession with "Ancestry" will help understand the importance of these lists to the ancients.

We can attempt to conclude certain things about these returnees. Their hearts were in their homeland, the land given to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. While they or their parents were removed by force from their ancestral homes, when the opportunity to return was given, they went back to Jerusalem and Judah. It may have appeared a large caravan, it was only about 8% the size of just the numbered men of war who returned from Egypt after that enslavement (600,000 military-aged men plus others would have made several million in the Exodus). However small, God always has a faithful remnant of His chosen people. Israel can never disappear from among the nations, though many of the nations who have come against them no longer exist! Jeremiah 31:36 is one passage that promises the endurance of Israel as a people. *"If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever."*

EZRA, CHAPTER 3

THE WORSHIP OF GIVING AND DOING

The seventy years of captivity were now over at last, thank God! Resettlement in the land of Israel for these returning exiles, these refugees, was a glorious thing, but no doubt it was also very taxing. Think of the last time you moved, especially if it was from one city to another. You left behind everything familiar, including many friends and family. You had to decide what to keep and what to get rid of - a painful task at best. Packing and loading then added to your grief, but finally you made it to your new home, and things began to settle down. What a relief! Now, go back in time 2500 years, and remove telephones, moving vans, packing companies, paved highways, and houses already prepared for occupancy. You now have a feel for what these people experienced and sacrificed to return to the land of their ancestors and of their God. For over 200 days they have been trying to settle in homes and get fields ready for agriculture. Now it is time for national renewal, the personal and family renewal having begun. A tremendous offering had been taken upon arrival to the land for the rebuilding of the Temple, but no work had been done, as the people saw first to their families' needs. This was in no way putting temporal things ahead of spiritual, putting God on a "back seat." Men could not expect their families to live without shelter, exposed to the elements and the wild beasts of the land. It was no sin to care for their families. Now they are about to add their work to their wealth in the actual building of the house of God.

THE RAISING OF AN ALTAR

1) Implied in this verse is the importance of unity in the Lord's work. Most every church has experienced the tragedy of discord. It is a great tool of Satan. It is a powerful work of the flesh. When men are in discord in God's family, somebody, often several somebodies, are not walking with God. When men are walking with God, they find it easier to walk with each other. A blessed phrase in New Testament history is "one accord." Paul wrote much to the Philippians about unity. He taught that personal humility was the key to corporate unity, and he used Jesus as the great Example of that personal

humility. This is not the time for personal agendas or rugged individualism. Satan's domain can only be conquered if Christian soldiers march forward together!

2) In building a work for God, in addition to unity, several other principles are also seen here. It is important to work according to our gifts and calling, as the priests demonstrate by building the altar. These men who were experts in the law, and who would be officiating at the altar, were best suited to build it. Singers should sing, and preachers should preach (although some singers seem to think it's their calling to preach between songs); let your gift place you in service where God intended you to be. Faithfulness to the Scriptures is also important in doing God's work. Notice the phrase, "*in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses.*" I fear that in this so-called "modern age," church leaders are looking more to the **world** for guidance on how to execute the business of the church than they look to the **Word**. It is time for a return to the Scriptures - "Back to the Bible!"

THE RENEWAL OF THE OFFERINGS

3) The land was not left uninhabited when the people went into captivity. Assyrians (in the north) and Babylonians (in the south) had been imported to intermingle with the "scrubs" of the land who had been left. These intermarriages resulted in the people referred to in the New Testament as "Samaritans." They had no doubt become possessive of the land, and the new arrivals felt threatened by them, as they surely felt threatened by the returning captives. Nevertheless, they built the altar. They also began to use it for sacrifices immediately, and according to the prescription of the law, they sacrificed "morning and evening." We, too, should start and finish our days with the Lord, and we should walk with Him throughout the day as well. Finally in verse three, the site for the building of the Temple and the altar was very important. It was all to be done exactly where it was built before, a location chosen by God Himself.

4) In 2004 my wife and I led a group to Israel during the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. It was quite a blessed experience, and among the memories fixed in my mind are the many booths that were fabricated right in the city of Jerusalem for the festival. We ate falafel, Middle-Eastern fast food, sitting in one such booth. Observed just after the harvest, the feast lasts 8 days, but it now has no sacrifices since there is no Temple standing. The booths reminded the Jews of their ancestors' wilderness journey; it calls to our minds the pilgrim nature of the Christian.

5) The repetition of the words "offering" and "sacrifice" demonstrate the devotion of the people to their God. He brought them home from exile, and they wasted no time in renewing the observance of festivals to the Lord. These would include Passover (Unleavened Bread), Weeks (Pentecost), and the present Feast of Tabernacles.

6) Taken in its entirety, the verse teaches that they used what they had as it was available, not waiting 'til everything was complete to start worshiping by sacrifice. The last part of the verse reminds us that there was more to be done. In addition to offering sacrifices on the altar, the people must now set themselves to the task of rebuilding the Temple. In this building God would manifest His presence among them. What glory was ahead!

7) Now many people's skills would come into play in the erecting of the Temple. "Giving" was something with which all could help, and no doubt, all did what they could. The money was used to buy cedar logs from Lebanon and float them in the Mediterranean Sea to Joppa, Jerusalem's seaport. Stone masons and carpenters had to be paid, as well as fed while on the job. God had also used Cyrus to prepare and provide for this great building work. Let us consider that our worship is not all done in a pew, but includes giving and doing for the name of the Lord.

BACK HOME AND BUILDING

*Behind the captivity in Babylon lay a number of sins - chief among them were idolatry and failure to observe the sabbatic years of letting the land lie fallow every seventh year. The seventy-year absence took care of the sabbatic year failure; and the idolatry of Babylon seemed to cure the Jews of that failing as well. Never after they returned from the exile did they have the problems with idols that plagued them prior to being removed from their land. God had promised through Moses the very things that this generation and their fathers had seen come to pass. In Deuteronomy 4:25-30 the exile was a promised result of the idolatry. Later in the fifth book of the Pentateuch we find God's promise of return from captivity should the Jews' hearts return unto their God (Deuteronomy 30:1-3). What grief must have been in the hearts of the people as they realized that all that had happened - the deaths of so many, the destruction of the Temple, the dispersion of the Jews among the nations - was the fault of their sins and the sins of their fathers. Now it was up to this generation to turn things around. Yahweh alone must be honored as their God; Jerusalem must be rebuilt as the eternal capital of Israel; and the Temple must be rebuilt as the place where sacrifices could be offered to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Great was their task, and great was their determination to accomplish it. More than that, great was the God Who had led them home and Who would see them through the measure of restoration. It was enough to sustain them to have in mind that after all these years away, they were **BACK HOME AND BUILDING!***

CONSTRUCTION BEGUN

8) The former captives who had returned from the exile to their land, their city, and their ruined Temple had been back home around two years. Solomon had begun the building of the original Temple in the second month (1 Kings 6:1), and it was no coincidence that this re-building begins at the same time of year. The rainy season is over, and things begin to be dry enough to make it a practical season for building. Other necessary things are out of the way, including the Spring harvest, and attention can now be turned to this great project. Destruction by the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:8, 9) and further devastation by disuse had rendered the Temple complex the disaster that they now faced. Zerubbabel was a descendant

of King David, and Joshua was a Levite. Zerubbabel was a link in the Messianic chain, receiving the kingdom from Shealtiel and passing it on to Abiud (Matthew 1:12,13). Joshua, also spelled sometimes "Jeshua," is the Hebrew form of the name "Jesus." These two represented the kingly and priestly tribes, and they now are mentioned as taking the lead in the building of the Temple. They are joined by "the rest of the people" in that effort. We assume that the Levites were thoroughly familiar with the Scriptural guidelines Solomon used in building the first Temple, and so they were tasked with supervising this second project. And so the returnees are ready to move forward in erecting the building that was central to their cultural and religious lives - the only place where sacrifices could be made to their God.

9) This was no ordinary building to be erected; this was God's Temple. Here He would meet with His people through the intermediary work of His priests. Here sacrifices would be offered according to His law. Here, more than any other place with an address, the work of the coming Messiah would be prefigured, foretold in clothing, furniture, proceedings, and even in the building itself! It was imperative that all be done in accordance with the Word of God, and so the supervisors of the project were men of God from the priestly tribe. Their names are forever immortalized on the page of Holy Writ so that we may never forget them. The other names listed had special meanings: "Kadmiel" - God is of old; "Hodaviah" - Yahweh is his praise; "Henadad" - the Most High is gracious.

CELEBRATION FOLLOWS

10) The language here is much like that which describes David's bringing the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16). There is great pomp, circumstance and pageantry. The priests and Levites are dressed in their ceremonial garments. They have trumpets to blow and cymbals to clang. The senses of sight and hearing will join the heart and mind in celebrating the laying of the Temple's foundation. God is a God of props - good for the visual learner.

11) For seventy years there has been no praise in Jerusalem. The Temple stones lay scattered, and the cedar wood was burned to ashes - symbols of the defeat and deportation of Israel's people. Now the scene changes! There is singing and praising of the Lord. There is the recollection of His goodness and the endurance of His mercy toward His people. They may have forgotten Him, but He certainly had not forgotten them! Praise Him!

CO-MINGLING OF WEeping AND JOY

12) What a contrast in responses as men view the restoration of the Temple! Some shout aloud for joy; they thrill that God has turned again the captivity of His people. They rejoice that they can take their harps down from the willow trees and once again sing the songs of Zion. Why do others weep? Is it the unfavorable comparison of this Temple with Solomon's? Is it recalling the sin that brought such tragedy to the people and land of the Lord?

13) What a great testimony! People of different generations, viewing things in different ways, singing and weeping, but all as one. And all as unto the Lord. People far away from the Temple mount heard their noise. It seemed to say, "**We are back home and building!**" God is with us!" May we, like them, gather and lift our voices to exalt the Lord, encourage each other in the work, and hope to be an evangel to those around us needing God.

EZRA, CHAPTER 4

GOD'S WORK ALWAYS HAS OPPOSITION

COMBATING THE WORK OF BUILDING

1), 2) Satan always has enemies of the work of God, and the rebuilding of the Temple was no exception. These particular adversaries were the people that the Assyrian king had brought in to replace the Israelites (Northern Kingdom) that had been deported in 722 BC. They had intermarried, producing the "half-breeds" that became known (and hated) as Samaritans. Their first attempt at sabotage was an effort at "infiltration." They offered to build with the returning captives, claiming that they, too, worshiped the God of Israel. A careful reading of 1 Kings 17 reveals that these had only added Yahweh to their pantheon of gods. You can only truly worship Yahweh if you worship Yahweh only.

3) The leaders of the returning Jewish group were united in their refusal to accept this feigned offer. First of all, these people did not really worship their God. In the second place, the Persian King Cyrus had commissioned those returning to Judea to build the Temple, without any mention of those already living in the land helping. To allow their help would have created a "mixed multitude," which always waters down true faith.

4), 5) The locals having come to the civil leader, Zerubbabel, and the religious leader, Jeshua, and having asked if they might join the effort of the returnees in building this Temple, had been rebuffed. Their offer declined, they now showed their real colors by beginning to work at discouraging the Jews in their task. They tried intimidation, attempting to frighten those who would rebuild God's Temple and restore His proper worship. This harassment even including hiring mercenary counselors to try and frustrate their efforts. Strange, isn't it, that these who so recently offered to "help" now spent good money and no small effort to "hinder." Those who do not truly follow God are bound to be in opposition to Him. These efforts went on until the new king of Persia, Darius, intervened.

6) Here is described a communique from the Samaritan adversaries to Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes). The letter was like an injunction to stop the work on the Temple, and it is only briefly mentioned. The text of the next letter will be included in the record.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE KING

7) Three named men and their unnamed colleagues pressed for the writing of a letter to Artaxerxes in the language of the

land, Aramaic, and it had to be translated into the Persian language for the king. From here until 6:19 the text is in Aramaic, returning in 6:19 to Hebrew.

8), 9), 10) Rehum and Shimshai apparently execute the letter, which they began by making it appear that everyone of consequence in the land was united in their opposition to this building project. This is reminiscent of the men who tried to turn Nebuchadnezzar against Daniel - they said they were all in agreement in their request, but Daniel had been left out of the process. In the present case, the men with the commission from Cyrus were the only concerned party, but they were left out of the communication!

11), 12) A simple, respectful salutation indicates the recipient of the letter as the King Artaxerxes. His kingdom spread "beyond the river" (TransEuphrates) into the area that included Israel. These men writing were from the area to the north of Judah, and they had malicious intent against the Jews. Their first adversarial effort was to join the Jews in the project, no doubt to sabotage the work. That failing, they had tried intimidation and then the sending of a false report to the king, accusing the Jews of future crimes! The basis of their accusations was again a false reporting of rebellion and wickedness on the Jews' part in the past.

13) It is amazing arrogance and presumption to pretend to know what people will do in the future! The reason for these accusations is a mystery. Who can know for sure why they wanted to undermine the work of their southern neighbors? They hit the king in his pocketbook by theorizing a future in which no custom, or "toll" would be forthcoming from Judah - a thing they could not possibly know with any degree of certainty. But they stated it as if were a known fact!

14), 15) These accusers presented themselves as partners of the king, people who were supported by the king - "eat the salt of the palace." And so they must look out for his interests in the land. The reality was that Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar for her stubborn rebellion, but the Babylonians were idolatrous enemies of Israel! The Persians were non-idolatrous people who had shown themselves friends to the Jews. They would not have the same motivation to stand against Artaxerxes that they did against Nebuchadnezzar.

16) It makes me chuckle to read these words! They allege that if this little city in the south of Israel, with a population of roughly 50,000, would then annex all the area of the north of Israel, and all of Syria, leaving the king with no vassals beyond the Euphrates. What a stretch of the imagination this was, but sinful anti-Semitic malice knows no reason or logic.

CESSATION OF THE WORK ON THE TEMPLE

17), 18) Artaxerxes did not just dismiss this missive from the Samaritans, but rather responded properly. He replied that he had gotten someone to read their letter plainly to him. He knew their concerns.

19) He did have search made of the records, and he did find evidence of past rebellions. Indeed, the Scriptures record that Jerusalem had rebelled against the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:7, and Babylon (2 Kings 24:1). There was no denying the past.

20) The mighty kings were no doubt David and Solomon, who expanded Israel's area to its largest size (1 Kings 4:21, 24).

21), 22) The king (Artaxerxes) directed that the building of the wall of Jerusalem be stopped until he might make a further decree. It was this same king who would send Nehemiah to continue this very project some time later (444 BC).

23) Not only did Rehum, Shimshai, and their associates deliver the edict of the king, they brought sufficient manpower with them to use "force and power" to stop the building.

24) Here is the sad report that the work did stop - a temporary setback for the Lord's work. We must remember that all opposition to God's work is just temporary; He will win in the end!

EZRA, CHAPTER 5

THE EFFECT OF GOOD PREACHING

1), 2) A delay in the building of the Temple lasted about 15 years. Now four men are used of God to get the work going again. Two of these men are the so-called "minor prophets" Haggai and Zechariah. These men spoke from God to stir up the Jews in the matter of their mission of restoration of the worship of Yahweh in Israel. Remember, priests were religious leaders who spoke to God for men; prophets, on the other hand, spoke to men on behalf of God. The men who accepted the challenge to get back to work were Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Zerubbabel was a descendant of Jehoiachin, the king taken into exile in Babylon, and thus a recognized civil leader. Jeshua was the high priest who had returned from the captivity, and he would be the expert in matters related to the Temple. The two prophets were there to motivate the two leaders, who could get work on the Temple underway again.

THE ENEMIES OF GOD'S PLAN

3), 4) Just as God had His men on the job there in Jerusalem, so the enemy had his workers. Tattenai was the first ruler of the land southwest of the Euphrates. Shethar-Bozenai was one of his provincial officials; they had with them other "associates," and together they all set about, first with words, to impede the efforts that had been revived to build the Temple and restore Yahweh-worship. Their two questions were somewhat threatening by intent: 1. "Who said that you could do this work on this building? And 2. What are the names of those working on the project?" This opposition group was questioning the authority of those building, and they were "taking names" to report to someone - intimidation effort. 5) Earthly officials, however high-placed, cannot stop work that the Most High God wants done. This attempted injunction against the building of the Temple did not stop the work from going forward. Word would indeed be sent to the court of

Darius, but there would be no further delay in the work.

THE EPISTLE TO THE GREAT POTENTATE

6), 7) Now is the record of the clerical effort to stop the Jews from building God's Temple. Tattenai, Shethar-Bozenai, and any associates of theirs they could muster all signed a letter to the King of the Medo-Persian Empire, Darius by name.

These multiple signatures seem to make it more important, more urgent - an effort to grab the King's attention, no doubt.

8) Their letter informed the King that they had made an investigative visit to Judah, and they had discovered that the former Temple of the great God was being diligently and prosperously rebuilt - with huge stones and timber (these were the standard building materials of the day, so it seems strange that this would be mentioned).

9), 10) They relate to the King the nature of their inquiry of the leaders of the building project - seeking the source of their authority to build and the names of those doing the work. To us who look back with the history now complete, this looks awfully petty, but it could have turned out to be a major problem for those doing God's will and work.

11) They report the reply of the Jewish leaders, which our author did not relate earlier, but he does so now. It went like this in the beginning: "We serve the God of heaven and earth. And we are rebuilding the house that was first built many years ago by a great King of Israel.

12) This is a good recounting in summary of the Babylonian campaign against the Jews and the reason for the fall of Judah. The people of Judah angered God by their sin, and God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to defeat the kingdom, and then he carried many of the people (and the best of them, at that) into captivity in Babylon. This was related in the chronological precursor to Ezra, the book of 2 Chronicles.

13), 14), 15) The letter continues with the report given by the Jews to the critics and "opposers" who challenged them.

"These Jews said that in the first year of his reign, Cyrus himself had decreed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem."

This was of course the fulfillment of one of Isaiah's prophecies (44:28), given possibly more than 200 years earlier! It is interesting that here the title "king of Babylon" is used, since Cyrus was Persian. But he had conquered the Babylonians, and perhaps was here emphasizing that. The report of Jewish response continues in the letter, "They said Cyrus also directed the return of the vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem, gave them to Sheshbazzar and instructed they were to be returned to the Temple that was to be rebuilt on its original site." Was "Sheshbazzar" a Babylonian name for Zerubbabel? Other Jews in captivities were given alternate names, as well (Joseph, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah).

16), 17) The conclusion of the letter was that the Temple foundations had been laid, but that the building was not yet finished. There was request to see if there ever really was a decree by Cyrus for this building project to be done. Enemies of the work of God will stop at nothing to undermine the efforts of the servants of Yahweh to accomplish anything in this world for their God. But never forget, "If God be for us, who can stand against us?" (Romans 8:31).

EZRA, CHAPTER 6

THINGS OF GOD ARE GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

RESEARCH AND DECREE OF DARIUS

1) Since in those days there was no such thing as Google, a scroll-by-scroll search was instituted by Darius. In this ancient world great care was taken to preserve important state documents, and so the archives were visited and search began.

2), 3), 4) In a place called Ecbatana, a Median citadel, a scroll was surely found that verified exactly what the Jews had testified when questioned about their authority. Additional data was read there about the sacrifices, the location of the Temple, and certain particulars about its construction - dimensions and building materials. The most astounding fact discovered was that Cyrus ordered that the cost of the work be borne by the government! This will make a huge difference in the continuation of the project!

5) The discovered decree also confirmed the word of the returned Jews that the vessels once taken from Solomon's Temple by Nebuchadnezzar were to be restored to the newly rebuilt Temple (often called the "Second Temple," or "Zerubbabel's Temple"). Several times in this context the building is called "the House of God" (Beit Elohe).

REQUIREMENT TO DESIST OPPOSITION

6), 7), 8) Don't you just love it when the bad guys get their "comeuppance?" The "good guys" win again! Darius orders the group of complainers to "keep away" from the work, to "let the work of God alone," and to "let them build." And the "icing on the cake" was when the missive from the king included these words, "you shall do for these elders of the Jews!" They had been "doing against" them, and now they are commanded to "do for them!" What a turning of the tables this was! O, how they must have cringed to read that the cost of the Temple's building was to be drawn from the budget of the TransEuphrates governors (that meant them!). Thank you Cyrus and Darius! Isaiah (60:10) had predicted, *"Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you."* This could also apply to the building of the city wall 500 years ago by Sulieman.

RESUMPTION OF WORSHIP

9), 10) Darius took things a step further than had Cyrus, who dealt with the building itself. Darius ordered the "governors beyond the river" to supply the Jews with whatever they needed for the daily sacrifices - be it animals or other food items - so that they might please the God of heaven as they pray for the lives of the kings and his sons. So a second foreign king

(Cyrus and then Darius) honors the God of Israel, more than did the kings of Israel and Judah. Had they honored God as these men did, the exile would never have had to happen.

11), 12) Darius certainly emphasized the seriousness of his edict by the penalties promised to anyone who would attempt to change what he said. Emphatically and specifically Darius spelled out that such a person would have a beam pulled from their home, and they would be impaled on the beam. Then their family would suffer as their house would be turned into a “dunghill” (was that like an ancient septic tank?). Darius seems here to express some knowledge of and faith in Israel’s God. He even calls on Yahweh to overthrow any people or king who would alter his edict or destroy this “house” that is in Jerusalem. The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, and the Empire has disappeared from the earth. Nations who oppose Israel will all find themselves on the junk heap of history.

REJOICING AT THE DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE

13) How thoroughly chastised must these men have felt. They changed from antagonism to strong support for the Temple building project. Governor Tattenai, Shethar-bozenai, and their cronies all were found diligently obeying the command of Darius. I’m afraid that if I were any of the Jews involved in the project, I would have taken great delight in the discomfort of these men - perhaps even rubbing their faces in it (shame on me).

14) How amazing was the combination of things that came together to get the Temple work completed! The item that is first-mentioned is the work of the Jews in the building. Not much ever gets done without someone putting their shoulder to the wheel or their nose to the grindstone - these folks are to be commended. Next spoken of is the prophesying of the two previously-mentioned prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. Never underestimate the powerful effect of God-ordained, Biblical preaching! It was what brought me from sin to righteousness, from death to life, from headed to the lake of fire to being on my way to heaven. Skipping on to the end of the verse, the decrees of Cyrus and Darius are said to be part of what God used to get the job done. But behind and above all of this - the working, the prophesying, the decrees of earthly monarchs - was the decree of Almighty God. Solomon had written in Proverbs 19:21, *“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.”* Nothing is more important than what “Thus saith the Lord.”

15) Twenty-one years earlier the building on the Temple had begun, but it had lagged as the people got busy building their own homes. When the two prophets came along and inspired the people, the work began again, and it was finished in less than four and a half years.

16), 17), 18) You will recall that around 50,000 Jews had returned to Judah from the captivity in the earlier *aliyah*. Ezra relates here that most, if not all, of the people joined the priests and Levites in joyfully celebrating the dedication of the new Temple. The number of animals sacrificed here is dwarfed by the vast numbers of those slain at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple - hundreds **here**, tens of thousands **then**. Perhaps the small number of people explains the size difference; it may also be assumed that these folks having returned from 70 years of captivity were not particularly well-off financially. The 12 male goats that were “according to the number of the tribes of Israel” suggest that there were no “lost ten tribes.” The Temple being complete, the people then set about to have the priests and Levites ready to perform their service to the Lord on behalf of the people. This would have brought much joy to those whose hearts were right with God.

RETURN TO THE PASSOVER

19), 20), 21) Here the text returns to Hebrew (the language of the Jews), having been in Aramaic (the language of the surrounding peoples) since 4:8. What a joy it must have been to finally celebrate the Passover! This feast which commemorated Israel’s escape from the bondage in Egypt is now enjoyed by those who have left the Babylonian captivity. You may recall that only those who were ceremonially clean could partake of the Passover. So the exiles who had returned could now do so, as well as others who had purified themselves. This latter group was made up of either Gentile proselytes from the land or Jews who never left the land, but who had defiled themselves with the pagan practices of the Babylonians who had joined them. These latter now have purified themselves and were ready to partake of the Passover.

22) The Passover, a single meal in the evening of a single day, was part of the larger feast of unleavened bread, which lasted seven days (Exodus 12:15, 13:6). Here is another strange mention of a king - this time the “king of Assyria” (as Cyrus was referred to as the king of Babylon in 5:13). This time the reference is to Darius the Mede, king of the Medo-Persian Empire, but he is referred to as the king of Assyria, which was supplanted by Babylon, which gave way to the Medo-Persian rule. He is credited as having aided the Jews in the work on the house of God.

EZRA, CHAPTER 7

A LETTER FROM THE KING!

Our youngest grandchild is a little boy named “Ezra.” The name means “help” or “my helper.” Certainly our hearts’ desire and prayer for this young man includes that he live up to his name. We want him (and all our grandchildren) to be a help to people. If our Ezra could be a man like this Bible Ezra, our prayers will have been answered. He trekked back from the exile in Babylon and was a leader in the re-possessing and rebuilding of the homeland. He was indeed a “helper” to God’s people and His work. He and Nehemiah are the best-known “returnees” and leaders of the repatriated Israelites. Though these books appear early in the English Bible, they follow most of the prophets in their chronology.

PAST HISTORY OF EZRA

1), 2), 3), 4), 5) Chronologically and historically, the events of the book of Esther occur between chapters six and seven of Ezra - a period of over fifty years. The credentials of Ezra as a priest from the best line of priests is found here in these first five verses of chapter seven. All proper Jewish priests came from Aaron's line, but Ezra also came from Zadok's line, a worthy ancestry indeed. He was many generations removed from Aaron, and from a line that ran through Zadok, who had remained faithful to David during one of the revolts against him. This was quite a pedigree for this priest returned from the exile with a mission of stirring the people to be right with God, which was more than a change of address from captivity to freedom. The record here does not include every line of descent; see 1 Chronicles 6 for a more detailed genealogy.

6) O, that we might see the hand of the Lord upon more people today like it was upon Ezra! The king, Artaxerxes, granted Ezra a "blank check" because God's hand was evident upon him. Ezra had the reputation of being a "man of the Book." When there is no Temple, priests have no sacrificial duties, so Ezra apparently wisely spent his time studying the Scriptures. He was "skilled in the law of Moses," and he recognized that this law came from Moses' God. Now that the Temple was complete, there was priestly work for Ezra to do in Jerusalem, so he left Babylon to head "home."

PILGRIMAGE SUMMARY

7) Chapter two had given a detailed census of those returning to Judah earlier with Zerubbabel. This one here is more of a summary statement without so much detail. Several categories of people are listed: 1. Some of the people of Israel, 2. Some of the priests and Levites, 3. The singers, 4. The gatekeepers, 5. The Temple servants. Though Ezra was a leader, he did not travel alone; was it his influence that these others followed? Perhaps it was.

8), 9) It took this troupe exactly four months, 120 days, to make the journey. This appears to have been a surprisingly short time for such a journey, as is indicated by the expression, "for the good hand of his God was upon him." I am reminded of Paul's sailing from Troas to Neapolis on his way to Philippi in Acts 16. This two-day journey was because of the Lord's wind in their sails, demonstrating that Paul was following God's will. The reverse journey at a later date (Acts 20:6) took five days! Your journey will sometimes be swift as God shows His good pleasure for your trip.

10) What a man was this Ezra! He was devoted ("he had set his heart") to studying the Torah given by Yahweh. He was then desirous to obey it ("to do it"), and finally he wanted to teach the ceremonial and moral aspects of God's Word to the people of Israel. I remember so well how the Scriptures grabbed my own heart, and how I could not wait to learn more and teach others what others had taught me. This is the essence of 2 Timothy 2:2, "*and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*" We will see in chapter 10, as well as in Nehemiah 8 that Ezra got his wish and fulfilled his mission of teaching God's people.

POSTAL MESSAGE FROM THE KING

11) Here Ezra is noted as a Priest, a Scribe (one who copies the law in writing), and a man "learned in the matters of...the Lord." Ezra was known for his astuteness as a student of God's Word. How blessed our generation would be if we would have such a commitment to Scripture!

12), 13) This opening of the letter sent by Artaxerxes first to Ezra, but also for the eyes of other Jews, wished them peace. The king somehow knew of the desire of Ezra and others to make the journey from their long-time (70-years) home back to their ancestral land and city, Judah and Jerusalem. So he offers liberty to any who wish to accompany Ezra to do so. They could not be coerced to return; they needed to want to go of their own free will. He mentions only the first three of the categories of people that were listed in verse seven as gifts to the Lord.

14), 15), 16) Ezra and his associates had at least a copy of the Law of God, and that was known to the king. Would that today leaders of nations and states would reverence the Scriptures, or at least respect them. These pilgrims were not to leave empty-handed. They were first to "carry" silver and gold offered by the king and his seven counselors. They seemed to understand that Yahweh was the God of Israel, and that in some sense He dwelled at Jerusalem. We would know that dwelling to be over the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies in the Temple. They were to carry also silver and gold that made up freewill offerings from people who were not making the trip. This may have included gifts from Gentiles who were favorable to the mission of the Jews.

17) Artaxerxes instructed the travelers to use the money to purchase animals and produce for the offerings to be made on the altar at the Temple. This Gentile king was well-taught in the matters of the law with regard to sacrifices and offerings. Any governmental leader would be a better leader, making better decisions and passing better laws if they were more familiar with the principles and precepts of the Scriptures. Artaxerxes certainly did so.

18) Verse 18 is like a "keep the change" command. After the appropriate sacrificial things were purchased, any residual monies were to be kept and used at the discretion of the people, as they understood the will of God.

19) Apparently not all of the Temple vessels went home with the first pilgrims, as the king now directs the delivery of vessels that were for the service of the Lord to be delivered before the God of Jerusalem.

20) Here is another of those "jaw-dropping" royal edicts. Not only shall you take Temple vessels and free-will offering moneys home with you, if you run short of funds in having the service of the Lord restored, you may tap the royal treasury for the resources to do it. So very different from our New Testament era "separation of church and state."

21), 22), 23), 24) What an amazing series of guidelines comes next from the letter Artaxerxes wrote in connection with the Temple service in Jerusalem! He first reminds the readers, whoever they may be, that this word is coming from the King, the sovereign of the greatest empire the world has ever seen. The treasurers in the TransEuphrates provinces are

commanded to fulfill any request of Ezra up to certain specified limits. It is interesting that the King refers to Ezra as “the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven.” What an unusual acknowledgment for a pagan king - somewhat reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar after his seven-year “lycanthropy” episode recorded for us in Daniel 4:2,3, *“It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.”* The limits of help were amazing - the silver alone would be 3.5 million dollars in today’s money. Remember, this was only for materials for the service of the Temple sacrifices, no building was involved. The king (Artaxerxes) may have been “hedging his bets” just in case Ezra’s God was THE real deity, or he may have come to trust in Yahweh. Heaven will tell. Also fascinating is the fact that the king gave to workers in the service of the Lord a tax-exempt status - from the priests all the way to the doorkeepers and servants of the Lord’s house.

25), 26) Artaxerxes saw value in the principles of the law that guided the people of God for the keeping of order in his empire. So he authorized Ezra to appoint officials who knew the law, as well as to teach the law to those not familiar with it. The king had seen that Ezra’s heart had been touched by his God. He also saw that God’s law and the laws of his kingdom did not conflict - which demonstrates that the Medo-Persian kingdom for the most part had just laws. By extension, any just law in our day will not conflict with the principles of God in and beyond the law. The king further ordered that any people who disobeyed God’s law or the law of the king should have executed appropriate punishment on themselves. This might be incarceration, fines, deportation, or even the death penalty - which last thing comes under debate even today. Know that if we follow Scripture, we will support capital punishment, which was ordained of God in Genesis 9:6, brought into the law of Moses, and never abrogated at any time by God. Jesus even validated the correctness of capital punishment by submitting to it, even though He had done nothing to deserve it!

PRAISE TO YAHWEH FOR ALL HIS FAVOR

27), 28) The king’s letter has ended, and Ezra now gives an editorial reflection on what the letter revealed. He blessed Yahweh for turning the heart of the king toward His house in Jerusalem, to “beautify” it. Yahweh even put His own love for His servant, Ezra, into the heart of the king and the king’s support team. All of this brought courage to the heart of God’s man, Ezra, to enable him to move ahead with God’s plan for him to gather men and head to Judah and Jerusalem.

EZRA, CHAPTER 8

THE SECOND POST-EXILE ALIYAH

REGISTRY OF THOSE RETURNING

1) - 14) This paragraph is a register of (adult?) males who made this journey back to Judah and Jerusalem. The total comes to 1,514. That number will increase by 258 Levites in the next paragraph, making the guys’ total 1,772. If we may assume that these were accompanied by wives and children, you can see that the total would swell to a number that I am afraid to guess. It reminds me of the roughly 600,000 adult males who escaped Egypt, which number would likely have grown to over two million (and maybe many more if the families were as large as ancient families often were).

RECRUITMENT OF LEVITES

15) - 20) The first *aliyah* (return, “going up”) from the exile was low on Levites. Whereas they were about 1/12 of the nation, only 1.5% of those returnees were from the tribe that gave the priests and other workers in the Temple. Whether Ezra knew this or not, we do not know, but he knew that he needed more people from his tribe to return with him. So he sent out a call from their 3-day encampment site before leaving for home. The response was a “blue-ribbon” team of wise men to consider the issue. The end result was that 258 men from the tribe of Levi were added to the role of those leaving exile and returning to Judah and Jerusalem.

REACHING OUT TO GOD FOR PROTECTION

21), 22), 23) As Ezra and his group prepared to depart for Jerusalem, it was discovered that no Levites were among those returning. He therefore sent an emissary to gather some Temple workers to join the entourage, and 258 more came alongside them to head to Jerusalem. The group now assembled, their leader reminds them of the dangers of their journey and leads them in a season of fasting and prayer for God’s protection. It will not do for us to contrast the methods of Nehemiah, who accepted from the king an armed military escort, and Ezra, who chose not to do so. Great men of God have differed in the way they went about His work in every age. George Mueller, the great man of prayer and faith, had a motto that went, “Ask no man.” He asked God for his needs and those of his orphanage ministry, and God provided. Another great soldier of the cross, D. L. Moody, went about soliciting financial help to rebuild South Chicago after the great fire. God used each man in a different way. The nearly 1,000-mile trip to Jerusalem could be fraught with danger, especially for a group of religious people taking all their possessions to relocate in their ancient homeland! Ezra had emphasized to the king how his God looked after those who trust Him and is angry with those who have no time for Him. On the heels of that, to have asked for an armed escort might seem untrusting of God. So Ezra and the people fasted and prayed, and the record said that God answered their prayer. Clearly this means they had **safety for the journey!**

Truth is eternal, and principles never change. For instance, delegation of responsibility is a huge help in getting things done. Moses had people assist him in handling matters brought by the Israelites in the wilderness. David’s success as a

general depended greatly on his surrounding himself with capable men who could lead others. Jesus chose 12 and then 70 to send out and reach people with the teaching of the truth. Delegation is an abiding method of accomplishing large tasks. Accountability is necessary for proper handling of material things in ministry. As articles were brought for the construction of the Tabernacle, there was a detailed listing of gifts. Here, Ezra disburses the combined gifts from the king, some of his staff, and from his own people to twelve priests, and he made a record of the amounts to be checked when the money was brought back together in Jerusalem at the Temple. This combined delegation for carrying the silver and gold, as well as accountability for the amount entrusted to each man. In this and other things, Ezra displayed great leadership. He has often been compared to Moses by Jewish scholars in his leadership skills.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRIESTS TO GUARD THE OFFERINGS

24), 25) Generally those in ministry do not like to handle the finances of the ministry. It was a little different in Israel; here Ezra selects a dozen men to take responsibility for transport of the silver and gold over the long miles of the journey, and he selects priests. The carefulness of the accounting was to protect the ministers and the money. At the Rescue Mission where I serve, we have an annual outside audit by an accounting firm to insure integrity in the handling of finances. We follow closely the guidance the auditors give us on the handling of money. But what we do in the 21st century is not new; Ezra was working to insure that all was handled in a proper manner.

26), 27) Those who know these things estimate the weight of the wealth at around 28 tons total! This suggests several things to the reader such as myself. First, the immense wealth of the Persian King and his court, as well as that of the Jews in the captivity. Next is the necessity of wagons of some sort to transport this massive amount of precious metals! This would require bringing more people into service to accompany and guard the wagons as they traveled - no small task. Finally, the great generosity of those who gave - Persian nobles and Israelites - stands out as amazing. When God stirs people's hearts, that stirring often touches the purse strings as well.

28), 29) Ezra gives a rousing charge to the caregivers of the bounty headed for Jerusalem. First he tells them that they are consecrated to the Lord - not just the offerings they have charge over. One recalls 2 Corinthians 8 as Paul spoke of the Macedonian believers who in their giving, "first gave themselves to the Lord." The man belongs to the service of God as well as does the money over which he is steward. Next Ezra reminds them that the money is God's - given as a freewill offering by His people. His ownership - our stewardship. So they were to GUARD IT, and they were to GET IT to Jerusalem, and they were then to GIVE IT to the next group of stewards there. Let us, too, learn to hold loosely the things God has entrusted to us, remembering that it all belongs to Him!

30) It seems only fair that Gentile powers help provide the resources to restore what Gentile powers had destroyed and/or taken away some 7 decades ago. And so, like the Israelites "spoiled" the Egyptians nearly 1,000 years before, these Jews left Babylon to head home with many resources to rebuild and restore what had been lost.

RETURN GETS UNDERWAY!

31), 32) It may be that a more detailed story of the journey would make an exciting read, with weather, bandits, accidents, deaths and births, and such. But Ezra unceremoniously sums it up in a few words: "We set out; God protected us; we arrived in Jerusalem; we rested." For them it was not the journey that mattered; it was the destination. For us, while the destination - that is, heaven - is paramount, the journey is where we live. How (not "if") we get there depends on how we do here. We can go in as Paul spoke of "so as by fire" ("the skin of our teeth"), or as Peter wrote, we may have an "abundant entrance." We get to choose our path and how we arrive at home.

33), 34) When the three days' rest were over, the stewards of the treasures that came from Persia assembled to turn over the largesse to the local authorities. Priests had been responsible for the care of the Temple treasure during transport, and now their Jerusalem counterparts were there to receive the trust from them. Notice the careful accounting, maintaining the integrity initiated by Ezra before the journey began. Four men formed the counting committee - two priests and two Levites. I was just noticing in our church newsletter that we have four people on next Monday's counting committee. Old principals never go out of style - they still work very well.

RELIGIOUS DUTIES COME FIRST

35) Seventy years away from the place of sacrifice, and now they are home. Their presence at the Temple allows them to at last sacrifice to their God. Notice the number of animals sacrificed to Jehovah in this great act of "welcome home worship." The people and the treasure had been consecrated to the Lord, now the animals are too.

36) After religious activities were completed, they also took care of some civil responsibilities - they conveyed the letter from King Artaxerxes to the local officials in the TransEuphrates province. These men, in turn, "aided the people and the house of God," as the king required of them.

EZRA, CHAPTER 9

SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE FIXED

Ezra had not been in the land during the events of the first portion of his book. As a priest and teacher of the law, however, he had a burning desire to be there, and he had now arrived in the land of his fathers. The Persian King had dispatched him there with additional silver and gold articles for the temple and with instructions for the civil leaders of the trans-Euphrates region to assist in the work for which he had come. What Ezra found there was not to his liking. The

disobedience of God's people had led to their two-fold defeat and exile in foreign lands. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, had been conquered by Assyria, and the people had been taken captive late in the eighth century B.C. (722 - 721 B.C.). Just over a century later, the Southern Kingdom, Judah, was also besieged, decimated, and its people carried into captivity by the Babylonians. This began in 606 B.C., with the third and final deportation occurring in 586 B.C. This was when the first Temple was destroyed, and the captivity lasted 70 years. Perhaps only Israel could recover from such a devastating national disaster. **But then** they are unique among the nations with a covenant of permanence, a perpetual land grant, and the guarantee of a Kingdom with a Divine King yet to come. King Cyrus of Persia allowed any Jews who wished to do so to return to their native land. All Biblical Hebrew history from that point on is called "Post-Exilic." This would be the time of the writing of the final three historic books, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Also written in this period were the final three prophetic books, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. By the time Ezra came to lead and write, the enthusiasm of the people for their national right had waned. The work of restoration had slowed to a stop, and the repatriated Jews had begun to intermarry with the squatters, and their children were not speaking Hebrew! God called several men, Ezra among them, to set things right in the land that bore His name. Nehemiah would also come to do the same thing, and the two would be bolstered by the ministries of the three aforementioned prophets.

THE ISSUE OF INTERMARRIAGE WITH PAGANS

1),2) The arrival of this new contingent was followed by their offering sacrifices! To obey the Levitical law was a new experience for these, and what a blessing it must have been! The sacred articles had been counted and weighed to make sure there was absolute honesty in their delivery. Now Ezra is met with the news that there is defilement among the people, defilement that extends even to the priests and Levites. God's people were to remain pure while living as neighbors to the pagans, eight nations of which are named here. Being separate from the world and its practices would give the Jews a real testimony with them for the Lord. See Exodus 19:6 here. What the Jews had done was to intermarry with these peoples, mingling the holy race with the unholy. The influence of false worship in such cases was always negative. An ungodly spouse so often has a detrimental influence on their godly mate. Besides this, the very act of such intermarrying was forbidden by God. What is worse, those leaders who should have guided them right were at the forefront of these practices. Blind guides!

3) Ezra is dumbfounded at the news he hears. He performs some outward expressions of grief in the tearing of his outer and his inner garment and painfully plucking hair from his head and beard. A crowd of righteous people join him in expressing outrage at sin, once they have heard the Word of God. Several hours later, Ezra prays a prayer of confession that rivals that of Daniel in his ninth chapter. His prayer reflects to the people that the very practices they now engage in helped lead to the captivity from which they have so recently come. How soon we forget!

4) Ezra's response was from a broken heart, and it was demonstrated outwardly by plucking hair from his head and beard, as well as tearing his outer garment in grief. Ezra was not alone in his grief, as others sat trembling with him, affected by the rebellion against the teaching of the laws of God.

5) God's design for Israel was one of separation from the sins of the people around them. As is often the case with the church of Jesus Christ, Israel was all too much influenced by their environs. Many had become "unequally yoked" with pagans, participating in their godless practices. Those who should have led them out of such behavior, the ministers, were leaders in the sin! At this word, Ezra showed the signs of a broken and contrite heart, including self-abasement, falling on his knees, tearing his garments before man and before God.

INTERCESSION MINGLED WITH CONFESSION

6) A good leader, Ezra did not exalt himself above the people in condemning them; he rather identified with them - as one of them. He refers here to "our sin" and "our guilt," placing himself with, not over, the people. One is reminded of the similar acts and attitudes of Nehemiah (1:6) and Daniel (9:5ff.). He is personally ashamed and embarrassed to "look God in the eye" as it were, and so he hangs his head in shame over corporate sin.

7) You may recall that some in the captivity had blamed their condition on the sins of earlier generations. The proverb went like this, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezekiel 18:12). Ezra would have no part of that; in fact he not only identified with his generation's sin, he owned that of their ancestors, as well. Mentioning "kings" in the plural suggested he crossed generational lines with confession. It is strange that such a good man senses so deeply his sin and the sin of his nation - or is it so strange after all?

8) How noble of Ezra to recognize the goodness and grace of God to his generation. He details four expressions of that grace for us. First, God left them a remnant, the relatively small number who returned to Judah. Next, He had granted them a firm place in the sanctuary - is this stability in worship? Then follows the enlightening of their eyes through divine revelation, with relief from the bondage of the Babylonian captivity. He felt really blessed!

9) Though released from the bondage of captivity, Ezra still felt the Jewish people were "bondmen." This could refer to their bondage to sin, or it may describe the Jewish people's continued subjection to the Persian Empire. Even so, Cyrus and then Darius had each smiled upon the Jewish exiles, granting them aid in going home and rebuilding. The walls of stone lay in ruins, but the wall of God's protection stood around them in their task.

INSTRUCTION FROM THE WORD OF GOD

10), 11) "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it," said George Santayana. Ezra was not guilty of that wrong! He had described how the sins of the past brought about the bondage in Babylon, and now he points out that

those same sins are being repeated by the people he served! He was so ashamed of this! The prophets had warned of the sinful practices of the people who squatted in the land. That seemed only to invite the Jews to intermarry with the Samaritan women and to adopt those wicked things as their own. Today the so-called "enlightened elite" would preach tolerance of everyone's faith system. They would say that any who hold to the truths of God's Word as absolute and exclusive are narrow-minded bigots. The truth is that there are absolutes in this world, and it is God Who sets the standards, not the leftist, elitist intelligentsia!

12) Upon their return to the Land the Israelites found strangers who had been brought in by Assyria (in the north) and Babylon (in the south). They were not to intermarry with these squatters, as such marriages would tend to draw the Jews after other gods and away from single-minded devotion to Yahweh. While in captivity, they were commanded to seek the peace of their host land (Jeremiah 29:7), but now back home they were not to seek the peace or prosperity of the pagan strangers dwelling among them. The end result of seeking their peace and prosperity would be to deny the Jews' own children the best opportunity to prosper in the land.

13), 14) In prayer now the people acknowledge that what they suffered in the captivity was less than their iniquities deserved (see Psalm 103:10 for a similar thought). So they add, "Shall we then intermarry with these transplants who practice things abominable to You, O Lord? If we did, You would be right to be so angry with us that You would consume us from the Land, leaving no remnant at all!"

15) Psalm 1:6 relates how the wicked cannot "stand in the judgment." Ezra was quite sure that the current spiritual state of the Jews in Judea was so sinfully low that they could not "stand" in God's presence. The great human-divine contrast is seen in this: "We are guilty - You are righteous." Only a work of God then and now can make us fit to stand before Him. It is all of grace, or it does not happen at all. We each need Christ's righteousness!

EZRA, CHAPTER 10

A GOOD LEADER IN ACTION

Ezra's prayer of contrition and confession is a model for us all. He recognized the failure of the people to live up to God's commands. He noted the chastisement of God upon them for their wrongs, citing that it was less than their iniquities deserved. The very fact that there was even then a remnant of Jews in the land was a testimony of God's grace to a people who deserved to be wiped out. But because of His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God could not and would not destroy Israel.

THE PEOPLE JOIN IN CONFESSION

1) Once again we find Ezra engaged in prayer of contrition and confession of the sin of the people, something that other good leaders have done at other times. Some among the people who knew something must be done joined Ezra, encouraging him to take the lead, promising their support.

2), 3) Now comes a spokesman, Shecaniah by name, who states the wrong of the people thus, "We have disobeyed the Lord by marrying women who were daughters of the land into which we have come. Children have been born of those unholy unions, and the repair of the situation will not be easy. But we must obey God's law, requiring us to send away these wives and their children to their own people." What courage this man had; he is to be commended. Sin creates problems that are not always easily solved, but deal with sin we must. Ezra had a comrade in Shecaniah who would help.

4), 5) Shecaniah then spoke with an enviable directness to God's man, Ezra. "You are our leader. It is up to you to take charge here in the solving of these problems. Rise up and lead us, and we pledge our support to you as you follow God's law, and we follow you." Ezra responds by calling together the religious leaders of the people, the priests and Levites, putting them under oath to follow this plan. No Biblical warrant can be found here to tell a believer to leave an unbelieving spouse. The spirit of their plans was good, but the method may not have been sanctioned by God. It is better to make a Biblical decision before saying "I do" than to try and correct what is perceived as a mistake by annulment or divorce. Do not wrongly justify ending an uncomfortable marriage from this text.

THE PRIEST FASTS AND THE PEOPLE ARE COMMANDED TO GATHER

6), 7), 8) So Ezra goes to a friend's home to continue seeking the Lord. There he fasts and mourns through the night over the "faithlessness of the exiles." Soon after this, word is sent out that all the returned exiles must gather at Jerusalem. Ezra is going to give instructions about their past intermarrying and the actions that must be taken. Anyone who doubts or rejects Ezra's authority and doesn't come will be excommunicated from the congregation of Israel - including the forfeiture of their property. This was well within the rights of Ezra's leadership as defined by King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:26).

THE PEOPLE GATHERED, ARE CALLED TO REPENT

9) One of the men present, Shecaniah by name, was so moved by Ezra's preaching and prayer that he called on the priest to take matters in hand and require that all the people who had sinned in the taking of foreign wives end those relationships immediately. The men were called to assemble upon pain of losing their property and being put out of the assembly. Within 72 hours they were all there, many trembling because of the gravity of the situation they faced and because they were assembled in a driving rain - is this a symbol of God's displeasure?

10), 11) This circumstance - the nervous and rain-soaked congregation - called for wisdom and discretion on the part of the preacher. He showed both in rendering a concise statement that summed up the sin and called for a decision of

action. One version speaks of their sin of intermarrying as treason - a sin against the nation, as well as against God. He knows from history that these foreign mates will influence the people of the land toward worshiping false gods, the very sin that brought down God's judgment upon them in the first place. How keen are the insights of this preacher - he sees this sin in light of the big picture. Having pronounced their guilt, he makes a simple matter of how to resolve the problem. O, how we do like to complicate matters today! First they must confess, for Solomon had declared that he who covered his sin would not prosper (Proverbs 28:13). Next, they were simply to do His will - always the right instruction. What was God's will in this matter? To become as they would had they not disobeyed by separating themselves from the people and from the wives they had taken from among them. This would be no easy matter, to send away a woman you loved, and your children with her. But they must do it!

12) The Persian King had sent Ezra to lead the people, and that authority was seen. But a higher moral authority is also demonstrated here - that of Yahweh. It is clear that heaven stands behind the preacher in that almost to a man they agree with his very difficult call. Only four out of the whole multitude resisted his words, and some will always resist. This very brief sermon met with a quick, hearty response - You are right! We must do as you say.

13), 14) While the people did agree with Ezra in what needed to be done, they offered some objections to trying to do it at that time. His zeal was tempered and guided by their prudence in this matter. First of all, the crowd size was too great as to be manageable. Organizing the group would be a painfully slow process. Secondly, they were standing in a driving rain, a circumstance not advantageous for the calm settling of a matter. I can just see tempers flaring. This was a large problem and very complicated; it could not easily be done in such a mass and in so short a time. The suggestion was that the leaders first take care of their own marital problems (and remember they were guilty, too). Then they could assemble smaller groups in their individual localities in which the problems could be given the time and attention they required. Their desire was not to get out of handling the problem, for they did wish to avert the anger of the Lord; it was rather to handle things at a time and in a way that would be most humane and honorable. It would take three months to solve the problem of the Marital Mixup.

15) Here are named the four men who stood against the plan to divest themselves of foreign wives. It looks like Ezra was "taking names."

PROMPT OBEDIENCE FOLLOWS

16), 17) Ezra selected family leaders who would begin the process of correcting the wrong. They began on the first day of the tenth month, and within three months (on the first day of the first month) the job was complete. What a difficult time it must have been, saying farewells to spouses and children. But sin has dire consequences, and these men had brought this on themselves.

POSTSCRIPT OF NAMES TAKEN

18) - 43) Here is contained a list of the men (including family members of some priests!) who had married foreign women. Wouldn't it be a shame to have your name immortalized in Scripture for sins committed against God!

44) At least 116 men had married these foreign women, and sadly, some of the wives had borne children. This last circumstance made for the hardest separations without a doubt! It is not enough just to have proper Temple worship to please God; the people of God must also live their lives away from the shadow of the Temple according to the principles and precepts of the Word of God. A good parallel to that today would be that we Christian believers must live each day in every place as God would have us live - not just show up for worship on Sunday.