

The book of Ezra

or

“GETTING BACK TO WHAT WE USED TO BE”

by Rick Shoemaker

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EZRA, THE PERSON

Ezra penned this book even though his name does not appear until chapter seven. He was a priest from the line of Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5) and a scribe (Ezra 7:6). He lived during the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 8:1-9; 12:36).

The word "Ezra" means, " help" or "aid". Certainly, he would be a help to the work of God. He loved the Lord and wanted to see God's people walking with Him once again. His desire is seen in Ezra 7:10 where it says, "*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments*".

We see in this description of Ezra what we should see in each of our lives.

He *searched* the Word. He prepared his heart to "*seek the law*". He had an earnest desire to know what God said.

He *showed* the Word. He not only wanted to learn the law, he determined by, God's grace, to "*do it*". He showed the Word by living it out in his life every day. It does not matter how much we know about the bible if we do not do what it says (Jam. 2:10).

He *shared* the Word. He set his heart to "*teach*" the Word. Ezra wanted to tell others what the Lord said so they could serve God and benefit from it as he had. The Word of God is to be shared.

EZRA, THE PEOPLE

The book of Ezra deals primarily with the two southern tribes of Judah. The book opens at the end of the seventy-year Babylonian captivity when Cyrus offered the Jews the opportunity to return to Jerusalem.

To rightly understand the book of Ezra, we need to understand the background of the people Ezra was writing about.

The nation of Israel began with a man named Abram (Gen. 12:1-3). God changed Abram's name to Abraham (Gen. 17:5). Abraham had a son named Isaac, and Isaac had a son named Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel (Gen. 32:28). Israel had twelve sons and from these twelve sons came the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 35:22-26).

These twelve tribes had conflicts among themselves quite often. After the death of Solomon, a dispute split the twelve tribes into two kingdoms (1 Kgs. 12:1-33). The northern kingdom consisted of the ten tribes, was called "Israel", and recognized Shechem as their capital. Later King Omri would establish Samaria as the capital city. The southern kingdom consisted of two tribes (Judah and Benjamin), was called "Judah", and recognized Jerusalem as their capital.

To complicate matters further, there are times when the people of Judah are referred to as "Israel" or "Jews" (cf. Ezra 3:1). This means they did not lose their identity as the children of Israel just because the kingdoms were split.

Both the northern and southern kingdoms refused to obey God. The book of Judges tells of their ungodly actions.

As a result, God judged the northern kingdom of Israel. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered them and took their best and brightest to Assyria (2 Kgs. 17:24-41). The Assyrians would force the inhabitants of the lands they conquered to relocate to different parts of the Assyrian empire. Then they would send Assyrians to live in the conquered territory. This caused their foes to lose their identity and pretty much make it impossible for them to rebuild into a threatening force.

Their strategy worked with the northern tribes. Though some would return with Zerubbabel, as organized tribes, they never returned to their land. They are referred to as the "lost tribes of Israel" still today.

A word of interest. A lot is said about these lost ten tribes but we can be certain they are not lost to God. Some from these ten northern tribes returned with the group we are discussing here. Ezra said, "all Israel" (Ezra 2:70). Twelve goats were offered at the dedication of the temple (Ezra 6:17). The New Testament is not silent about these ten tribes. Paul spoke of the "*twelve tribes*" (Acts 26:7). James wrote to the "*twelve tribes that were scattered abroad*" (Jam. 1:1). Twelve tribes will be judged (Lk. 22:30). God has promised to unite the



northern and southern kingdoms (Isa. 11:12-13). When the Prince of Peace returns and sets up His kingdom, all of Israel will be reunited (Rev. 20:2-7).

After the Assyrian attack on the northern tribes, God warned the two tribes of Judah repeatedly but they also refused to obey. God judged them by sending them into Babylon for seventy years. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land of Judah, overthrew the people, plundered and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the temple, and took many of the people to Babylon (2 Kgs. 24:10-16). God judged them for two reasons.

One, because they continued to worship false gods (Jer. 25:6-13). The people of Judah had refused to cease their idol worship, so God sent them to a place where idolatry was rampant. There they learned the futility of worshiping false gods. After these seventy years, they would never worship false gods again. Their desire for other gods was lost by living in a land that showed the results of trusting in gods who could not hear, see, care, or help.

Two, because they had disobeyed God about the Sabbath year of rest. God had commanded Israel to plant no crops and to let the land rest every seventh year (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:3-5). The Lord gave them an abundant harvest on the sixth year to provide for the year of rest (Lev. 25:20-22). But, for 490 years, Israel ignored God's instructions and planted on the seventh year. So, God sent them into Babylonian captivity for 70 years to pay for the 70 years of Sabbaths they had violated. They would not let the land rest, so God sent them into another country, and the land rested while they were gone.

The length of the captivity was determined by their breaking of the Sabbath rest but the reasons for the captivity was their worship of idols and their ignoring the yearly Sabbath.

Their time in Babylon was difficult because they had to leave the Temple. The Temple meant more to the Jews than we can ever imagine. To them, it was the place to meet with God. They went there to worship and to get help from God.

The hardship was recorded by one of the captives, "*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land*" (Ps 137:1-4).

We can be in bondage like the people of Judah. We can be in bondage to fear, lust, pride, or pleasure. It is so easy to stray away from the center of God's will. Many who used to walk close to the Lord have allowed themselves to stray. Their desire to please God has dwindled and the thrill of being saved has diminished. And, just like the people of Judah, God wants us to get back to what we used to be. I will call this move toward God, the road to restoration.

As we will see, Cyrus allowed the people of God to return to Judah but they were still under his authority. The land of Judah was in the area that Cyrus controlled. This reminds us of how we will never completely escape the influence and power of the devil as long as we are in this world. But, God does want us to have victory over the devil. He provides the way whereby we can experience this victory.

EZRA, THE PROMISE

The book of Ezra reveals the fact that God keeps His promises and does not forget His people.

God's promise had to do with the *land*. He had promised the land to Abraham and his kindred (Ge. 15:18-21). They had sinned and as a result, God had moved them out of that land of promise. But, God would not forget the promise He had made to Abraham. He would bring His people back to the land.

God's promise had to do with the *length*. God had promised they would remain captive for seventy years (Jer. 25:11,12; 29:10).

God's promise had to do with the *leader*. He promised this event through the prophet Isaiah and even named Cyrus as the man who would initiate it (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). This prophecy came approximately 200 years before Cyrus was even born.

As wonderful as this prediction was, it is no more wonderful than the fact that God has a mission in mind for each of His children who live today (Jer. 29:11).

Ezra is a book that displays God's great purpose, godly people, grand promises, generous provision, and glorious power.

EZRA, THE PLAN

Ezra was written at the end of the Babylonian captivity. God's plan for Ezra was to move His people back into the land of Judah, rebuild the temple, and to restore them to a right spiritual condition. God used Zerubbabel to reconstruct the temple (Ezra 3:8), Ezra to restore the spiritual condition of God's people (Ezra 7-10) and Nehemiah to rebuild the walls (Nehemiah 1-2). We could say, Zerubbabel took care of the *structure*, Ezra took care of the *Spirit*, and Nehemiah took care of the *security*. The building project would face opposition (Ezra 3) and would be delayed (Ezra 4:1-5). Ezra dealt with his own heart (Ezra 7:10), with discouraged workers (Ezra 4:1-5), and with intermarriage (Ezra 10:3). Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all deal with how God brought them out of Babylonian Captivity.

EZRA, THE PROBLEMS

God's plan was to move His people from Babylon to Jerusalem, but there were some problems that had to be dealt with before this could happen.

There was a problem with the *devil*. As with any work of God, the devil did his best to hinder the work.

There was a problem with the *distance*. The trip from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 900 miles and took around four months of difficult travel (Ezra 7:9).

There was a problem with the *danger*. The trip was dangerous. Thieves were rampant along the roads. They were carrying a great deal of gold, silver, and valuables (Ezra 2:69) so they were a choice target.

There was a problem with the *disinterest*. Many of these people had been born in Babylon and they had no interest whatsoever about leaving. They felt no connection to the land of Judah. My ancestry can be traced back to Germany, but I certainly feel no connection to that country or have any desire to move there.

There was a problem with the *difficulty*. This move would be difficult for several reasons.

Going back to Jerusalem was not an easy task because of the trip itself. Imagine traveling on foot for four months in a group of over 40,000. Included in this group were the elderly, little babies, and toddlers.

Going back to Jerusalem was not an easy task because they had made their homes in Babylon. They had lived in Babylon for seventy years. They had built their homes, run their businesses, and raised their families there. Some of them had actually been born in Babylon. Leaving it behind would not be easy.

Going back to Jerusalem was not an easy task because the temple, the city, and the walls were destroyed. To go back and rebuild would be a difficult task.

Going back to Jerusalem was not an easy task because they were going into a land where some of the people were not going to welcome them with open arms. They would face opposition.

The Jews who returned did it in three separate groups and at three different times.

The first group was led by Zerubbabel (538 BC). He led in the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 3:8).

The second group was led by Ezra (458 BC). He led in the spiritual restoration of the people (Ezra 7:6-12).

The third group was led by Nehemiah (445 BC). He led in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-2:20).

1. THE BONDAGE WAS ESCAPED chapters 1-2

A. THE PROCLAMATION 1:1-3

The book of Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ends. The last verses of 2 Chronicles are very similar to the beginning verses of Ezra. Cyrus, the king of Persia made a proclamation that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland.

We must not miss the fact that there is more going on in this book than the work of man. God is at work here and He was moving to accomplish His will. This book opens with the people of God still in bondage in Babylon. Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, was not about to let them go. Humanly speaking, there is no way they would ever be set free. But, God had different plans. He allowed Cyrus to overthrow Babylon (Dan. 5). Then He touched the heart of Cyrus to let the people of God go back to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. And so, from the very first verse of this book, we see God stirring the heart of the one man who, humanly speaking, had the authority to let the people of Judah go back to Jerusalem. God can accomplish His will.

Cyrus did not simply speak the word that would let the people of Judah go to Jerusalem and rebuild the

temple. He made a legal proclamation that made it legal by their law. The fact that this decree was legal would make a vast difference later (Ezra 6). God was getting the details right.

Ezra 1:1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

Cyrus, the king of Persia, had overthrown Babylon (Dan. 5:30-31). Daniel 6:28 refers to "the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian" showing that Darius and Cyrus ruled concurrently. This has caused many to believe that Cyrus appointed Darius as ruler over Babylon.

One of Cyrus' first acts of business was to write a proclamation that dealt with the Jews that had been brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah had prophesied about this event (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10). Isaiah also wrote of this event, even naming Cyrus by name (Isa. 44:28; 45:1).

Cyrus gave a decree that allowed the people of Judah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The book of Ezra begins with this proclamation of Cyrus.

It is important to realize, this proclamation did not completely liberate the people of Judah. As we will see, Cyrus allowed the people to return to Judah but they were still under his authority. The land of Judah was in the area that Cyrus controlled. This reminds us of how we will never completely escape the influence and power of the devil as long as we are in this world. But, God does want us to have victory over the devil. He provides the way whereby we can experience this victory. Cyrus and the leadership of Persia would not have as much control over them when they went back to Judah. In like fashion, the further we can get away from the devil, and the closer we can get to our Lord, the less power our enemy will have over us.

The "LORD stirred the spirit of Cyrus". God was working to keep His promise that His people would be in captivity for a period of seventy years. He still does whatever it takes to keep His promises. This reminds us of how God is able to move on the hearts of the most prominent of men. No matter how high, or low, on the social ladder, God is able to touch the heart.

The work done in Cyrus' heart was nothing short of a miracle. God does not force a person to do anything against their will. But, He is able to touch the heart of a person and bring them to the place to where they want to do what He says. This is truly a work of grace.

The words "stirred up" mean "to open the eyes". We are all blind to spiritual matters. The Spirit of God must open our eyes (2 Cor. 4:4, 4:6; Rev. 3:17). That is what happens to a lost person, God opens their eyes and they see their true condition. In like fashion, God must open the eyes of believers that they might see His will and understand His Word.

This proclamation went "throughout all his kingdom". This is saying a great deal for the Persian Empire included much of the known world.

This map shows the extent of the Persian Empire.

Cyrus had this proclamation put in "writing". This writing is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, but it has also been discovered by archaeologists. The fact that it was put into writing will be vitally important as we walk through this book for these writings will be examined later.

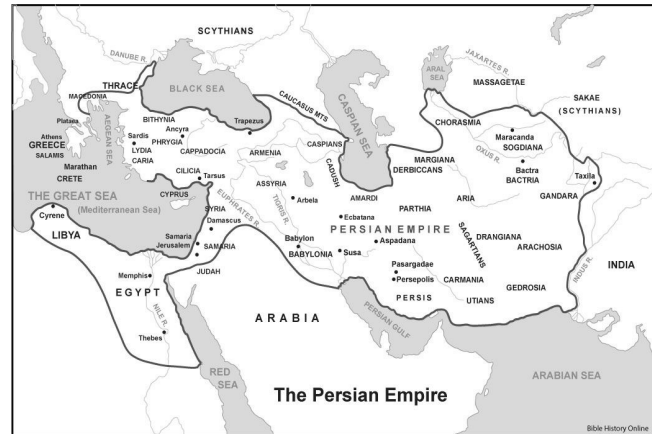
Ezra 1:2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

That which Cyrus had written begins in this verse.

We do not know if Cyrus was a true believer. History tells us he had worshiped many gods. However, at this point, he acknowledged the fact that God had blessed him and had placed him where he was. He used the word "LORD" when speaking of God. The word, "LORD" is the Hebrew word "Jehovah". It means, "self-existent one". It refers to the fact that God needs nothing or no one. He is enough by Himself.

Cyrus also called God, the "God of heaven". That means he recognized God to be the One who sits in heaven and oversees all things in the universe (Gen. 8:22; Job 38:33-37; Ps. 135:6-7; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; 2 Pet. 3:7). Cyrus' statements affirmed the fact that there is only one God. For Cyrus to make such a declaration is nothing short of a miracle in his day of believing in many gods.

Whether Cyrus was a believer or not, we must recognize the influence of the Word of God and the Spirit of



God in the restoration of the people of Judah. Believer or not, the power behind the work was God.

The word, "*charged*" means, "to visit with an intent". It carries with it the idea of overseeing. God had given Cyrus a task and he would be held accountable for how he carried out that task. And, so it is with all of God's servants. We all have a particular task we are to do for the glory of God. And, He will hold us accountable for how we handle our task.

Would it not be refreshing to hear the President of our country give such a proclamation? The God who touched the heart of Cyrus is certainly able to touch the heart of any world leader alive today (Acts 10:34).

We are not told the exact manner of which Cyrus received this charge. Since Daniel was in Babylon when he took possession of it (Dan. 5:11-17) many believe Daniel told Cyrus about the scripture in Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10) and Isaiah (Isa. 44:28; 45:1) that predicted his release of the Jews. On the other hand, this charge may have come directly from the Spirit of God. Either way, it came straight from God Himself.

Cyrus said God had given him "*all the kingdoms of the earth*". God, had indeed allowed Cyrus to control much of the known world at that time. The Persian empire was the greatest ruling power at that time.

Cyrus' task was to build "*an house at Jerusalem*". God wanted Cyrus to build the temple in Jerusalem. What an honor. The first temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 5:12). The temple was more than just a building dedicated to God. It was a place where the presence of God could be enjoyed. They saw it as a place where they could literally meet with God.

It was no small matter that Cyrus was willing to let these people go. They could have been a great benefit to him exactly where they were. Even though they would still be under his authority, he would have less control over them once they returned to Judah.

B. THE PLAN 1:4-5

Cyrus not only made the proclamation, but he also had a plan to provide for the project. Some were to go, some were to give.

Once again, we see God at work. He not only touched the heart of Cyrus to let His people go, but He gave him the plan to do it. Doing God's will is important, but we must do it God's way.

Ezra 1:3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

The seventy-year Babylonian captivity had come to an end. King Cyrus, the king of Persia, issued a decree to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (2 Chr. 36:22-23). He was officially granting permission to any and all of God's people throughout his kingdom to return to Jerusalem.

Cyrus said, "*Who is there among you*". He was not forcing anyone to return to Jerusalem. He was simply making the offer and allowing everyone to decide on their own.

This proclamation was offered to any of the people of God. Since the Persian Empire was so widespread at that time, it would include the area where the ten tribes were scattered when Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. It seems as though some of the ten northern tribes did return (1 Chr. 9:3).

One thing was certain, those who decided to return to Jerusalem would need his God to "*be with him*". We can be assured God is with us as long as we are doing His will. Where God leads, God will provide. God's grace is always sufficient. Those who would trust God and return would discover their God was with them. He would take care of them and enable them to do what they needed to do.

Cyrus' decree was limited in that those who left Babylon must go to assist in building "*the house of the LORD God is Israel*" and that would be built "*in Jerusalem*". This was not a holiday, nor was it an invitation to those who were lazy and unconcerned. In like fashion, the liberty we enjoy in Christ Jesus sets us free to do His will and not to indulge our flesh (Gal. 5:13).

Some have tried to excuse those who did not return to the land of Judah. It is true that some of the godly, like Daniel, did stay in Babylon, but I honestly believe most of them were supposed to return. It was the land of promise. God had given it to Abraham and his seed (Gen. 12:1; 17:7-8). They had been taken out of the land because of their sin. Now, their punishment was over and it was time to go home.

Certainly, more should have returned than did. It is amazing how there can be such a great move of God, and yet, there are some who do not get in on it. Their dedication to God was certainly lacking.

They had gotten satisfied with Babylon. Jeremiah had advised those taken into captivity to make the most of a bad situation (Jer. 29:4-7). They were supposed to seek the peace of the place where they were held captive. God's will is always that we evangelize the place where we are. However, that did not mean they were to become content in Babylon. We, like the people of Judah, have become way too comfortable where we are. We are content in a foreign land while the Promised Land is available.

Those who returned were a minority. More would stay than would leave. God's people have always been a minority, but those who truly have a desire to please God are an even smaller minority. However, it is better to have a small number who are truly concerned than a large number who have no burden. The task ahead would be difficult. Those who returned to Jerusalem would need to be dedicated to the task. Those who lacked this dedication would end up being more of a hindrance than a help.

As sad as these truths are, we dare not miss the fact that God did keep His promise about a remnant. God always keeps a number of people who are willing to do His will. There are times when that group seems pretty small, but it will always exist. Ezra will mention this later (Ezra 9:8). Isaiah spoke of a "small remnant" (Isa. 1:9). I believe this truth can be seen in our world today. There are not many who are hungry for God and for His work. However, God has kept a small remnant who still want something fresh from their God.

Ezra 1:4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

Those who "remaineth in any place where he sojourneth" was referring to those who wanted to go to Jerusalem but were not able because of lack of the finances for the journey. In such a case, their neighbors were to give them the funds needed for them to go. They were to give of their silver, gold, goods, and animals.

This offering was to be given "beside" the freewill offering for the house of God. It seems as though there was an offering that went to the expenses in the rebuilding of the temple and an offering that went to those who needed funds to make the journey to Judah.

So, no one was left out. Those who stayed were commanded to assist those who went. If you did not go, you were to give.

The words, "freewill offering" mean, "spontaneity". It has the idea of doing that which the Lord moves on our heart to do at the moment He tells us to do it. It is referring to freely giving without the anticipation of anything in return. This is certainly contrary to the average TV evangelist that tells us to "Sow the seed and expect a great harvest".

There is no indication whatsoever that these were wealthy people. More than likely they were common folks. They were not giving out of wealth, they were giving out of love. They simply wanted to.

The words "freewill offering" also means, "willing". Cyrus was not forcing anyone to do anything. God wants us to do what we do because we love Him, not because we have to (Rom. 12:8; Phil. 2:14; 2 Cor. 9:7).

We should not assume all those who stayed behind were totally against the rebuilding of the temple. Many of them gave and gave gladly. Unfortunately, some of them wanted the temple to be rebuilt but they were not willing to take part in the actual construction. There will always be the ones who want the church to be great as long as they do not have to do anything to make it great.

Of course, there were some who could not have cared less. They did not care if the people of Judah returned or if the temple was rebuilt. There is always some who care more for the things of the world than for the things of God.

Ezra 1:5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

The religious leaders were the first ones to strike out on the journey. The "chief of the fathers" were leaders of the families. Someone had to take the lead. It is impossible to follow when no one is leading. A godly leader is invaluable for any ministry.

Most of the ones who were willing were of the tribes of "Judah and Benjamin". However, there were others mixed in with this group. It seems as though there were some of the ten northern tribes who returned also (1 Chr. 9:3). The total who returned would be 42,360 (Ezra 2:64-65).

The "priests" were the descendants of Aaron. They were in charge of the sacrifices and the holy functions in the temple. The "Levites" were the non-Aaron descendants of Levi. They assisted in less important tasks in the temple.

The words, "whose spirit God had raised" reminds us of the fact that if God does not move on a person, they will not be moved. Without the work of the Spirit of God, man will remain content in his condition.

C. THE PROVISION 1:6-11

Cyrus did not just release the people to go back to Jerusalem, he made sure their needs were met to accomplish the project.

God, not only put Cyrus in the position and touched his heart to let the people of God go back to Jerusalem, but He moved on Cyrus to give the funds needed to accomplish the task. God always provides

what is needed to do His will.

Ezra 1:6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

All "*they that were about them*" is referring to the neighbors who lived around the people of God. Under the direction of Cyrus, the neighbors of the people of Judah gave of their own possessions. They gave their vessels of gold and silver. The word "*goods*" means, "substance". It would seem to imply anything of value.

Some have suggested the liberality of these people was because of the decree of Cyrus and they were simply obeying the law. I think not. If it was the Spirit of God who moved Cyrus to release the people, and the Spirit of God that moved the people of Judah to leave, was it not also the Spirit of God that moved these people to give? God did the same type of thing when His people were getting ready to come out of Egypt (Ex. 12:35-36).

The "*willingly offered*" probably refers to the "freewill offering" mentioned in verse four.

Ezra 1:7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

Cyrus assisted himself by returning all the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple when he conquered Jerusalem (2 Chr. 36:7). All of the Babylonian Empire was absorbed by the Persian Empire when Cyrus overthrew it. So, these items became the lawful spoil of Cyrus. God had said these vessels would be restored (Jer. 27:22). These vessels would once again be used in the service of the Lord.

Not often do we see the work of God being assisted by the people of the world. The people of Israel received goods from the people of Egypt (Ex. 12:35-36). But, that is not the norm. This does show us, however, that God will provide for His will whatever it takes. God provides what He requires.

Ezra 1:8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

Here we find the first mention of the name "*Sheshbazzar*". This man was used greatly in the first part of the return to Jerusalem. Some believe he was one of Cyrus' men that he appointed to oversee the beginning of the work on the temple. Some believe Sheshbazzar was a partner to Zerubbabel that worked with him in the return to the land and the foundation to the temple. Others believe this was another name given to Zerubbabel. The name "*Sheshbazzar*" being the name used by the people of Babylon, and the name "*Zerubbabel*" used by the people of Judah. This certainly is possible seeing both names were used in connection with the building of the temple (Ezra 3:8; 4:9-10; 5:14-16). It was common for the Babylonians to give their own name to those they captured. Daniel and his three Hebrew friends were given Babylonian names (Dan. 1:6-7).

This man was called, "*the prince of Judah*". Indeed, he must have been an unusual and godly man.

Ezra 1:9-10 And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand.

These items were used in the temple in the execution of the sacrifices. The vessels were used to catch the blood of the sacrifice. The "*knives*" would be used to slay the animals and divide the carcasses.

Ezra 1:11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

There is much debate about the difference in number. The total of items mentioned in verses nine and ten is 2,499, but the total in this verse is 5,400. It would seem the total from verses nine and ten refers to the bigger and more valuable items and the total in verse eleven is of all the items.

We dare not miss the fact of what is missing from this list of items that would be used in the new temple. Nothing is said of the altar of incense, table of shewbread, brazen altar, golden lampstand, nor the ark. These items were not mentioned after the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. Later, John saw an ark in heaven (Rev. 11:19). Whether the ark he saw was the same ark or a heavenly ark, we do not know.

D. THE PEOPLE 2:1-70

The second chapter of Ezra is made up of a list on the names of those who returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. If the land was going to be retaken and the temple be rebuilt, it was going to take some people who were willing.

God was providing everything necessary for His people to return to Judah and to reestablish the worship in the temple. The proclamation of Cyrus had been given which gave them legal permission to return. The offerings had been given which provided the financial needs for the project. And now, the people who were

needed to accomplish the task had committed themselves to the project.

There are several reasons for this list.

One, this list was vitally important in determining who was worthy of certain offices in the work of God. It was to provide proof that those returning were indeed descendants of the original Jews who had been taken into captivity. Those who could not produce their family record were refused certain positions (cf. Ezra 2:62).

Two, this list would also enable them to claim their inheritance once they were back in Judah. The land had been divided according to the tribes, so they would need proof of what tribe they were from to gain ownership of their land when they returned.

Three, this list was like an honor roll. It gave a record of those who were willing to pay the price, leave Babylon, go back to Jerusalem, and to rebuild the temple. They did so, recognizing the difficulty of the task.

Four, I believe this list was a rebuke to the many Jews who refused to return to Jerusalem and Judah. It not only honored those who were on the list but rebuked those who were not.

The list is as follows, the number of the people that returned, 2:1-35; the priests, 2:36-39; the Levites, 2:40; the singers, 2:41; the porters, 2:42; the Nethinims, 2:43-54; Solomon's servants, 2:55-58. the priests that could not show their lineage, 2:59-63. The entire number of them and their substance, 2:64-67.

Ezra 2:1 Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city;

This reminds me of another list far grander than this. The names of those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior are recorded in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:27).

The word, "children" is used throughout this list. It means "descendants".

Notice, this group were called "*the children of the province*". The "*province*" mentioned here was referring to Judah (cf. Ezra 5:8). Judah had become one of the provinces of the Persian empire. This speaks to the fact that Judah was no longer the great and powerful kingdom that it once was. It also speaks of the fact that the people of Judah were not the strong and mighty people they had once been. This was a reminder of what sin had cost them and the land they once possessed. This should remind us of the fact that we cannot live as we please without losing the blessings of God.

Those who returned were to go "*unto his city*". This is referring to the place where they lived before they were taken captive. They truly were, going back to where they used to be. Jeremiah spoke of this reclaiming of their homeland (Jer. 32:15). Sadly, they were going back to cities that were desolate because of years of neglect and abuse.

Nehemiah gives a list of those who returned (Neh. 7:1-73). His list has a different total than Ezra's. There is much discussion as to the reason for this difference. Probably the difference can be explained in that some of those returning were not of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Ezra 2:2 Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

The leaders, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, the high priest, were mentioned first. As mentioned before, God used Zerubbabel to lead this group to Jerusalem. God always has His Moses and Aaron. It should be noted that the Nehemiah and Mordecai mentioned here are not the men we read about in the books of Nehemiah and Esther.

Ezra 2:3-35 The children of Parosh, two thousand an hundred seventy and two. The children of Shephathiah, three hundred seventy and two. The children of Arah, seven hundred seventy and five. The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve. The children of Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four. The children of Zattu, nine hundred forty and five. The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and threescore. The children of Bani, six hundred forty and two. The children of Bebai, six hundred twenty and three. The children of Azgad, a thousand two hundred twenty and two. The children of Adonikam, six hundred sixty and six. The children of Bigvai, two thousand fifty and six. The children of Adin, four hundred fifty and four. The children of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety and eight. The children of Bezai, three hundred twenty and three. The children of Jorah, an hundred and twelve. The children of Hashum, two hundred twenty and three. The children of Gibbar, ninety and five. The children of Bethlehem, an hundred twenty and three. The men of Netophah, fifty and six. The men of Anathoth, an hundred twenty and eight. The children of Azmaveth, forty and two. The children of Kirjatharim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty and three. The children of Ramah and Gaba, six hundred twenty and one. The men of Michmas, an hundred twenty and two. The men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty and three. The children of Nebo, fifty and two. The children of Magbish, an hundred fifty and six. The children of the other Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four. The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty. The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty and five. The children of Jericho, three hundred forty and five. The children of Senaah, three thousand and six hundred and thirty.

Ezra 2:36-39 lists the priests who returned to Judah.

Ezra 2:36–39 The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy and three. The children of Immer, a thousand fifty and two. The children of Pashur, a thousand two hundred forty and seven. The children of Harim, a thousand and seventeen.

If temple worship was to be reinstated they would need some priests to serve. God touched the hearts of some of the priests to go to Jerusalem and serve Him in the temple that would be built. He was providing what was needed.

The number of the priests made up a tenth of the total number who returned. Of the twenty-four courses (divisions) of the priests, only four returned to Jerusalem. This returning group was divided and the twenty-four courses were made up as required.

Ezra 2:40 lists the Levites who returned to Judah.

Ezra 2:40 The Levites: the children of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the children of Hodaviah, seventy and four.

If temple worship was to be reestablished they needed some Levites who were willing to serve. God touched the hearts of some of the Levites to go to Jerusalem and serve Him in the temple. He was providing what was needed.

It is astounding how few of the Levites returned. Nearly ten times the priests returned as did the Levites. There had been a time when the Levites were more zealous in their duty than the priests (2 Chr. 29:43). Undoubtedly, this was no longer the case.

Ezra 2:41 lists the singers who returned to Judah.

Ezra 2:41 The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred twenty and eight.

If temple worship was to be reinstated they would need some singers. God touched the hearts of some who could sing to go to Jerusalem and serve Him in the temple that would be built. He was providing what was needed.

Ezra 2:42 lists the porters who returned to Judah.

Ezra 2:42 The children of the porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, in all an hundred thirty and nine.

The porters were those who were doorkeepers of the temple. They were the temple bouncers. They kept the unauthorized people out of the temple.

Ezra 2:43-54 lists the Nethinims who returned to Judah.

Ezra 2:43–54 The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth, The children of Keros, the children of Siaha, the children of Padon, The children of Lebanah, the children of Hagabah, the children of Akkub, The children of Hagab, the children of Shalmi, the children of Hanan, The children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, the children of Reaiah, The children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, the children of Gazzam, The children of Uzza, the children of Paseah, the children of Besai, The children of Asnah, the children of Mehumim, the children of Nephusim, The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur, The children of Bazluth, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha, The children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Thamah, The children of Nezhiah, the children of Hatipha.

The "Nethinims" were the descendants of the Gibeonites who tricked Joshua (Josh. 9:26-27). Joshua had made them woodcutters and water carriers. They would do the same type of work in the temple. They would clean the blood and gore from the sacrifices. It was a lowly, but very necessary, job. I find it commendable that these people were willing to go to Jerusalem knowing they would be used for the less important tasks in the temple. Many are not content to be servants, they want the ones who are served.

Ezra 2:55-58 lists the servants of Solomon who returned to Judah.

Ezra 2:55–58 The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Peruda, The children of Jaalah, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel, The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Ami. All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants, were three hundred ninety and two.

Solomon's servants were from Gentile nations. It is believed that these were the descendants of those Solomon used in the construction of the first temple (1 Kgs. 9:21). It is also believed that these people called themselves by this name because they considered it such an honor to serve a man as great as Solomon.

Ezra 2:59-63 lists those from uncertain genealogies.

Ezra 2:59–63 And these were they which went up from Telmelah, Telharsa, Cherub, Addan, and Immer: but they could not shew their father's house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel: The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two. And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai; which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name: These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood. And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with

Thummim.

The Jews were very exact when dealing with their genealogies. This was by the design of God in order that they might preserve the distinctions of the tribes. Proof of genealogy was required when dealing with marriage. Proof of genealogy was required when dealing with service for the Lord. There were certain functions in the service of the Lord that was restricted to certain tribes or groups. Proof of genealogy was required when dealing with their inheritances. The same is true in our day. We must have proof we are related before we can inherit the estate of a family member.

Those in this group were "*put from the priesthood*". Since this group could not prove their genealogy, they were not allowed to take part in the function of the priests. They were not rejected for personal reasons. They were rejected because God required proof on lineage before they could hold these positions.

I find it truly commendable that these were rejected. It could not have been easy to make this decision. It would have been very easy to just let it slip and let them take part in the restoration of the temple. There are times when it is not easy to take a stand. But, God's work must agree with Scripture.

Notice, the Urim, and the Thummim are mentioned here. The details about these items are somewhat uncertain. We know they were placed in the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8) and were used in determining the will of God when facing times of decision. But, we are not told exactly how they were used.

Ezra 2:64-65 gives the totals.

Ezra 2:64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,

The total given in this verse is 42,360, not including the singers and servants mentioned in verse sixty-five. However, if we add all those listed in the above verses, the total is only 29,818. Perhaps there is a difference because the women and children, the Levites who could not produce their genealogy, those from tribes other than Judah and Benjamin, and the non-Israelites were not listed.

Ezra 2:65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women.

The singers and servants were counted separately. The singing men and women were vitally important in the worship of the Lord. It is the same today. Good and godly singers add to the worship of any church.

Total counted	42,360
Servants and maids	7,337
Singers	<u>200</u>
Grand total	49,897

Ezra 2:66-67 lists their animals.

Ezra 2:66-67 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five; Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

The number of animals was relatively small considering the number of people who returned. This may reveal the fact that many of them were of the poorer class.

Horses and mules were used mostly as riding animals. Camels and donkeys were used mostly as work animals.

Ezra 2:68-69 lists their gifts.

Ezra 2:68-69 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place: They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments.

The words, "*the house of the LORD*" refers to the place when the temple had once stood.

The word, "*treasure*" means, "depository". They had a separate fund that was to be used for the rebuilding of the temple. This was one of the first building fund accounts for God's people.

Something must have happened to these people when they arrived in Jerusalem. When they saw the devastation and desolation of that holy place they were moved to do all they could to see it rebuilt. Many, if not all, of them, had already given before they left Babylon. But, here we find them giving again. They realized the importance of the house of God and they were willing to do what they could to make it a reality. They gave "*freely*". They gave according to "*their ability*". The richer gave more and the poorer gave less, but everyone gave all they could. Paul talked about the importance of giving (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:3). If God does not have our pocketbooks, He does not have our heart (2 Cor. 9:7).

The chapter and the lists are concluded in verse seventy.

Ezra 2:70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwell in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

Once again the people of God dwelt "in their cities". They all went to the city that originally belonged to their family. As previously mentioned, this seems to suggest that some of the ten northern tribes also returned (1 Chr. 9:3).

Though they were not the great people they once had been, they were back in the land God had promised them. The people of God had not lost their identity. The history of the people of Israel is nothing short of a miracle. No other nation has survived what they have and stayed intact. God does keep His promises (Gen. 12:1-3).

Though a good number decided to return to Judah, it was sad indeed compared to how many decided to stay in Babylon. They had gotten comfortable there. Josephus wrote, "many remained in Babylon, being unwilling to leave their possessions" (Antiquities XI, 8). In like fashion, we get comfortable in the place where we are.

However, we should remember this is the first of three groups that returned to Judah.

2. THE BATTLE WAS ENCOUNTERED chapters 3-4

As we might expect, when the people of God set out to rebuild the temple, there was opposition. Anytime we endeavor to do a work for God, there will be a battle.

A. THE PLACE WAS IMPORTANT 3:1-3

Their first matter of business in rebuilding the temple was to rebuild the altar. It was very important that they rebuild it at the exact place where it stood before.

Ezra 3:1 And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.

The "seventh month" of the Jewish calendar corresponds with our late September and early October. As we will see, the "seventh month" was an important month on the spiritual calendar for Israel. In the seventh month, they celebrated the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-34; 23:27-28), the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24; Num. 29:1-6), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:34). Even though the temple would not be rebuilt in time, they still celebrated these holy days.

The children of Israel were "in the cities". Having left Babylon, they went back to the places where their ancestors had lived before they were taken captive. They probably built themselves some type of shelters to dwell in temporarily. Once this was done, they turned to the task of rebuilding the altar.

The people "gathered themselves together as one man" to Jerusalem. They came together with one mind and one goal. What a blessing this must have been. The excitement must have been electric as they came together for this just cause.

Ezra 3:2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

The man named "Jeshua" (also called Joshua) was the first high priest after the captivity ended. He and Zerubbabel were the two main leaders in the construction of the altar and temple. Zerubbabel was the governor of Judah. So, Zerubbabel was the civil leader, and Jeshua was the spiritual leader.

Jeshua, the priests, Zerubbabel, and his brethren, set to work on the altar. As mentioned, they began the reconstruction of the temple by rebuilding the altar. They built the altar "to offer burnt offerings thereon". They built the altar to offer the sacrifices God had instructed them to give.

They did what the "law of Moses" said. They were doing their best to do what God had said. They did not just return to the land, they returned to the law. The chastening hand of God had done its work on these people. They had learned while in the seventy years of captivity that, more than anything, they needed to obey God. How much better would our lives be if we would find out what the bible says, and simply do it? The bible should be our final authority.

Ezra 3:3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening.

The "*bases*" mentioned here was referring to the old foundation where the altar once stood. They found the exact place where the altar had first been built. They did not go to a different spot and build the new altar and temple. It was the place where God had told them to build before. It was the place He had blessed (Ps. 2:6; 48:1-2; 50:2; 51:11; 78:68; 99:9; 132:13-14; Mi. 4:7; Zech. 2:12; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 14:1). This should assure us that we do not need to look for something different in our day. Many churches are trying a new approach. They may have the approval of man but I doubt seriously if they have the approval of God.

Out of the rubble of the destroyed temple and its courts, an altar now stood ready to receive sacrifices both on behalf of the people as a whole and as individuals.

Notice, before they built the temple itself, they built the altar. Before they rebuilt the walls around the city, they built the altar. Before they built themselves permanent houses, they built the altar.

They built the altar first because of *forgiveness*. They knew they needed God's *pardon*. The sin offering that would atone for their sin would be offered on this altar.

They built the altar first because of *favor*. They knew they needed God's *power*. They were about to embark on the very difficult task of rebuilding the temple. They would need strength and blessings from God to do so.

They built the altar first because of *fellowship*. They knew they needed God's *presence*. The altar was the place where they met with God to get closer to Him. They would come to this place to worship even while they were building the temple. What good would a new temple be if they did not have God's fellowship? A building without God's presence is a tomb. You can have an altar without a temple but you cannot have a temple without an altar.

They built the altar first because of *fear*. They knew they needed God's *protection*. They feared the "*people of those countries*". They were in a place of hostility so they knew they needed God's protection.

If we had been in Israel's place we probably would ask for the walls of the city to be rebuilt first. After all, the walls were what kept the enemies out. But walls would be useless without the protecting hand of God. The altar did much more to protect them than walls ever could have.

No doubt, they feared the people because they could attack and overpower them. But, I believe their fear also involved the influence of the ungodly lifestyle of those living in and around Jerusalem. The people of Judah knew they would need God's help if they were to resist their ungodly influence. So, they built the altar first. We are in trouble when we cease being afraid of sin and sinful people.

Notice, their fear caused them to do what God had told them to do. So many times, we allow fear to keep us from doing God's will. We are afraid of what will happen if we do God's will, they were afraid of what would happen if they did not do God's will.

They rebuilt the altar according to the "*law of Moses*". Before the captivity, they had little concern about what the law said. But, they had just spent seventy years learning what would happen when they did not follow the Word of God. Some believe the Bible is good only for spiritual matters. But, it is good for everything. It is the best science book, the most accurate history book, and the best love story ever told. It will help us with any, and every, aspect of our lives.

We also have an altar (Heb. 13:10). Our altar is the cross of Calvary. The offering they slew on that altar spoke of the sacrifice of Christ who gave His life for our sin.

B. THE PEOPLE WERE INVOLVED 3:4-10

Once again, we find the people getting involved with the work. Everyone did their part. We see a wonderful unity among the people in these verses. They had a like mind and a like heart. There is nothing like unity in the family of God. You can get a lot more done with a few people who are working together than a crowd that has their own agenda. This reminds me of the New Testament church (Acts 2:44-47).

SOME WERE SACRIFICING 3:4-6

Ezra 3:4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required;

They observed the "*feast of tabernacles*" (Num. 29:12-38). The Feast of Tabernacles lasted seven days. It was observed that they might remember the Lord's faithfulness during the wilderness journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. During those seven days, the people "camped out" in temporary shelters made from the branches of trees (Lev. 23:40-42). This was to remind them of how their forefathers lived during their time in the wilderness. Considering the fact that they had just traveled for four months over rugged terrain, you

would think staying in a homemade hut would be the last thing they wanted to do. But, they did it gladly. They also offered the "daily burnt offerings" as directed by God (Ex. 29:38-42; Num. 28:3-8). These offerings were those that were "the duty" of the people. They were "required" of the Lord.

Being able to offer these sacrifices must have been a blessing to the people of Israel. Since sacrifices could only be offered in Jerusalem, they had not been able to do so while in Babylon.

Ezra 3:5 And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD.

The "continual offering" mentioned here was referring to the morning and evening sacrifices which consisted of a lamb that was prepared with flour, oil, and wine (Ex. 29:38-42; Num. 28:6). They were in a continual state of worship.

They did more than give the required sacrifices mentioned in verse four, they offered other sacrifices "willingly". They did more than they had to. Oh, that this might be said of us today (cf. Lk. 17:10).

Ezra 3:6 From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

They observed the holy days even though the foundation of the temple had not yet been laid. It would have been easy for them to excuse themselves from this time of worship. They had much to do but they took out time to observe the special days God had instituted for His people. It would do us well to follow their example. Most of us have more to do than we will ever get done. But, we must not use that as an excuse to not set aside time to worship our God. We should never get so busy that we do not have time for God.

SOME WERE SUPPLYING 3:7

Ezra 3:7 They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia.

They "gave money" to the "masons" and "carpenters" who would build the temple. They gave "meat, and drink, and oil" to the people of Zidon and Tyre to bring "cedar trees from Lebanon". Undoubtedly, the people of Zidon and Tyre wanted these items instead of money. The cedars of Lebanon were well known for their wonderful aroma and their resistance to decay and bugs. Solomon had done the same in the construction of the first temple (1 Kgs. 5:11; 2 Chr. 2:15-16).

This tells us they wanted to use the best materials available. Also, it tells us they wanted to use the same materials Solomon had used in the first temple. In our service to the Lord, we should give our very best. God deserves our best.

The word, "grant" means "permit" and is referring to the decree Cyrus gave (Ezra 1:1-4). This money was likely taken from the treasury referred to in Ezra 2:69.

SOME WERE SERVING 3:8-10

Ezra 3:8 Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD.

In the second month of the second year, they "appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward" to do the work on the temple. The time they had longed for had finally arrived. They appointed the priests who would build the temple. This was the house of God. Just anyone and everyone were not permitted to labor in its construction. The law of Moses stated that Levites could begin their service at twenty-five years of age (Num. 8:24-25). However, David changed the starting age to twenty years of age (1 Chr. 23:27). The minimum age may have been lowered because the total number of Levites was declining. The change would ensure there would always be enough Levites to fill the duties of the temple.

The time of construction had finally come. Verse one of this chapter told us the work began in the seventh month after they arrived in the land. So, it took approximately seven months of gathering materials, removing the rubbish, and preparing the ground for construction.

It is interesting to note that the work of Solomon's temple also began on the second month (1 Kgs. 6:1).

Ezra 3:9 Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.

The Jeshua mentioned here was not the Jeshua the high priest but the Jeshua, who was a Levite,

mentioned in Ezra 2:40.

Ezra 3:10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel.

The laying of the foundation was celebrated with much fanfare. This was indeed an amazing sight. As the builders were laying the foundation of the temple, the priests, dressed in their priestly attire played trumpets, and the Levites played loud cymbals.

The blowing of the trumpets was always the duty of the priests (Num. 10:8; 31:6; Josh. 6:4; 1 Chr. 15:24; 2 Chr. 5:12). The praising God with cymbals was the responsibility of the Levites (1 Chr. 15:16; 15:19; 16:5; 2 Chr. 5:12-13; 29:25).

This was the same order observed when they brought the ark into Jerusalem in David's day (1 Chr. 16:5-6; Num. 10:8).

The apparel of the priests was designed "for glory and for beauty" (Ex. 28:40).

The details of this ceremony were much like that of Solomon's temple, but on a much humbler scale (2 Chr. 5:13).

SOME WERE SINGING 3:11a

Ezra 3:11 And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

The words, "by course" mean they sang responsively. One part of the choir would sing, "Give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good", and the other part of the choir would respond with, "For His mercy endureth for ever". The theme of their song was the goodness of God. Many of David's psalms begin in the same manner (Ps. 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1).

Good and godly gospel singing is one of God's greatest gifts to His children. It helps prepare us to worship God. The bible says, "Praise ye the LORD: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely" (Ps 147:1). The longest book in the bible is a collection of songs. Clearly, God gave us music and song to help us to worship and praise Him (Ps. 47:6; 92:1-2; 100:2; Acts 16:25; Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12). Jesus sang with his disciples on the evening he was arrested (Mt. 26:30). God, Himself sings (Zeph. 3:17).

Godly singing is for Him, and not for us. Therefore, it should be done in a way that it would please Him, and not us. Christian songs should bring honor to God, not to man. They should be dedicated to God, not the world. It's music, message, melody, and motive should be distinctly Christian.

Godly singing involves a blend of music and message. The music and the message are meant to compliment each other. That means, the message should always be biblical. It is a disgrace to sing a gospel song that has lyrics that are not true to Scripture. It also means the music should never override the message. To be more moved by the music than the message is fleshly and sinful.

Since singing and music are so powerful, we can rest assured our enemy will try to use it to his advantage. The same one who uses alcohol, drugs, lust, pride, jealousy, envy, and strife, will certainly not neglect the tool of music. Many believe Lucifer was the music director of heaven before he fell (Ezk. 28:13; Isa. 14:11). He certainly has not forgotten the power of music and singing.

SOME WERE SHOUTING 3:11b

They not only sang, they shouted. The word, "shout" literally means, "battle cry". The word, "aloud" means, "to be high" or "to raise". They shouted loud enough to where they could be heard "afar off". How unlike the average service of the average church today.

The bible has much to say about shouting (2 Sam. 6:14-15; Ps. 5:11; 32:11; 35:27; 47:1, 132:9; Rev. 5:12). Job tells us about the angels shouting (Job 38:7). Jesus will come back with a shout (1 Th. 4:16).

The fact that shouting is mentioned so many times in the bible should show us it is more than just emotionalism. Shouting is the result of us realizing how good God has been and us expressing that joy with our lips. Shouting is an outward expression of what is in our heart. Shouting brings honor and glory to God. I think He likes it. There are times when God gave His people victory through shouting (Josh. 6:20). That tells me He is pleased with it.

No doubt, shouting can be of the flesh. But so can anything we do for God. A teacher can teach in the flesh, that doesn't mean we should not teach. A singer can sing in the flesh, that doesn't mean we should not sing. Just because some shouting is not real does not mean it is all wrong. You don't discard it all just

because some isn't what it should be. I've seen some artificial bananas but that does not stop me from enjoying a real one when I can find it.

SOME WERE SAD 3:12-13

The praise was interrupted by the weeping of the older folks who remembered the temple Solomon built.

Ezra 3:12-13 But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

It had been seventy years since any of God's people had been in the temple. The younger people had never even seen the magnificent temple that Solomon had built. They were experiencing something they had never experienced before and they were thrilled about it all. There is something to be said about the excitement of young people who love the Lord.

But, the older ones had seen the temple of Solomon. And, even though only the foundation had been completed, they could see there was going to be a vast difference between the new and the old temple. And, it broke their hearts.

There was a vast difference between this temple and the one Solomon built (2 Chr. 3). Zerubbabel's temple was smaller than Solomon's. The construction of Solomon's temple was much grander than Zerubbabel's. It has been estimated that it would cost billions of dollars to build Solomon's temple in our day. Also, this new temple lacked the altar of incense, table of shewbread, brazen altar, golden lampstand, and the Ark of the Covenant that had been in Solomon's temple.

The older folks remembered how Solomon's temple had displayed the glory of God. They remembered the dedication when the fire came from heaven and consumed the sacrifices. They were thinking of how the presence of God was so real the priests could not even enter the house of the Lord (2 Chr. 7:1-3).

But, somehow, it seems that they had forgotten about how the time came when the Shekinah Glory departed from Solomon's temple (Ezk. 10:4; 10:18-19; 11:23).

So, the young ones were shouting, and the older ones were sobbing. The sound of the rejoicing and remorse was so mingled together that they could not discern which they were hearing. In Ezra's day, expressions of sorrow were usually very loud wailing.

Both Haggai and Zechariah warned them about taking this work of God lightly (Hag. 2:1-9; Zech. 4:8-10). The prophet Haggai commented about the temple built by Zerubbabel. He said, though it may have not been the magnificent building that Solomon's temple was, God would bless it and use it for His glory (Hag. 2:3). Herod would refurbish this temple and add many courtyards, but it was still the place where Jesus would walk some 500 years later (Lk. 2:46; 19:45).

I am afraid the older people discouraged the younger ones. I wonder if that isn't the case in our day. So often, we who are older are prone to talk about "how it used to be". If we aren't careful, our backward looks can stifle the present work of God and cause us to not appreciate what He is doing.

C. THE PRAISE WAS INTERRUPTED 4:1-24

The excitement of rebuilding the temple was cut short by those who had their own agenda. Not everyone was excited about the temple and the city of Jerusalem being rebuilt. We would do well to realize, there will always be opposition to the work of God. The devil will not sit back and let the work of God progress. He will do all he can to hinder what God is doing.

THE ENEMY WAS DESCRIBED 4:1

The first verse of this chapter introduces those who opposed the work of God. They were described as "adversaries".

Ezra 4:1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel;

Verses two and seven tell us *who* these people were. However, God also tells us *what* they were in verse one. They were the "adversaries". The word "adversaries" means, "enemy". It carries with it the idea of sorrow

and trouble. This one word tells us what these people were the enemies of God's people and God's work. An enemy tries to hurt, harm, and hinder us. If we take them lightly, we will take advantage of us.

Verse seven gives us some of the names of these people. They would come to be known as Samaritans. They were called Samaritans because they occupied the city of Samaria and its neighborhood.

The Samaritans originated from the intermarriage of two groups of people.

The first group was the Jews who were left behind when Assyria conquered the ten northern tribes of Israel. Verse two tells us these were the people "*which were brought up*" by the king of Assyria when he invaded the ten northern tribes of Israel. As previously mentioned, when Assyria attacked the ten northern tribes of Israel they took the best and brightest to Assyria (2 Kgs. 17:24-41). Sadly, that meant most of those who were left behind were those who were what might be considered, less desirable.

The second group was those who were brought into the land by the king of Assyria. When Assyria conquered the northern tribes, the king sent people from Babylon, Cutha, Ava, Hamath, and Sepharvaim to inhabit Samaria (2 Kgs. 17:24). These people were an ungodly bunch who worshiped idols. Some of them actually offered their own children as sacrifices to their god (2 Kgs. 17:31). The king of Assyria sent a prophet in an effort to teach them the ways of the Jews but it had little real effect on them. They ended up trying to serve their gods and the God of the Jews at the same time (2 Kgs. 17:16-28).

Since these two groups intermarried, their children were considered half-breeds and were despised by the Jews. This animosity against the Samaritans is seen in the New Testament also (Jn. 4:9; 8:48). The Samaritan woman talked about how they worshiped at a different place than the people of Israel (Jn.4:20)

The Samaritans embraced a strange mixture of believing in the God of the Jews and the false gods of the Assyrians (2 Kgs. 17:39-41). Eventually, the Samaritans evolved to the place to where they believed only the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) was the true law of God. They rejected the other books of the Old Testament.

These Samaritans "*heard*" about the work on the temple. Somehow, they heard about the work being done in Jerusalem. Josephus tells us they actually heard the trumpets and came to investigate (Antiquities 1. 11. c. 4. section 3).

THE ENEMY WAS DECEPTIVE 4:2

Ezra 4:2 Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither.

They came to Zerubbabel asking if they could join them in the rebuilding of the temple. They said, "*Let us build with you*". To have someone volunteer would have been wonderful news to most building projects. But, this was not an ordinary building project, this was a work of God. And, a work of God must be done in a way that pleases God. There are times when volunteers cause more harm than help. This was one of those times.

They tried to persuade Zerubbabel by saying, "*we seek your God, as ye do*". They were trying to convince Zerubbabel they were all on the same side. When they said, "*we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon*" they were claiming to have been worshiping God since they arrived in the land of Israel. This was partly true. As mentioned, this bunch tried to worship many gods, including the true God of the Jews (2 Kgs. 17:29).

There is some discussion about the motives of these people. Some believe they were against the rebuilding of the temple from the very beginning. If this is true, they were pretending to want to help when they only wanted to hinder. Others believe they truly wanted to assist in the construction but got upset when the Jews refused to let them help. Their ensuing conduct certainly seems to suggest they were opposed to the work from the beginning.

Either way, they were more of a hindrance than a help. They either wanted to stop the work totally or influence it to their liking. They realized they could do more harm from the inside than from the outside. The devil is a master counterfeiter. He appears as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Since he appears as an angel of light, we must assume he has his ministers who pretend to be something they are not (2 Cor. 11:15; Eph. 6:12).

Notice they "*came to Zerubbabel*". We do not have to go out looking for those will oppose the work of God in our lives, they will come looking for us. Our enemy is always active. He "*walketh about, seeking whom he may devour*" (1 Pet. 5:8). We must remember, our enemy specializes in deception (Gen. 3:1-5; Rev. 12:9). Like an uncover spy, he does his best work when he is undetected. He knows his work will be hindered if he is ever discovered. Some of our worse enemies will be those who appear to be on our side.

This is a perfect picture of the liberal religious person. Liberalism has always been the enemy of the family

of God. They believe we should put aside our differences and just get along. That may sound good on the surface but it is one of the most dangerous tools of the devil. We should never set aside biblical doctrine in order to get along with others. The truths of Scripture must come before any relationships. The Scripture that tells us to not be unequally yoked together (2 Cor. 6:14) is referring to more than just marriage. Any partnership between the godly and the ungodly will cause problems.

Had they allowed them to assist in the construction of the temple they could not have denied them access to it later when it came time to worship. The devil's desire is to lower the standards of the dedicated Christian. One of the best ways to do that is to get them to unite with those who are less dedicated.

There is no doubt that these Samaritans wanted to dominate the people of Judah. They did not just want to infiltrate them, they wanted to control them. We must remember, our enemy's primary goal is to control us. He wants to become our master.

This should teach us that not all of our enemies will come against us with swords and spears. There are times when they come with a smile. And yet, they are still very dangerous.

THE ENEMY WAS DENIED 4:3

Ezra 4:3 But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

Since the rebuilding of the temple and city of Jerusalem was such a large task, you would think Zerubbabel and the people of Judah would welcome any assistance. However, they knew the Samaritans would only be a hindrance.

God has given us two tools to help us discern if something is right or wrong. The first tool is the Word of God. It is God's Word, not our opinion, that matters. To discern what the bible says, we must know it. To know it, we must study it. The second tool is the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth (Jn. 16:13). To be able to discern the Spirit's voice, we must be close to God.

Thank the Lord for God-given discernment. There will be times when the Lord warns us in our spirit that something is not right. We dare not take that "uneasiness" lightly. That is our Father is trying to warn us of impending danger.

Thank the Lord, Zerubbabel and the leaders were not fooled by their enemy. They stood their ground from the beginning. Once we allow the liberal mentality to evade our lives it is all but impossible to get rid of it later. I have known many churches who have opened themselves to the modern way. However, I do not know of one of them to ever return to the way they were or to recover from the damage.

The reply came from "*Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel*". In other words, everyone gave the same answer. Thankfully, they were in one accord and everyone agreed.

They said, "*Ye have nothing to do with us*". We are warned throughout the Bible to avoid those who walk after the flesh (Num. 16:21, 26, 45; Ps. 1:1; Isa. 52:11; Acts 2:40; 2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4).

The leaders of the people of Judah were actually pretty rude to these people but they got their point across. Even if they had great ability, pure motives, and an intense desire, they should not have been allowed to help because they did not qualify for the work.

I can think of three reasons why the people of Judah denied the Samaritans the opportunity to help them rebuilt the temple. One, they denied their help because the Spirit of God told them to. We need to be close enough to our Lord to where we can hear His voice. Two, they denied their help because of their fear of idolatry. They had learned their lesson about idolatry while in Babylon. They knew the danger of associating with anyone who worshiped false gods. Three, they denied their help because the Samaritan's lifestyle was not spiritual. The family of God must realize it takes more than talent to do a real work for God. The professional musician, singer, or orator may be accomplished in their area of ability but that means nothing to God. He is not looking for ability alone, He is looking for holiness. Herein lies the danger of getting the famous Hollywood performer and sticking them in the church.

The people of Judah were ridiculed because they rejected the Samaritans but that isn't anything new. The people of God have always received ridicule because of their belief in separation (Lev. 20:23-24, 26; Dt. 7:3; Ps. 4:3; Jer. 10:2; 2 Cor. 6:17).

THE ENEMY WAS DETERMINED 4:4-24

The Samaritans did not handle it well when the people of Judah refused to allow them to assist in the

building of the temple. They determined to stop the work. When one tactic did not work, they tried another, but they did not give up. It certainly would make a vast difference in our lives if we had the same attitude about the work of God.

Ezra 4:4 Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building,

As soon as their offer to help was turned down, they began to oppose the work of God. I believe this reveals the intent of their hearts all along.

The word "*weakened*" means "to slacken" or "weak". We are not told the details, but they did whatever they could to hinder the reconstruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

The word "*troubled*" means "to tremble inwardly". It carries with it the idea of being afraid. They tried to frighten the people into stopping the work. We must remember, this relatively small group of people were surrounded by their enemies with very little way to protect themselves. The Samaritans not only did all they could to hinder the work, but they also tried their best to harass the people of Judah. It had become personal. They were not only against Jerusalem, but they were also against the people of Jerusalem.

They troubled them "*in building*". They recognized the power of the rebuilt temple and city. They knew it would be a place that would provide strength and unity to the people of Judah. Therefore, they were going to do whatever it took to stop it. In like fashion, the devil recognizes the power of a close walk in the lives of God's people. He knows we will become stronger if we develop a consistent fellowship with our Lord, and he will do whatever it takes to stop it.

Ezra 4:5 And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Important note: It is important to note that verses 6-23 are an overview of the opposition from the Samaritans and their continual attempt to stop the work of the people of Judah. It actually covers a period of 16 to 17 years. It is like Ezra looks ahead to the events that would take place over the next few years. We see this done in movies. The scene jumps ahead in time, gives a view of what is going to happen in the future, then goes back to the present. We see the same here. Verses 1-5 take place during the reign of Cyrus. Verse 6 takes place during the reign of Ahasuerus. Verses 7-23 take place during the reign of Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes reigned during the events described in chapters 7-10 in Ezra. The information found in these verses is vitally important but we can understand the chronology of these events better if we read verse 5 and then go to verse 24.

Why did Ezra add this overview at this point in his writing of this book? Perhaps he wanted to reveal the absolute hatred of those who were opposing the work on the temple and the city of Jerusalem. They were not the good people they were pretending to be when they offered to assist in the construction project.

The word "*hired*" means "to purchase temporarily". The Samaritans were bribing some of the officials serving under the king of Persia to hinder the work in Judah.

The word "*counsellors*" is the same word used for the Persian king's advisors found in Ezra 7:28 and 8:25. It is uncertain as to their exact position but it is certain that they had some power to sway the decisions of the king. Like a crooked lawyer or Congressman, they had connections that would allow them to accomplish quite a bit if they so desired. These hired crooks did what they could to obstruct the work in Judah.

We should remember, the people of Judah were still under the authority of the Persian king. This being true, the king had the legal authority to slow or stop completely, the building project if he so desired.

The word, "*frustrate*" means, "to break up". They had one goal in mind, they wanted to break up the plan of the people of Judah.

Verse five says so much to be so short. The Samaritans continued this tactic through the reign of Cyrus and into the reign of "*Darius king of Persia*". That means the Samaritans continued their attack for approximately fourteen years. They certainly were determined.

Verse 6 deals with the opposition of the Samaritans during the reign of King Ahasuerus.

Ezra 4:6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Cyrus died and the new king took the throne of Persia.

"*Ahasuerus*" was a royal title and not a proper name. We do the same because we call the leader of our country "President". Many believe this is referring to Cambyses, the son of Cyrus. He reigned after Cyrus, for seven years and six months. He was an ungodly man and despised the Jews. Therefore, he did not share Cyrus' concern for the people of Judah or for the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.

In the "*beginning of his reign*". The Samaritans wasted no time to begin their influence upon the king. They tried to influence the new king to oppose the people of Judah as they had done with Cyrus.

They wrote a letter of "*accusation*" against the people of Judah and Jerusalem. We are not told the exact

details of their accusation. Of course, they were hoping this would discourage the king from assisting the people of Judah. They were doing all they could to turn the king against the builders.

There is no record in Scripture of any response from Ahasuerus to this letter.

Verses 7-16 deal with the opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes.

Ezra 4:7 And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue.

Once again the leadership changed and "Artaxerxes" became the king of Persia. As before, the Samaritans were quick to address the new king in an attempt to sway him to their agenda and to hinder the work of the people of Judah.

They wrote a letter of accusation against the people of Judah to the new king.

It is believed that "Bishlam, Mithredath", and "Tabeel" were governors appointed by the king of Persia to rule over certain areas of the Persian territory.

These people were willing to put their name on the line. They were not ashamed to be numbered among those who stood for what they believed. Their cause was wrong, but they believed in it and stood for it. We certainly need some Christians who would be willing to put their lives on the line for the cause of Christ.

The "Syrian tongue" was referring to the Chaldean language (called Aramaic now). Aramaic would eventually become the official language of the Persian Empire.

As in the case with Ahasuerus, there is no record in Scripture of a response from Artaxerxes to this letter.

Ezra 4:8 Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:

Another letter of accusation was sent to Artaxerxes by Rehum and Shimshai. Like the letters mentioned in verses six and seven, this letter was also was "against Jerusalem". The hatred for God's people and God's work was not lessening as the years passed. Just like the devil, they would not give up.

This letter was written to "Artaxerxes the king". Artaxerxes became king of Persia in 465 BC. That means the temple had been completed some fifty years before this letter was sent. So, this opposition must have been about the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.

The term, "scribe" as used here is probably referring to an official. At this time, a scribe was much like a secretary. They would write and keep records of the events connected to the kings.

The words, "in this sort" mean they were complaining about the people of Judah just as the others had done.

Starting with this verse, the Syrian (Aramaic) language is used instead of Hebrew. This continues until Ezra 6:18. The words in Ezra 7:12-26 are also in Aramaic. The words were probably transcribed by Ezra from the Persian public records. The Persians kept detailed records of their business affairs.

Ezra 4:9-10 Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest that are on this side the river, and at such a time.

Another letter of accusation was sent.

Nine nations are listed by name in these verses. They had joined together in sending a letter of accusation against the people of Judah. Just for good measure, they added, "And the rest of the nations". These were some of the people who had been brought into the land of Judah when Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Babylon. They were attempting to put as much influence on the king as possible by implying that they represented a large group of people. After all, there is power in numbers.

The man named "Asnappar" was one of the men who was assigned to bring the people of Judah from Babylon to the land of Judah when Cyrus released them.

Ezra 4:11 This is the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king; Thy servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time.

The words in this verse are the introduction of the letter. The letter itself begins in verse twelve and continues to verse sixteen. Artaxerxes' response is in verses 17-22.

The "river" was the river Euphrates.

Ezra 4:12 Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations.

Even though the greater part of those who returned from Babylon were of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, there were some from the ten northern tribes who returned to the land of promise. The term "Jews" became the common name of the people of Israel after the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles.

They called the people of Judah, "the rebellious and the bad city". As we will see later (4:19), their accusation

was mixed with lies and truth. The devil is a master at making false accusations. He accused Job of serving God for selfish reasons (Job 1:11). He tried the same tactic with Jesus (Mk. 14:56). We should not be surprised if he does the same thing with us. After all, he is called "*the accuser*" (Rev. 12:10). He does not just accuse us before the Lord, he will accuse us to ourselves. He is an expert at making us feel inadequate, unworthy, and guilty.

Their description was exaggerated because "*the walls*" had not been rebuilt yet. In this same letter, they will make a statement that lets us know the walls had not been rebuilt (cf. verse 16). Rebuilding the walls would be a major part of the rebuilding project but they would not be completed until Nehemiah came later (Neh. 2:13-17). The Samaritans were not concerned with the truth. They simply wanted to stop the building project. The devil does not mind telling a lie as long as he accomplishes his fiendish plan.

Ezra 4:13 Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings.

They tried to influence king Artaxerxes by suggesting how he would suffer personally if he allowed the work to continue. Their first accusation was that the people of Judah would stop paying taxes. The "*toll, tribute, and custom*" were different types of taxes. Since taxes were the primary means of income for the royal treasury, this was a very important matter to the king. The suggestion that the people of Judah would not pay taxes would get the attention of any king, especially one who cared nothing about God. The focus of any such king would be his own personal welfare and the treasury of the country he ruled.

They went on to say, "*so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings*". They were pretending to have the best interest of the king in mind. A part of their comments implied the results would be his fault and he would have to accept the responsibility of the results. Their statements in this verse were completely hypocritical for they certainly despised taxes themselves. But, their hatred for the Jews was greater than their hatred for taxes. They were willing to use any tactic necessary as long as it stopped the work of God.

Ezra 4:14 Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king;

The word, "*maintenance*" means, "to eat salt". It is speaking of acquiring one's subsistence from another. It carries with it the idea of being indebted to the person who has provided. It simply means they were on the king's payroll.

I believe this statement can be taken two ways. One, they were telling king Artaxerxes he had been so good to them that he should know they would not do anything to harm him. Two, they were telling the king that since they depended on him for their income, he could rest assured they would never do anything to jeopardize it. In other words, they would not bite the hand that feeds them. No matter which way they intended their statement, they were covering up their real feelings. They did not really care about the king, they only cared about themselves and their agenda.

The word, "*dishonour*" means to be dishonored but it also means, "nakedness". It speaks bring dishonored in such a manner as to cause extreme embarrassment. They were trying to make the consequences of the king's decision sound as severe as they possibly could in attempt to sway his decision.

The word "*certified*" means "to make known". These hypocrites were trying to convince the king they had his best interest in mind and had informed him for his own good. This comment was worded in such a manner as to say that if anything bad happened, it would be his fault, and he could not blame them.

Ezra 4:15 That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed.

They recommended the "*book of records*" be searched. The "*book of the records*" was the royal archives of the Persian government. It was a common practice for the Persians to record their important events in writing. These were like what we would call "minutes" that record what is said in a business meeting. The Persians had devised an elaborate record keeping system. They marked their tablets and scrolls with labeling devices where they could be searched easily. Their system was so effective that Alexander the Great adopted their method of record keeping.

The Samaritans were hoping the king's search of the records would provide sufficient reason to stop the rebuilding in Jerusalem.

They called the people of Judah, "*rebellious*" and "*hurtful*". Generally, we would not want to be described by these words. But, in this case, these words are very positive. It is one thing for a friend to call us rebellious or hurtful. It is quite another when our enemy says we are rebellious and hurtful. I would love for the devil to think of me as rebellious and hurtful to his kingdom. We need some people who rebel against the devil and be hurtful to his work on earth.

The reference to the city being "*destroyed*" was referring to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 24:18-25:30). They were saying the rebellion of the people of Judah had forced Nebuchadnezzar to

deal with them. They were looking at this from a human viewpoint. The real reason for the destruction of Jerusalem was because of the sin of God's people.

So, according to them, if king Artaxerxes did not want the same thing to happen during his reign, he had better not allow them to rebuild the city.

The words, "*for which cause was this city destroyed*" implied it was the people of Judah's fault that the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed, to begin with. Little did they realize that what they said was, in fact, the truth. It had been their sin that caused God to judge them.

Ezra 4:16 We certify the king that, if this city be builded again, and the walls thereof set up, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river.

They were trying to convince King Artaxerxes that the Jews would not pay any taxes if they were allowed to rebuild Jerusalem. That certainly, was the last thing he would want.

They went so far as to say the king would have "*no portion*". They told the king he would lose control of all the people on the west side of the Euphrates River. The implication was that, not only would the people of Judah rebel, but they would influence those around them to rebel against the king. There is nothing an ungodly king would fear more than for those under his rule to refuse to acknowledge his authority.

They were saying to the king if you let these people continue you will lose all control over them and they will not contribute to your kingdom at all. This should be the desire of every Christian in the family of God. To get to the place to where the devil has totally lost control of us, and we are no longer contributing to his evil work in this world.

The words, "*and the walls thereof set up*" tells us the walls had not been rebuilt at that time (cf. verse 12).

Artaxerxes' answer to the letter is found in verses 17-22.

Ezra 4:17-18 Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and unto the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time. The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me.

King Artaxerxes acknowledged the fact that he had received the letter and gave his response.

Ezra 4:19 And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein.

The search of the official records did reveal times when the southern kingdom of Judah had resisted their enemies who had oppressed them (2 Kgs. 18:7; 24:1; 24:20; 2 Chr. 36:13). However, they certainly were not resisting at this time. They had been given official permission by king Cyrus to go back to the land of their ancestors and rebuild. They were far too weak at that time to even think about rebelling, and they had demonstrated no evidence of plans to do so.

There were times when the people of Israel had struggled to keep their independence. Their resistance was viewed as rebellion. The bible is clear that Christians should be submissive to their government (Rom. 13:1-2; Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-20; Titus 2:9). However, there may be times when God's people are forced to take a stand against an ungodly government. When the government instructs God's people to do things that are contrary to the Word of God, they must obey God rather than man (Ex. 1:17; Dan. 3:16-18; 6:10,13; Acts 4:19; 5:29). It is interesting to note when those under oppression fight and win their liberty, it is called a revolution. When they fight for their liberty and lose, it is called treason. Need I remind us how the United States got her start?

Ezra 4:20 There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them.

The "*mighty kings*" may be referring to David (2 Sa. 8:3-8) and Solomon (1 Kgs. 4:21). The people of Israel certainly had been blessed by the Lord. This is the theme of the book of Ezra. Even an ungodly king had to admit to the greatness of God's people. God had done great things through His people and He was wanting to do so again. In like fashion, God has done great things in our past. But, for so many, it is just a faint memory. As I have said several times in the study of the book of Ezra, God wants us to get back to what we used to be. God still wants to bless His people. If we will get back to what we should be, He can, and will, do it again.

From Artaxerxes perspective, the "*mighty kings*" were a possible threat to him and his kingdom. Such a king, if they so desired, would have the power to influence people, raise funds, and to build armies to attack his kingdom. King Artaxerxes did not take this lightly. He would act accordingly and cause the building in Jerusalem to cease.

The term, "*beyond the river*" is referring to the Euphrates River.

Ezra 4:21 Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me.

King Artaxerxes gave the command that the work "*cease and that this city be not builded*". The ungodly Samaritans' plan had worked and they had accomplished what they desired.

They were to cause the work to cease "*until another commandment*" should be given. This said two things. One, the king's decision to stop the work could not be changed unless he was the one to do it. Two, he left the door open to allow the work to continue at a later date. He would change this decree later and allow Nehemiah to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem (Neh. 2:1-9).

Ezra 4:22 Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?

The words, "*Take heed*" have the idea of getting hold of something or being able to comprehend. He was telling the people they had better listen to what he was saying. His point was, if they did nothing, his kingdom would suffer damage and it would be their fault. You can sense the fear in this statement. He recognized the damage that could be caused.

In like fashion, the devil understands the potential of the Christian who is willing to trust and obey the Lord. It certainly would be a blessing if God's people would so dedicate themselves to the Lord's work that it would cause our enemy to fear. We talk a lot about fearing the devil, but it would be a blessing for us to be the type of Christian that would cause him to fear us. By the way, nowhere in the bible are we told to fear the devil.

Even though this verse is referring to the enemy of God's work, the facts are the same for the child of God. Failure to heed what God says will cause damage to the work of Christ. Our failure is too costly.

Ezra 4:23 Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power.

They "*went up in haste*". Having received authority from the king, the Samaritans moved quickly to stop the building project. No doubt, they were excited to do so. The devil does not waste time. Like a roaring lion, he is quick to attack (1 Pet. 5:8).

They made them "*cease by force and power*". Though we are not told the exact details, we can assume they used armed forces. The word, "*force*" is an Aramaic word that means "arm". The word, "*power*" means, "army".

There will be times when God allows His work to be opposed. Somehow the modern Christian has the idea that the path of following God's will is supposed to be easy. Many think that obstacles in our path mean we must be going the wrong way. The fact is, there will be times when the will of God is the most difficult way.

Ezra 4:24 Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Ezra's narrative from verse five begins again with this verse. As previously mentioned (cf. comments on verse 5), verses 6-23 are an overview of the opposition from the Samaritans and their continual attempt to stop the work of the people of Judah. To get a clearer view of what Ezra was saying, read verse 5 and then verse 24.

In spite of the fact that they had been commanded by the authorities to cease the work, ultimately, it was the people of Judah who decided to stop the work. They could have trusted their God and continued building. God certainly would have enabled them to complete the task He had given them. God always provides where He guides. This is obvious, for later, they would continue the work even though they were being opposed (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:15).

In my opinion, the words "*Then ceased the work of the house of God*" are some of the saddest words in the bible. The Jews had left their lives in Babylon (1:3) traveled hundreds of miles to return to the land God had promised them (2:64), stood against the Samaritans when they tried to infiltrate the work (4:3), and now they allowed their emotions to get the best of them. They were willing to stand against the Samaritans when it came to their doctrine but they failed when it came to their emotions. Unfortunately, that is the case in our day. So many are doctrinally correct but they allow their feelings to control them.

Their ceasing the building of the temple revealed the attitude of the people of Judah. The temple was the place where they met with God. It was the place where they offered sacrifices that atoned for their sin. The lack of interest for the temple revealed their lack of interest in the things of God. The fact that they were so easily convinced to stop building reveals their spiritual condition.

The amazing thing about this entire situation is the fact that the circumstances today are much like the circumstances then. The Jews talk about building another temple. They have everything needed to do so. The only thing missing is their willingness to do so. The next temple will be built will be desecrated by the Anti-Christ (Dan. 9:27; Mt. 24:15; 2 Th. 2:3-4). Like always, there will be opposition to the work of God.

3. THE BUILDING WAS ERECTED chapters 5-6

Chapter four ends with the work on the temple ceasing. It would be sixteen years before they would start the work again. But, God was about to move. He started by sending prophets to speak to the people of Judah. I am so glad we have a God who will still speak to His people.

God spoke to the people of Judah by sending the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah. He sent them to get the attention of the people of Judah and stir them to action. Both of these prophets understood the importance of the temple. Without the temple, the Jews would not be able to totally obey the law God had given Moses.

THE PROPHETS WERE SPEAKING 5:1-2

Ezra 5:1 Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them.

God stirred the people of Judah by sending the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai was the first to speak. When Haggai spoke the altar was complete and the foundation of the temple had been laid, but that was all. For years, the work had ceased. God had been patient but His patience was about to run out. It was time for them to get back to work.

Haggai and Zechariah preached during the same time period. To get an idea of the time frame please note the following.

1. Haggai's first message was preached the sixth month of the second year of Darius' rule.
2. Haggai's second message was preached the seventh month of the second year of Darius' rule.
3. Zechariah's first message was preached the eighth month or the second year of Darius' rule.
4. Haggai's third message was preached the ninth month of the second year of Darius' rule.
5. Haggai's fourth message was preached the same day of the ninth month of the second year of Darius' rule.
6. Zechariah's second message was preached the eleventh month of the second year of Darius' rule.
7. Zechariah's third message was preached the ninth month of the fourth year of Darius' rule.

To understand this part of the book of Ezra, we must take a brief look at the book of Haggai.

Haggai actually delivered four messages to the people of Judah. His first message came on the first day of the sixth month in the second year of the reign of Darius (Hag. 1:1-15), about seven weeks later, his second (Hag. 2:1-9), about two months later, his third (Hag. 2:10-19), and his fourth message came later that same day (Hag. 2:20-23).

His first message came on the first day of the sixth month in the second year of the reign of Darius (Hag. 1:1-11).

The first verse of the book of Haggai makes it clear that, even though Haggai's message was to all of the people of Judah, he was addressing the leaders first. Godly leadership would be vitally important if the building project was going to resume. If the leaders were not doing right it was unlikely that the people would do right. Even though Haggai's message was first directed to the leaders, we are about to find out, it was intended for all the people.

Haggai's message began by stating what the people of Judah had been saying about the rebuilding of the temple. They were saying, "*The time is not come, the time that the LORD'S house should be built*" (Hag. 1:2). Like so many of God's people, they were saying the timing wasn't just right to do the will of God.

Their original excuse for not completing the temple was the opposition from the Samaritans. Now, they were saying it just did not seem to be the right time. There will always be an excuse for those looking for one. But, could I say, none of them hold water. None of them are accepted by our God.

Notice, they did not say it was not God's will that the temple be rebuilt, they just said it was not the right time. So many of God's people are quick to talk about the need to get back to what we used to be, but few seem to think this is the time to make a move towards God. God's will is always easy if we put it off till later.

We should remember, these were not bad people. They were the ones who had willingly left their homes in Babylon, made the long journey back to the land of Judah, and had made an effort to rebuild the temple.

They had done more than many of the people in captivity. Yet, they had still fallen short of God's will for their lives. We dare not excuse ourselves from doing God's will by comparing ourselves with those who are further from God than we are (2 Cor. 10:12).

Haggai addressed this issue by saying, "*Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste*" (Hag 1:4). Haggai exposed their misplaced priorities. While the house of God was lying in waste, they had been busy building houses for themselves. The word, "*cieled*" means "covered". It has the idea of hiding by covering. It means they built strong and comfortable homes for themselves. They were planting crops and vineyards also (Hag. 1:10). Unfortunately, this seems to be the attitude of so many in our day. The average Christian is much more concerned about their own comfort than the work of God. Paul said, "*For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's*" (Phil. 2:21).

Haggai's message was actually dealing more with the spiritual lax in the lives of the people than the fact that the building on the house of God had ceased. Theirs was a spiritual problem. So it is with us.

The problem was not that they had built themselves houses. Solomon built a magnificent house for himself (1 Kgs. 7:1-12). The problem was the fact that they cared more about their own houses than they did the house of God. As we are about to find out, until they put the house of God in its proper place, their personal lives would not be at peace. Worldly possessions will not fill the heart with peace (Mat. 6:19-21, 33; 1 Tim. 6:8-9; Heb. 13:5). Only a right fellowship with God can do that.

Haggai made it very clear that he was not speaking for himself. He said, "*Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts*" (Hag. 1:5). It would do us well to realize, a God-called preacher is not speaking for himself. His message is a message from God. Certainly, being human, he can make mistakes and misspeak, but ultimately, what he says can be taken as from the Lord Himself. We should listen, and respond, as such.

God said, "*Consider thy ways*" (Hag. 1:5). The word, "*consider*" is quite interesting. It means, "set your hearts on your ways". It means to take a good look at where your decisions have brought you. God, in essence, was saying, "Do you not see what has happened to you". He was also trying to warn them that the path they had chosen had led them to trouble and it was not going to get any easier. The only hope they had was to change paths.

Every decision we make has consequences. God will let us make unwise decisions if we are so inclined. And, He will let us live with the consequences of these unwise decisions. By the way, when we are hurting because of some dumb choice we made, we cannot blame God.

The words Haggai spoke were not easy to take, but, they were the truth. There are times when the truth hurts, but we still need to hear it. Acting like everything is okay when it isn't can only lead to trouble and heartache.

Haggai reminded them how difficult their lives had been since they stopped working on the temple. No matter how hard they worked, they were lacking. Haggai wrote, "*Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes*" (Hag 1:6). The reason for their difficulty was because they had stopped obeying God.

There was a threefold judgment on them.

First, God withheld His blessings. They had sown much but brought in little (Hag. 1:6a). The God who is able to bless is just as able to withhold His blessings.

Second, what they did accomplish did not satisfy them. They had put wages in bags with holes in them (Hag. 1:6c).

Third, God had sent His judgment on them. He withheld the much-needed dew and sent drought which kept the harvest from coming (Hag. 1:10-11). This statement makes it clear that they did not just build themselves houses, they were busy planting vineyards and crops. They were simply settling in, living life, and ignoring the house of God.

The people of Judah probably blamed their bad circumstances on the devil. Little did they realize, what they were enduring was not a work of the devil, but a work of God. The problem was not satan, it was their own disobedience to God's will. How often do we blame the devil for something that is our fault? I am afraid the devil gets blamed for a lot he has nothing to do with.

The only way their needs would be met was for them to start obeying God (Hag. 1:7-11). When our disobedience brings God's judgment, the only remedy is our obedience.

No doubt, the people did not want to hear Haggai's message. Things have not changed. People of our day want to be made to feel good about themselves. Whether the message is true or not does not matter, as long as it makes them feel better.

God's instructions through Haggai was threefold. He told them to "*Go up to the mountain*". He told them where they needed to go to get what they would need. He told them to "*bring wood*". He told them what they would

need. And, He told them to "*build the house*" (Hag. 1:8a). He told them how to do what they had to do. It is amazing to me that they had not thought about this before now. This was the same message He had given them when they first arrived in the land. When we are struggling with what we should do next, we need to go back to what God told us to do last.

If they did as God said, He would be pleased again (Hag. 1:8b). Pleasing our heavenly Father should be our first priority (Phil. 4:18; 1 Th. 2:4). Whether we please Him or not should be our first priority, not where we have His blessings.

If they did as He said, God would "*be glorified*" (Hag. 1:8c). When the temple was completed (Ezra 6:14-22), God would be glorified. What a thrill it must have been for these people when they saw the finished temple being filled with the presence of God. God manifested Himself many times in this temple.

This reveals a spiritual truth we dare not miss. That being, we are not able to discern the importance of our ministry. We should not get discouraged because our ministry for the Lord seems less important than that of others. It is not our responsibility to determine the size of our work for God. We are simply to be faithful at the place God planted us and let Him take care of the results.

Then God spoke through Haggai and said some of the most delightful words in the bible. God said, "*I am with you*" (Hag 1:13). In spite of their neglect to God and His will, He was still willing to work with them. The same God who had blessed them before was willing to bless them again.

No doubt, they were not excited about Haggai's message. Yet it was a message they needed to hear. It was, after all, God's message. Someone has said Haggai was like an alarm clock, unwelcome but necessary.

About seven weeks after his first message, Haggai delivered his second message (Hag. 2:1-9). It is good to see that, even though they had ignored His Word before, God was still willing to speak to His people.

The second message was to Zerubbabel, Jeshua (Joshua), and the people of Judah also (Hag. 2:2 cf. Ezra 5:1). It was for all the people of Judah because everyone needed to get right and everyone had a job to do. I believe part of the reason God addressed the people here was to assure them that He was still going to use Zerubbabel and Jeshua as leaders in rebuilding His temple. Zerubbabel and Jeshua had given up when the opposition came years earlier. Therefore, it would have been easy for the people to question their ability to lead. But, God was going to use them in spite of their past failure. I am glad failure is not final with God. He will forgive, restore, and use, those who are willing to get right and do right.

Haggai's second message addressed the fact that this new temple was not as extravagant as Solomon's had been (Hag. 2:3-9). This temple was not as magnificent as Solomon's temple but Haggai said the glory of this house would be greater than Solomon's (Hag 2:3,9). As mentioned before, even though Herod would add on to this temple later on, this would still be the place where Jesus would walk (Lk. 2:46).

The new temple may have been less than the old but they still had a lot more than they deserved. By the way, so do we. God has been better to us than we will ever deserve.

About two months later, Haggai delivered his third message (Hag. 2:10-19). He asked if something unholy came in contact with something holy, did that make it holy. Of course, it does not. Haggai's point was, just because they were in the land of promise did not mean they were automatically holy. Therefore, they were to examine their lives and deal with any unconfessed sin.

Haggai's fourth message came later that same day (Hag. 2:20-23). This message was a reminder of God's promise of blessings to those who would obey Him. God spoke through Haggai and assured the people of Judah He would use Zerubbabel to establish His work in the land of promise.

As previously mentioned, Zechariah also had a message from God for the people of Judah (Ezra 5:1). The book of Zechariah tells us about this message. Haggai's preaching was delivered over several months but Zechariah's lasted a couple of years (please note the time frame in our comments on verse one of chapter five).

Zechariah's first message came between Haggai's second and third message.

Haggai's message encouraged the people to look in the future and the glory ahead. Zechariah's message looked back to the sin of the parents of the people of Judah. So, Haggai's message looked ahead, and Zechariah's looked back.

Haggai's message had been more directed to the need for them to get busy rebuilding the temple. Zechariah's message was more directed towards their spiritual condition and their need to get thoroughly right with God. He warned them about the consequences of neglecting the work of God. Zechariah shows us that God is interested in more than just buildings, He is interested in our lives.

Zechariah began his message by saying, God had been angry at the fathers of the people of Judah (Zech. 1:2). He asked where their fathers and their prophets were (Zech. 1:5). There was no answer given because they all knew the answer. Their fathers and their prophets had suffered the judgment of God

because they had refused to obey God.

Zechariah told the people of Judah to repent that they might not suffer the same consequences of their fathers (Zech. 1:3-4). God's judgment on one generation is meant to warn the next generation to not repeat the same error. God was not going to overlook their refusal to obey. As I have mentioned before, there was more involved than just the fact that they were refusing to rebuild the temple. Their refusing to build the temple revealed their hearts were not right with God.

God understood the fact that Zerubbabel and the people of Judah had gotten discouraged because of the opposition to the building of the Temple (Ezra 4:1-24). So, He sent Zechariah to encourage them to trust God and get back to work. He prophesied that Zerubbabel would indeed be used of the Lord to finish the temple (Zech. 4:9). The task of building the temple may have seemed like a mountain to the people of Judah, but God would make it a plain (Zech. 4:7). The task would be difficult, but God was going to give them the grace to do it. He will do the same today if we will but trust and obey Him (1 Jn. 4:4). When we step out by faith to do God's will, He will make a way. What are obstacles to us are opportunities to God. They give God a chance to show us His power. He allows the obstacles to show us how weak we are and how much we need Him.

Zechariah made a statement that applies to every saint in every day with every problem. He said, "*Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts*" (Zech. 4:6). God wanted His people to understand how weak they were without Him. The same is true of the New Testament saints (2 Cor. 12:9).

The messages of Zechariah can be summarized by what we find in chapter one. God said, "*Turn ye unto me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you*" (Zech. 1:3). God said if they would turn to Him, He would turn to them. He was still willing to bless His people. We can have God's blessings. However, we must be willing to obey Him. We want God to change our circumstances but we do not want Him to change us.

Ezra 5:2 Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.

The messages of Haggai and Zechariah stirred the hearts of Zerubbabel and Jeshua and they "*began to build the house of God*". As is so often the case, obedience began with the leaders. So much depends on good and godly leaders in the family of God. After years of neglect, the work on God's house had begun again. God convicted them of their failure and stirred them to obey Him once again.

This verse reveals the teamwork involved with the building of the temple. Zerubbabel was the civil leader, Jeshua was the spiritual leader, and the prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) were the preachers.

Surprisingly, this would be the last time Zerubbabel's name is mentioned. Much speculation has been made as to the reason. Some believe he simply died, some that he was killed, and some that he returned to Babylon. We do not know what happened to him, but, we do know he did finish the temple. Zechariah tells us the same Zerubbabel who started the temple was the one who finished it (Zech. 4:9). We know God kept him alive until he had finished the task He had given him. No one, including the devil, can do away with a child of God until God is through with them.

THE PEOPLE WERE STUBBORN 5:3-17

Those opposing the people of Judah refused to give up. They kept searching for some way, any way, to defeat the people and stop the work of God.

Ezra 5:3 At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?

The words, "*At the same time*" tell us the enemy did not wait to approach the people of God. The devil is never idle. His timing is always right. In fact, the devil's timing is as precise as the Lord's. He knows when to strike. He watches for the slightest sign of movement in the lives of God's people. Isn't it interesting that while the people were busy building their own houses and planting their own crops, the adversary caused them no problem? If the devil isn't attacking you, it may be a sign that you aren't doing enough to upset him.

We are introduced to "*Tatnai*" and "*Shetharboznai*" in this verse. Rehum and Shimshai (cf. Ezra 4:8) were either dead or had been removed from their office by this time. Tatnai and Shetharboznai were men placed in authority by the king of Persia to manage the public affairs on the west side of Euphrates River. Tatnai was the governor over the province that extended from the Euphrates River in the north to Egypt in the south.

Tatnai, Shetharboznai, and their companions wanted to know who had given the people of Judah the authority to work on the temple and its wall. As previously mentioned (Ezra 1:1), the people of Judah were still under the authority of the Persian government.

The words "make up" mean, "to complete". This refers to finishing something that has been started. The "wall" is the wall that surrounded the temple. The walls around the city of Jerusalem were not repaired until Nehemiah came later (Neh. 1:3; 3:12-16; 4:1-3)

Ezra 5:4 Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building?

There is some confusion about who actually asked for the names of those who were assisting in building the temple. It seems obvious from what they wrote in their letter, that Tatnai and Shetharboznai asked the question (Ezra 5:9-10). They knew they needed to send a thorough report to the king of Persia.

No doubt, the people of Judah complied to this request and gave the names. This shows they were not in a state of rebellion against the king of Persia.

Ezra 5:5 But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this matter.

The words, "the eye of their God" mean more than God was seeing them. It means, they were under His watchful care. This implies they were recipients of the favor of their God. They finally woke up to the fact that He had been watching them all along. Realizing this, they kept working on the temple in spite of this latest opposition.

Since God's favor was on the people of Judah, the enemy "could not cause them to cease". The adversary wanted to cause the work to cease once more, but the Lord would not allow them to do so. Whatever they intended to do, they were unable to do God always puts a limit on those who oppose His people (Job 1:12; 2:6). Those who fight against God, always lose.

The fact that God was protecting them was a wonderful thing but He had been willing to do so all along. Their years of idleness were inexcusable. How much time do we waste waiting for God to do something He has already promised to do? Anytime we do the will of God, we can be assured of His protection and provision.

Tatnai and Shetharboznai sent a letter to King Darius to explain the situation with the building of the temple and to ask for his instructions.

The letters to and from Darius would have been quicker than we would imagine. The Persian Empire, under the control of Darius, grew from east to west to a distance of three thousand miles and contained approximately two million square miles with a population between seventy and eighty million. One of the greatest of its accomplishments was their road system. These roads allowed the king to move his military quickly, and merchants to carry their goods. It also led to the establishment of a postal system that was used by the king to communicate with the distant provinces throughout his empire. The roads were unpaved, packed dirt, that allowed quick travel. Perhaps the most well known of these roads was the Royal Road. It connected Susa and Sardis and was approximately 1,600 miles in length. Darius established 111 stations along this road where the couriers could get fresh horses or pass their messages to another courier. This allowed a messenger to cover the 1,600 miles in 7 to 10 days. Without this road, the journey would have taken three months. Herodotus, the Greek historian wrote, "Neither snow, nor rain, nor frost, nor darkness could hinder the swift couriers of the post of Darius". The United States Postal Service has adopted a similar statement as their creed.

Ezra 5:6 The copy of the letter that Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and his companions the Apharsachites, which were on this side the river, sent unto Darius the king:

Verses 6-10 record the content of the letter Tatnai and Shetharboznai sent to King Darius.

The "Apharsachites" were mentioned earlier in connection with the letter sent by Rehum and Shimshai (Ezra 4:9). Tatnai and Shetharboznai may have been from the Apharsachites. This letter was less hostile than the one sent by Rehum and Shimshai (Ezra 4:10-16). It simply stated the facts and asked for instructions from Darius.

Ezra 5:7 They sent a letter unto him, wherein was written thus; Unto Darius the king, all peace.

There was a personal touch in this letter. They began with a common greeting of peace.

Ezra 5:8 Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands.

Tatnai and Shetharboznai had gone to examine the work on the house of God in the province of Judah. The fact that they referred to God as the "great God" does not mean they were believers. No doubt, they believed in many gods, so to them, the God of the people of Judah was simply one of many. However, they did recognize the fact that the God of Judah was different than the other gods. No one who is honest can deny the power of God.

The stones being used in the rebuilding of the temple were called "great" stones. The word carries with it the idea of "stones of rolling". They were so large they could not be carried and had to be rolled or dragged. These large stones were much more expensive and more difficult to work with than some of the

smaller stones available throughout the land. But, they wanted to use the best. Our God deserves our best. The work was going fast and they were making great progress. The desire of the people caused them to work with vigor. God blesses those who serve Him with all of their hearts.

Ezra 5:9 Then asked we those elders, and said unto them thus, Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls?

The "walls" were referring to the walls of the temple and not the walls around the city of Jerusalem.

Ezra 5:10 We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them.

They mentioned how they had requested the names of those who had authorized the work on the temple. This statement tells us who asked the question mentioned in verse four. They wanted to know exactly who was responsible for the work on the temple. They knew Darius would expect them to thoroughly question the people of Judah. The devil is always thorough with his work. He leaves no stone unturned.

Ezra 5:11 And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up.

Tatnai's and Shetharboznai's letter included the answers the people of Judah had given to his questions (Ezra 5:11-16). The people of Judah went into some detail in their explanation of the events that had transpired. These were important details that should have been in the letter to Darius.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua called themselves, "*the servants of the God of heaven and earth*". They saw themselves as they were, simple servants of a great God.

Of course, the "*great king of Israel*" was Solomon.

Ezra 5:12 But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon.

The people of Judah knew why the first temple had been destroyed and why they had been deported out of the land. Their "*fathers had provoked*" their God. There had been more involved with their downfall than just Nebuchadnezzar and his selfish desires. God had used Nebuchadnezzar as a tool to correct His children. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar defeated God's people did not mean he had defeated God. God was very much in control the entire time.

The wording of this verse, like every verse in the bible, is very important. It says, God "*gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar*". This tells us God simply stepped out of the way and let Nebuchadnezzar do what he wanted to do. Up to that point, God had restricted Nebuchadnezzar. It would shock us if we could see what all God has kept the devil from doing to us. There is no telling what God has protected you from today.

We can see in this verse how God will use people to accomplish His will in our lives. Those people who cause us so many problems may be the tool of God at work in our lives. That does not excuse their wrong behavior but we need to see what God is attempting to do through them.

Ezra 5:13 But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God.

Of course, the people of Judah had told Tatnai and Shetharboznai about the decree Cyrus had given that allowed them to return to the land and rebuild the temple (cf. Ezra 1:2-4). Tatnai and Shetharboznai wanted to make sure the building project was legal according to the Persian law.

Ezra 5:14 And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto one, whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor;

God had stirred the heart of Cyrus and he turned over the items Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of Solomon's temple.

Once again, we see the man named "*Sheshbazzar*" mentioned (please refer to our notes on Ezra 1:8, 11). As mentioned before, some believe he was one of Cyrus' men, some believe he was a partner to Zerubbabel, and others believe this was another name given to Zerubbabel.

Ezra 5:15 And said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place.

These items would be needed in the temple they were building. God provided everything they needed to do the job He required of them.

Ezra 5:16 Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished.

In essence, they said, they started on the building and they still haven't finished. What a horrible testimony for the people of God. The world may not want to live like a child of God, but they certainly expect us to.

Ezra 5:17 Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure house, which is there at

Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.

The people of Judah had given Tatnai and Shetharboznai all the information mentioned in the verses above, but he was not satisfied that they were telling the truth.

They requested that the records of Cyrus be examined. The records of Persia were kept in the king's storeroom. Finding the written records of Cyrus' decree would provide the proof the people of Judah needed.

We can only imagine how the people of Judah felt during this time of waiting for Darius' response to this letter. Would he allow them to continue the work or would he attempt to stop them as the other Persian kings had done?

It is a blessing to know that, according to verse five, the people continued the work on the house of God while this letter was being sent and received. They had abandoned the work of God before. But finally, they were willing to do the will of God in spite of the opposition. The opposition against the believer will never lessen. We have to fight the powers of the devil until we leave this world.

I am afraid the average Christian today is much like the people of Judah. Through neglect, their spiritual lives of many have fallen into ruins. Most are satisfied to coast through life with little concern for the will of God. May the Spirit of God stir us as He did the people of Judah. May we, as I have said so many times during this study, get back to what we used to be. We need to get on the road to restoration.

THE PROJECT WAS SUCCESSFUL 6:1-15

Ezra 6:1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

King Darius did as requested and ordered a search of the records of Persia. The "house of rolls" is referring to the place where the king's records were kept.

Ezra 6:2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

They searched the king's storehouse in Babylon but did not find the records there. Then they searched in "Achmetha" and found a scroll whereon the record was written. Achmetha was a city wherein was the palace used as a summer residence by the kings of Persia. It was also the Persian capital and was later called Ecbatana.

The contents of Cyrus' decree is given in verses 3-5.

Ezra 6:3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits;

The measurements given here are 90 feet high and 90 feet wide. Solomon's temple had been 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet high. (1 Kgs. 6:2-3). The measurements given here have caused difficulty with Bible students since it would seem unlikely they would not build upon the old foundation of Solomon's temple. Some believe the measurements given here include the porches that would be around the temple itself. Others believe Cyrus gave them the liberty to build the temple whatever size they wanted to but limited the size to 90 feet high and 45 feet wide.

Ezra 6:4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house:

The temple was to be built with three courses of large stones and one course of timbers. This is the same building process as Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 6:36).

King Cyrus had promised to pay the "expenses" for the temple from his treasury. However, it is unlikely these funds ever actually reached the people of Judah. Those opposing the work, more than likely, hindered this money from reaching the people of Judah (Ezra 4:4-6). The people of Judah gave large sums of money themselves (Ezra 2:68-69; 3:7).

Ezra 6:5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

Part of Cyrus' decree had involved the return of vessels from Solomon's temple that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar. These items were necessary if the function of the temple was to be carried out according to God's instructions.

6:6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond

the river, be ye far from thence:

The reciting of Cyrus' decree ends in verse five and Darius' response to Tatnai and Shetharboznai is found in verses 6-12.

Upon finding the decree of Cyrus, Darius had no choice than to honor it. The law of the Medes and Persians could not be altered or changed (cf. Dan. 6:8).

King Darius' instructions consisted of three items.

Ezra 6:7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

Darius' first command instructed Tatnai, Shetharboznai, and their companions was to leave the work of the house of God alone. They were to not interfere with the construction in any way. No greater words have ever been spoken than these. They may have come from a pagan king, but they still were words of great importance. Darius said, "*Let the work of this house of God alone*". Every enemy of Christ needs to hear and heed these words. Every atheist, agnostic, and infidel needs to take these words to heart. When you trifle with God's house and God's people, you are trifling with God.

Ezra 6:8-9 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:

Darius' second command stated that local tax money was to be used to pay for the building and the animals needed for sacrifices. Not only were they to leave the work alone, but they were also to assist in its progress. The funds were to come from the treasury "*beyond the river*". Like any politician would, Darius put the burden for funding this work on the province itself and not from his own treasury.

The items needed were to be provided "*day by day without fail*". Though these items came through the hand of Darius, they were actually from the throne of heaven. There are times when God provides in miraculous ways through natural means. God could have simply produced these items from nothing, as Jesus did the loaves and fish (Mt. 14:18-21). But, He worked through men to accomplish what He desired. I believe those types of miracles are the greatest. The miracle took place in the heart of a man. When God says "all things" that is exactly what He means (Rom. 8:28).

Ezra 6:10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

Darius had one request, that being, that the people of God pray for him and his family. So it is so many times. The lost person at work may make fun of the child of God but they are quick to ask that Christian to pray for them when trouble comes to their house.

However, this request was probably totally selfish in nature. Since he believed in many gods this was simply an effort to get the blessing of the God of Israel. He wanted all the gods on his side, including the God of the people of Judah. He certainly was not the last who desired God's blessings without being willing to do God's will.

Ezra 6:11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

Darius' third command said anyone who disobeyed the decree would suffer the consequences.

The meaning of the word "*hanged*" is uncertain. It can mean to strike, hang, or impale. Therefore, it is uncertain if it means the guilty person was, as with crucifixion, nailed to a beam of wood, hanged on a gallows build of timber, or impaled by a sharpened beam from his house. Whatever the means of punishment, it was severe and final. To make matters worse, their house was to be demolished and their property was to be used for a "*dunghill*". The property would be used as a dump for garbage and manure. Not only would the guilty person suffer, but their family would also. Those living in the home would be ousted, there would be no home to pass on to the children, and the dunghill would be a constant reminder to anyone passing by.

Ezra 6:12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

Darius realized God had "*caused his name to dwell*" in the land of Judah. He was forced to acknowledge the fact that God had been at work in his life and his kingdom. Since he believed in many gods, he probably saw the God of the people of Judah as one of the many gods who had brought success to his kingdom. In spite of his belief in many gods, he had to acknowledge the fact that the God of the Jews had great power and was working among the people.

Darius' decree was to be carried out "*with speed*". There was to be no discussion and no delay.

So, the plan of Tatnai and Shetharboznai to further hinder the work of God failed miserably. Instead of stopping the work, they were actually a part of its advancement. As mentioned earlier (1:1), it was a good thing Cyrus had the decree written down. The records proved Cyrus did indeed grant the people of Judah permission to rebuild the temple (Ezra 6:1-3). The interesting thing about it is, they would have never known about the decree of Cyrus had the enemy not mentioned it first. They would have been a lot better off if they had just kept quiet. There are times when God will use the enemy of His children to help them. I love it when the devil's plans backfire on him.

We dare not miss the significance of this verse. For years the people of Judah had bowed to the demands of the Persian leadership. But now, all that was changed. They were now free to build the temple. There was more involved here than just the decision of a man. The hand of God was working. God does some of His best work anonymously. It is astounding what God can do. He can change our prisons into palaces.

Ezra 6:13 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.

Tatnai and Shetharboznai followed the instructions of Darius immediately. Defying the demands of a king would result in quick and harsh punishment, so they really did not have any other choice.

Ezra 6:14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

The "elders of the Jews" is a reference to the older men of Judah who oversaw the work. God used the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah to touch the hearts of the people of Judah and to move them to action. He used the pagan kings Cyrus and Darius to grant legal permission and to provide the funds necessary. The people of God learned that God can indeed turn the heart of a king (Pro. 21:1).

Artaxerxes was the king of Persia later. He did not contribute to the work during Zerubbabel's day, but he did later when Ezra came on the scene. So, Ezra included his name here as being one of those who helped (Ezra 7:11-26).

Ezra 6:15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

The house of God was finally finished. Hallelujah, after two years to complete the foundation, sixteen years delay, and four more years of construction, the temple was finally completed.

THE PRIESTS WERE SERVING 6:16-18

Once finished, the temple was dedicated to the Lord.

Ezra 6:16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy,

The temple was completed, but now it was time to use it as it had been designed. The first step was dedicating it to the Lord. They kept this dedication with "joy". One reason was because it had been so long since they had been able to celebrate such an occasion. Another reason was because these celebrations were supposed to be observed with joy. The child of God has a reason to rejoice. To not do so, grieves God and dishonors His name.

Ezra 6:17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

They offered 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 male lambs, and 12 male goats. The number of animals used for sacrifices was far less than of Solomon's. At the dedication of Solomon's temple, there were 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep offered (1 Kg. 8:63).

As mentioned before, the cost and beauty of this temple were less than Solomon's. Yet, we must consider the wealth of both groups. These who had just returned from seventy years of captivity would not have been as wealthy as those who lived in Solomon's day. So, relatively speaking, there may not have been as much difference between the two as we might imagine. Our calculations are not always correct. Jesus said the widow lady who gave two mites gave more than they all (Mk. 12:43-44).

The "he goats" were for a sin offering. The people of Judah wanted to make sure their sin was dealt with. Their sins had accumulated during the years of having no temple and no sacrifice. God had established one, and only one, way to obtain forgiveness. The fact that there was no temple did not change this fact. But now, there was a temple and they could offer the sacrifices God demanded. Thank the Lord, forgiveness was available when they did it the way God required. I am glad to say, there is forgiveness available today, but it can be obtained only by coming to God the way He demands (Mt. 11:28; Eph. 2:8-9).

Those who refuse to come God's way, are rejected (Jn. 5:40).

The words, "*the children of Israel*" seem to indicate this was a celebration involving some of all twelve tribes of Israel. This is also evident in the "twelve" he goats that were offered since there are twelve tribes of Israel. Some of every tribe returned home from captivity making it possible to regard the re-established people as "*Israel*." God wanted all His people to celebrate.

Ezra 6:18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

The completion of the temple was followed by the placement of the leaders needed to serve in the temple. A building without people to serve in it would have been useless. They established the priests and the Levites for the service of God, as "*it was written in the book of Moses*" (cf. Num. 8:6-26). They had learned the importance of doing things God's way. The modern church needs to learn that same lesson.

THE PRAISE WAS SINCERE 6:19-22

The people of Judah worshipped the Lord with joy and gratitude.

Ezra 6:19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month.

The language of the text changes back to Hebrew at this point.

Approximately one month after the temple was finished, they observed the Passover. The Passover celebration lasted one day. Each household sacrificed a one-year-old unblemished lamb (Ex. 12:6). The lamb was roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Num. 9:11). The Passover reminded them of how God's judgment passed over their forefathers and brought them out of Egypt. They were to never forget the bondage they had suffered nor the deliverance God had provided.

The completion of this temple reminded them of how God had delivered their forefathers from Egypt. Their experience was much like the experience of their forefathers. This has led some to call this, the "Second Exodus". There were several comparisons between the two.

One, Israel had been taken into bondage in a distant land (Ex. 1:8-15).

Two, After a period of time God delivered His people from their bondage called them back to where they once had been (Ex. 12:29-42; 50-51).

Three, the people, because of their lack of faith, choose to disobey the Lord and forfeit that which God had for them (Num. 13:17-14:39).

Four, after a period of time, God gave them a second chance for the deliverance He had offered before (Josh. 1:1-7).

Five, God gave His people the deliverance He had promised (Josh. 3:14-17).

Ezra 6:20 For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.

The "*priests*" had to be from the tribe of Levi and descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses (Ex. 28:1-3). They served as mediators between man and God by offering sacrifices to provide atonement for the people. Only the priests could offer these sacrifices (Ex. 29:38-42). They had to meet certain physical and spiritual qualifications to be able to serve (Lev. 21; Num. 4:3). This meant, they had to be ceremonially clean in order to fill their role as a priest (Lev. 10:8-10).

The "*Levites*" were also from the tribe of Levi but were not descendants of Aaron. It had been their job to dismantle, move, and reassemble the tabernacle (Num. 1:47-54; 4:3-15) and to keep all the vessels and utensils used in the tabernacle clean (Num. 23:28). After the temple was built, they aided the priests by taking care of the temple. They made repairs, played music, sang, and kept the doors (Num. 1:50-53; 3:6-9; 4:1-33; 1 Chr. 23). They were not permitted to offer any of the sacrifices but they were to assist in whatever way the priests instructed (Num. 3:6; 16:9; 18:23). They took turns in their duty in the temple according to a fixed schedule. They became teachers of Israel (Dt. 24:8; 33:10; 2 Chr. 35:3; Neh. 8:7). They were scribes (2 Chr. 34:13) and judges (Dt. 17:8-9; 21:5; 2 Chr. 19:8). They were exempt from military service (Num. 1:47-48). They inherited no property in the Promised Land because the Lord was their inheritance (Dt. 18:1-2).

The priests and the Levites "*were purified together*". The tasks of the Levites may have been considered of less importance than those of the priests but theirs were still vitally important tasks. For this reason, just like the priests, they had to stay ceremonially clean that they might fill their role in the temple. They had to offer a sacrifice for "*themselves*" and for the people. God still demands His servants be pure (1 Th. 4:3-4). He will not use a dirty vessel.

Ezra 6:21 And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat,

The "*children of Israel*" were those who had returned to the land from the Babylonian captivity.

Those who "*had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen*" were probably the ones who had remained in the land but had mixed with the heathen population that had been sent from Babylon by Cyrus.

The words "*had separated themselves*" indicates they had given evidence of true repentance. God had truly done a work in their hearts. The word, "*separated*" means, "difference or distinguish". Those who separate themselves to the Lord will be different than they were. You can distinguish the separated person from those who are living in the world.

The word "*separated*" also means to "sever". The separated person has severed their connection with the world. We are to be severed from the world (Num. 16:21, 26; Pro. 9:6; Isa. 52:11; 2 Cor. 6:17).

All these "*did eat*". They took part in the Passover ceremony which included eating the lamb.

This shows the fact that there is always an open door to God for those who are willing to enter His way. The hypocrites (Ezra 4:1-3) were denied access, but those who genuinely believed and repented were welcome. So it is with the gospel message of today (Mt. 11:28; Jn. 7:37).

They not only were separated, but they were also seeking. The word, "*seek*" means "to seek or ask". It has the idea of intently pursuing someone. We certainly should be earnestly seeking our Lord (Dt. 4:29; 1 Chr. 16:10-11; Ps. 34:10; 105:3-4; Pro. 28:5; Acts 17:27).

Ezra 6:22 And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

After they observed the Passover, they celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were two separate observances but they came one after the other and seemed to blend together. The Passover lasted one day but the Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted seven days (Ex. 12:15-20; Lev. 23:6-8; Dt. 16:3). During these seven days, they were to eat no leaven nor have any leaven in their homes. Before the feast time began, they would search their houses diligently to make certain all leaven had been removed. Leaven is a symbol of sin, so they had to make sure there was none left in their homes. God certainly wants us to search our hearts, to find, and to rid ourselves, of any sin.

Whereas the Passover reminded them of how God brought the Jews out of Egypt, the Feast of Unleavened Bread reminded them how their forefathers left in haste the night God brought them out.

The "*king of Assyria*" refers to the fact that Darius had conquered, and was now ruler over, all that had been known as Assyria. When a king conquered another king, he became ruler over all the defeated king had possessed. It was worded this way to point to the fact that the victorious king was stronger than the one he had defeated.

God had "*turned the heart*" of a pagan king and used him "*to strengthen the hands in the work of the house of God*".

Observing the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread in the temple marked the true end of the captivity of God's people. They had not been able to observe these ceremonies since they had been taken to Babylon. We must not forget the fact that they had been taken into captivity because they had ignored God's law and walked in their own ways. And, they had suffered the consequences. It had been a long hard road (cf. Ps. 137:4). But now, at last, they were back in the land and able to observe the religious ceremonies that marked them as the people of God. The temple was completed and once again they were able to follow God's instructions pertaining to the priesthood.

Thus ends the first phase of God's restoration of His people. The next phase involved Ezra leading another group from Babylon back to the land of promise.

The events recorded in the book of Esther happened between the six and seventh chapter of the book of Ezra.

4. THE BLESSING WAS EXPERIENCED chapters 7-10

Chapter seven is certainly a pivotal chapter in this book. God will do a great work in the hearts of His people. God's blessings were on the way, but it would not be an easy trip. God saves His best for those who are willing to pay the price.

The scene of this book changes and we find ourselves back in Babylon, the main character becomes a man named Ezra. In the remaining chapters, we find Ezra leading a second group from Babylon to Jerusalem. There will be somewhere between 5,000 to 7,000 in this group.

As we have seen, many of the people had decided to stay in Babylon when Zerubbabel returned to Judah (Ezra 2:64). Now, they were getting a second chance to go back to the land God had promised them. I am glad God is a God of the second chance. It is a shame that He has to almost beg His children to do His will.

Ezra will address the spiritual failure of these people. Zerubbabel had brought them back into their land and had built the temple. Nehemiah would eventually come and rebuild the walls. But, they were in dire need for someone to help them with their spiritual drought. Simply put, they needed revival. So do we.

EZRA'S CREDENTIALS 7:1-5

If Ezra was going to do what God desired, he had to meet God's requirements for the task. For a man to be a priest, he had to be a descendant of Aaron, who was the first priest. This chapter begins with his genealogy that proves he was (Ezra 7:1-5).

Ezr 7:1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiyah,

The words, "*after these things*" mean more than is first obvious. There were approximately sixty years between chapter six and chapter seven. King "*Artaxerxes*" was the king of Persia by this time. This is the same Artaxerxes that is mentioned in Ezra 6:14. The fact that Artaxerxes had resisted the people of Judah at first has caused some to believe this was a different man than the one mentioned in Ezra 4. More than likely, this is the same one and something happened that caused him to change his opinion of the Jews. This is also the same Artaxerxes that assisted Nehemiah later (Neh. 2:1-8; 6:15).

Ezra 7:2-5 The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, The son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

There are some omissions in this genealogy for brevity sake. Those missing here are supplied (cf. 1 Chr. 6:7-10).

EZRA'S CALL 7:6-10

God stirred the heart of Ezra to return to Jerusalem and the land of Judah. This was not a decision he made on his own, but a true call from God. The more we learn about his journey, the more we will realize the importance of this call from God. If Ezra was not in the Lord's will, he would have no hope of making it.

Ezra 7:6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

The word "*scribe*" makes us think of something like a secretary. But, to the Jews, the scribe was vitally important. They were experts of the Law of Moses and regarded highly. The scribes were very influential in the Jewish communities. It was their job to study, protect, and teach the Word of God. They were something like the Old Testament prophet in that they explained the Old Testament to the people. The scribes that lived during Jesus' day had abandoned their spiritual position to the point to where they were some of the worse enemies of Jesus (Mt. 7:29).

Ezra knew the Old Testament scripture and knew how to teach it to others. The word, "*ready*" means, "*hasty, quick, or ready*". It suggests a quickness to grasp the matters of the law of Moses. Because of his time devoted to the Word of God Ezra was able to comprehend things in the law that most people would struggle over. Our time in the Word is never wasted.

The "*request*" spoken of here is referring to the fact that Ezra asked the king to allow him to return to Jerusalem. God had stirred his heart so he did not wait (Ecc. 11:4).

The term, "*the hand of the LORD his God upon him*" will be a familiar one in this book (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). It means God was favorable to Ezra. He realized it was the hand of God that was guiding, providing, and protecting him.

Ezra 7:7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

In the seventh year of his reign, King Artaxerxes, king of Persia, granted permission to Ezra to take as many Israelites who desired to go back to Jerusalem. He promised to provide the funds and whatever else

was needed to accomplish this task.

Once again (cf. Ezra 1:6; 2:10) we see the term "*children of Israel*" is used. This seems to indicate the fact that some from all twelve tribes of Israel would be involved with this move to Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:8-9 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

Hearing the temple had been rebuilt and worship restored may have encouraged this group to go along with Ezra.

They left Babylon on the "first day of the first month" and arrived in Jerusalem on the "*first day of the fifth month*", so the trip took four months. Such a large caravan which included the very young and the very old would have to move slowly. The direct distance from Babylon to Jerusalem was about five hundred miles. However, they took a route that was approximately nine hundred miles along the Euphrates River (cf. Ezra 8:24-32).

This verse is merely a summary of the trip from Babylon to Jerusalem. It gives no information about the difficulty they endured along the way. Ezra will speak of these difficulties later. However, in spite of these difficulties, it could rightfully be said, "*the good hand of his God upon him*". The fact that we face difficulties in no indication that our Lord has forsaken us. The fact that we face difficulties may be proof that the hand of our God is upon us because He sees us through things that should devastate us.

Ezra 7:10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

What a wonderful verse this is. It shines a light into the heart of Ezra. He set his heart to do three things.

One, Ezra set his heart to "*seek the law of the LORD*". He intently searched the law. The opinion of man about the Word is not important. We must know what God said. We can do that only by studying it diligently.

Two, Ezra set his heart to "*do it*". As wonderful as knowing the Word is, that is not enough. We must know it and then do it (Jam. 1:22). So many are proud of their knowledge of God's Word, but they seem little concerned about their failure in doing God's Word. Before he did the law, he had studied it to make sure he knew what it said.

Three, Ezra set his heart to "*teach*" others to do the same. He saw the need of passing on to others what God had shown him. As wonderful as Ezra's devotion to God's Word would have been had he only learned it and practiced it, it would have been sad indeed to stop there. He saw it as his responsibility to pass on what God had given him. So it is with every child of God, whether we are preachers or not.

Ezra knew he could not correctly teach the Word unless he had studied the Word to determine what it said. He also knew he would not be worthy to teach the Word unless he was doing what the Word said. The person who is too lazy to study the Word is not able to teach the Word. And, the person who is not doing the Word, is not worthy to teach the Word.

All preachers and teachers should do as Ezra did.

As Ezra did these three things, the Spirit of God touched his heart about the spiritual lack of his people. The temple was completed and functioning but there is still a spiritual need among the people. God would send Ezra back to Jerusalem to preach to the people. None of this happened until he devoted himself to learning, doing, and teaching the Word of God. Time in the Word will always stir our hearts about the spiritual needs around us.

EZRA'S COMMISSION 7:11-27

God commissioned Ezra for the task He called him to do. However, humanly speaking, Ezra also needed permission from the king of Persia if he was going to lead a group of people to Jerusalem. God definitely gave favor to Ezra. He was able to gain the confidence of King Artaxerxes. He received almost complete authority to do whatever he needed to return and restore the spiritual condition of the people of Israel. Artaxerxes granted him permission to establish the law of Moses in the land of Judah, to appoint judges and officers (7:25), to execute judgment on those who violated the law (7:26).

On our journey back to where we once were, God may use the most unexpected means to produce in us what we need to accomplish what He desires. It is important that we remember, if it is God's will, He will do whatever it takes to accomplish it.

Ezra 7:11 Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel.

Verses 11-26 are the contents of a letter send with Ezra from king Artaxerxes. He would carry this letter

with him on the journey to Jerusalem to prove he had permission from the king to do what he was doing. It gave him the authority of the king himself.

This letter was written in the Aramaic language.

Ezra 7:12 Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time.

Artaxerxes referred to himself as a "king of kings". It simply means he had several kings who were in subjection to him.

Ezra 7:13 I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee.

Artaxerxes made a decree that permitted any of the Jews to leave Babylon and go back to Jerusalem with Ezra. Notice this decree specifically mentioned the "priests and Levites". This will become an important issue later (8:15).

This was not forced upon the people. They were free to make their own decision. They had not taken their chance to leave Babylon when Zerubbabel returned (Ezra 1:1-4). So, they certainly needed to take this second opportunity. We seldom have an opportunity to do right what we have done wrong.

Artaxerxes may have had somewhat of a selfish motive for his assistance to the people of Judah. History tells us Egypt was in a state of rebellion at that time. The land of Judah provided a buffer area between Egypt and his land of Persia. No doubt, he wanted a friend in that area in case Egypt decided to go to war. So, every person who went to Jerusalem was improving his chance for victory.

Ezra 7:14 Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand;

This tells us that Ezra was actually sent by Artaxerxes "to gather information" about Judah and Jerusalem for himself and his seven counselors. I believe this is another indicator that Artaxerxes had more in mind than just freeing the Jews. He wanted someone to keep him informed about the situation in the land of Judah.

The "seven counsellors" were probably men who offered advice to the king. These seven men may be the ones mentioned in Esther 1:10.

The words, "in thine hand" speak of how the law of God had become so much a part of Ezra's life. He not only carried it in his hand, but he also carried it in his heart.

Ezra 7:15-16 And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem:

The king and his counsellors had given silver and gold for Ezra and his expedition to Jerusalem. The people were to take the gold and silver as well as the freewill offering given by the Jewish people who were still living in Babylon.

The statement, "whose habitation is in Jerusalem" reveals their misunderstanding of God. They believed there were gods over certain areas of the world and Ezra's God who revealed Himself in and around Jerusalem. The Syrians wrongly believed God was a God of the hills (1 Kgs. 20:28). They soon discovered just how wrong they were. Our God is omnipresent (Jer. 23:23-24; Isa. 66:1; Amos 9:2-3; Ps. 46:1; 139:L7-12; Pro. 15:3).

Ezra had received the silver and gold from Artaxerxes, but he was also granted permission to receive contributions from the Jewish inhabitants of Babylon.

Ezra 7:17 That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.

In verses 17-22, the things needed for the temple and the sacrifices are mentioned.

Ezra was to use part of the monies to purchase the items needed for sacrifices in the temple. The finances were to be used only for the expedition back to Jerusalem. This was not a fund to make Ezra rich.

Ezra 7:18 And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God.

Artaxerxes' trust in Ezra is certainly displayed in this verse. He said, "whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and thy brethren". After purchasing the items needed for the sacrifices, Ezra could use the "rest of the silver and the gold" as he saw fit as long as he used it for the needs of the temple functions.

It is amazing that a pagan king would put no more requirements on the treasures he had given than that they be used "after the will of your God". This probably is an indication as to the life Ezra lived. Even those who did not believe in Ezra's God, believed him to be a man who could be trusted. He knew he could trust Ezra,

and he knew he could trust those whom Ezra trusted.

Ezra 7:19 The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, those deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem.

They were given the utensils of worship that were used in the temple. Apparently, not all of these had been taken when Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 1:7-11).

Ezra 7:20 And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it out of the king's treasure house.

If Ezra spent all that Artaxerxes had given, he was permitted to draw any additional funds from the king's treasury.

Ezra 7:21 And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily,

Each of the Persian provinces had their own treasury. The "treasurers which are beyond the river" referred to here would have been that which was on the west side of the Euphrates River.

Ezra 7:22 Unto an hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much.

The "hundred talents" would be close to 4 tons in weight. A "hundred measures" would be close to 750 bushels. One "hundred baths" would be close to 600 gallons.

The wheat, oil, and salt were used in the grain offerings (Lev. 2:1-2, 7, 13). The "wine" was used for drink offerings (Lev. 23:13).

Ezra 7:23 Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?

Even a pagan king knows the work of God should be "diligently done".

Artaxerxes had enough sense to know anyone who failed to do the will of God would suffer His "wrath". He knew he did not want the wrath of God on him or his kingdom. He had more sense than many people who live today. So many believe they can live as they please with no consequences. There is very little fear of God in our day. It used to be that even the worse of the sinners had a respect for God and the house of God. But, that has totally changed in the last few years.

This also reveals at least part of the king's motive for being generous to Ezra and the people of God. Believing in many gods caused him to try to appease any, and all, gods. He felt as though the funds he gave was a good investment against the wrath of God.

In verses 24-26, Ezra was given legal rights to enforce the law of God.

Ezra 7:24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

Artaxerxes declared that all priests and workers in the temple be exempt from paying taxes.

Ezra 7:25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not.

The letter in which Artaxerxes' decree embedded was addressed to Ezra.

Ezra was to set up "magistrates and judges" who would have authority over civil matters in the land. All those who professed the Jewish religion would be under the jurisdiction of these magistrates and judges.

Ezra was also to teach the "laws" of God to those who did not know them.

The words, "that is in thine hand" refer to the fact that God had given Ezra wisdom and the ability to carry it out. God had put it in his heart and it was revealed through his hands (cf. Ps. 78:72).

Ezra 7:26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

Artaxerxes not only gave Ezra the authority to teach the people, but he also gave him the authority to punish those who did not observe the law. They did not have the authority to write new laws but were to make certain the law of God was obeyed. What good is a law when there is no punishment for those who violate it? This authority included the right to banish, confiscate goods, imprison, and even put to death the guilty. What a responsibility.

The "law of the king" was that which was contained in this decree. Any matters not included in the Jewish law was to be handled according to the "law of the king".

Ezra 7:27 Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem:

At this point, the Hebrew language is used once again.

This verse is simply a sudden burst of gratitude. Ezra had to take a moment to shout about the goodness of his God. Godly men recognize God's work in every event. They appreciate God's goodness and know they should not be quiet about it.

Ezra 7:28 And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

Ezra thanked the Lord for touching the heart of the king in verse 27. Here, he thanked God for the "mercy" God had shown him personally. He knew it was the mercy of God that had stirred the heart of the king and caused him to assist the people of God in such a manner. There was no way this was just the kind heart of a good man. God had stirred the heart of Cyrus, now He was doing the same with Artaxerxes (Pro. 21:1). We must look beyond the people in our lives and see the God who is working.

Ezra spoke of that which he was able to accomplish. He "*gathered together*" the men who went with him. However, he was not bragging about something he had done. He was expressing his amazement that God would do such a thing through him. Whatever desire, courage, persuasion, or accomplishments he had done were by the grace of God, and he knew it.

EZRA'S COMRADES 8:1-20

Chapter eight describes the journey of Ezra and those who chose to go with him to Jerusalem. Ezra retells the details of what was summarized in Ezra 7:1-10.

Ezra had the authority and the money, but he needed some people to help him. He could not do what God wanted by himself. This story sounds so familiar. Many churches have the buildings and the funds but lack the people to do the work of God. Thank the Lord, Ezra was not alone in his desire to return to the land. God gave him some comrades who were willing to stand with him and to follow the Lord.

Of course, our theme of this study of Ezra has been about the need to get back to what we used to be. We have been talking about our road to restoration. As the Lord called His people back to Jerusalem and the temple, our heavenly Father is calling His children back to a wholehearted life of love and service to Him. This move back to God may start with one person, as it did with Zerubbabel and Ezra. But, if that one person will heed to call of God, the movement will spread to others. May such a move take place in our day. There will be others involved with us on our road to restoration. We must recognize the fact that God is the one working through these people. We should accept the help provided by their connection with us and appreciate God putting them in our lives.

In spite of the wonderful move of God, many of the Jews still decided to stay in Babylon. They were content to live their lives as they were. So is the case with most believers today. The desire for a close walk with the Lord is rare indeed.

Verses 1-14 contain the list of those who went with Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem. It lists the heads of their father's houses. Many of these were family members of the ones who returned with Zerubbabel.

Ezr 8:1 These are now the chief of their fathers, and this is the genealogy of them that went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king.

The word "*chief*" means "head". So, the following is a list of the heads of the families.

Ezra 8:2-14 Of the sons of Phinehas; Gershom: of the sons of Ithamar; Daniel: of the sons of David; Hattush. Of the sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty. Of the sons of Pahathmoab; Elihoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him two hundred males. Of the sons of Shechaniah; the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males. Of the sons also of Adin; Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males. And of the sons of Elam; Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males. And of the sons of Shephatiah; Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him fourscore males. Of the sons of Joab; Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males. And of the sons of Shelomith; the son of Josiphiah, and with him an hundred and threescore males. And of the sons of Bebai; Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty and eight males. And of the sons of Azgad; Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him an hundred and ten males. And of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names are these, Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them threescore males. Of the sons also of Bigvai; Uthai, and Zabbud, and with them seventy males.

The total number of adult males was 1,496. There would be 18 heads of families and 258 Levites who would join later (Ezra 8:15-20), making the total number of males 1,772. With women and children, a reasonable estimate would be somewhere between five to six thousand who joined this group and returned to Jerusalem. This was a considerable less amount than the almost 50,000 who returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:64-65).

It is astounding how few chose to return to Jerusalem with Ezra. We must remember, this was more than a

sight-seeing trip, it was a call from God. Why were so few willing to obey this call? The reason then is the same as today. They were comfortable where they were. They were not interested in the difficult journey and the sacrifice it required. They had no desire to give up their lifestyle. The years in Babylon had caused them to lose their vision of doing something great for God. They had forgotten who they were. They had forgotten how they were the chosen people of a powerful God. Their God wanted to use them greatly in the world they lived, but somehow, they had forgotten that. And unfortunately, so have we.

Ezra 8:15 And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi.

The time to embark on their journey was drawing closer. They gathered by the Ahava River. The place and the river had the same name.

They stayed in "tents for three days". No doubt this was to give Ezra time to examine the situation and make sure all things were ready for the journey. Good planning is vital for a successful mission. Jesus talked about counting the cost before we embark on a mission (cf. Lk. 14:28).

It was a good thing that Ezra did this final check before they left, for having examined the group, he discovered there were priests among the group but no Levites. As mentioned before (Ezra 6:20), the Levites were different than the priests. Their tasks in the temple may have been of less importance than those of the priests but they were absolutely necessary for the temple to function properly. So, to say the least, it was essential that there be some of the Levites in this group.

Even though the decree Artaxerxes had given mentioned the priests and Levites specifically (7:13), none seemed to see the importance of going with Ezra. We are not told, but perhaps the Levites felt like their job was not important enough to return to Jerusalem. The volunteer list is pretty short when it comes to less desirable jobs around the church. But, the fact is, there are no unimportant jobs in the service of our Lord.

Whatever their excuse, this failure of the Levites was a significant one. They were supposed to be the spiritual leaders among the people. They should have been at the front of the line when it came time to return to Jerusalem.

It would have been easy for Ezra to just give up at this point. It would seem that if anyone would want to be a part of this group, it would be the Levites. They were men called of God to do a service for Him. But, Ezra did not let it discourage him to the point of giving up. He kept praying, trusting, and working.

This delay would cost them nine days for they would eventually leave on the twelfth day of the month (Ezra 8:31).

Our road to restoration will not be smooth and easy. We should expect difficulties, disappointments, detours, and delays. We must not let these hinder us.

In verses 16-20, Ezra addressed the problem relating to the lack of Levites.

Ezra 8:16-17 Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Elnathan, men of understanding. And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God.

Ezra called for nine leaders and two men of understanding from the group who were gathered with him. Their mission was to try to recruit some Levites to join them in the trip back to Jerusalem. Ezra instructed these men to go to a man named "Iddo" in a place called "Casiphia". It is uncertain where Casiphia was or who Iddo was. We are told Iddo was "the chief at the place of Casiphia", so we know he was a man of influence. They were to speak to Iddo and "his brethren the Nethinims".

Ezra 8:18-20 And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren, eighteen; And Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty; Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name.

These men were able to recruit a total of 258 men. There were 18 from Sherebiah's family, 20 from Jeshaiiah's family, and 220 "Nethinims". As commented on earlier (2:43), The Nethinims were the descendants of the Gibeonites who tricked Joshua (Josh. 9:26-27). Joshua had made them woodcutters and water carriers. They did the same type of work in the temple. They cleaned the blood and gore from the sacrifices. It was a lowly, but very necessary, job.

Once again Ezra mentioned "the good hand of our God". He knew God had answered prayer and provided what would be needed for the task ahead.

We should have a great deal of respect for Ezra at this point. He saw the need and was willing to wait on God. He did not simply surge ahead and hope for the best. He was willing to do what it took to do it the right way. A true work of God will take time. There are times when waiting accomplishes more than working.

EZRA'S CONFIDENCE 8:21-23

Though God would use many men to assist Ezra, his confidence was in the Lord and not in man. This is made evident by the fact that he proclaimed a fast before they embarked on their trip to Jerusalem.

Ezra 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

Ezra proclaimed a fast by the river of Ahava. They not only fasted, but they prayed (8:23). I believe Ezra proclaimed a fast for at least three reasons.

First, Ezra declared a fast that they might examine themselves. The word "*afflict*" means, "to abase or chasten". They spent the time searching their hearts and dealing with anything that might grieve the Lord. They made sure they were right with God and had the right motives for what they were doing. God is interested not just in what we do, but why we do it. Even spiritual activity can be vain when done for the wrong reasons. It becomes nothing more than an empty ritual.

Second, Ezra declared a fast because he recognized the danger involved with the trip to Jerusalem. They fasted and prayed for the Lord's protection.

Third, Ezra declared a fast for the Lord to show them the "*right way*". He recognized their need to be guided by God. This prayer must have been answered for they ended up taking a route that was not the shortest available.

They fasted and prayed for themselves, their "*little ones*", and their "*substance*". It sounds to me like we should pray about everything (Phil. 4:6-7).

Ezra 8:22 For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him.

Ezra refused to ask the king for a band of soldiers to protect them as they traveled towards Jerusalem. Ezra's confidence in the Lord is seen clearly in this verse. I believe we see two important factors here.

One, Ezra believed he could trust God. The trip to Jerusalem would indeed be a dangerous one. Thieves roamed the area seeking anyone they might ambush and rob. It was especially dangerous for Ezra's group because they were carrying all the treasures Artaxerxes had given them.

Two, Ezra saw the importance of protecting his reputation among the unbelievers. He was "*ashamed*" to ask the king to provide a band of soldiers to travel with them and protect them. He had previously spoken of how the great hand of God had provided for them (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18). How could he now request the king's protection? How can a person who claims to have an all-powerful God request the assistance of sinful man? He believed if he was doing the will of God, He would protect him, so he decided to pray and trust God. It is refreshing to see a man who was more concerned about what people think about his God than his own safety. Our testimony among the lost world is so important. We should guard it at all costs.

Ezra 8:23 So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us.

They fasted and prayed and trusted God. The word "*besought*" means to "ask, beg, beseech". It carries with it the idea of striving after. Their prayers were sincere and fervent (cf. Gen. 32:26; Jam. 5:16).

The word, "*intreated*" means, "to listen". God hears the cry of His children (Ex. 2:24; 6:5; 22:23; Ps. 22:5, 24; 79:11; 81:7; 102:20; 138:3). Of course, Ezra would not write these words of this book until after they arrived in Jerusalem, so he was able to say "*he was intreated of us*".

By the way, the Lord did take care of them. Their prayers provided a guard much stronger and able than any army could have provided.

EZRA'S CHOICES 8:24-36

Ezra had some very important decisions to make. They had fasted and prayed to make sure they were spiritually fit for the journey, now they turned to the more practical matters involved with the trip. Ezra knew he needed men he could trust to be in charge of the enormous amount of treasure and the sacred vessels they were carrying to Jerusalem. He certainly needed God's help in selecting these people. If he made a mistake, the entire project could be in jeopardy.

By this time, God had done great things for His people. He had provided miraculously much of what was necessary to complete the full restoration of worship in His house. In the next few verses, we will see Ezra being extremely careful as to how he handled that which God had provided.

Any progress along our road to restoration must be handled carefully (2 Tim. 1:13-14). The devil would love to come in and take it away. We must be alert to his tactics and not allow that to happen. Any choice we make at this point is a critical choice.

Though Ezra's confidence was in his God, he had to trust men to a degree. Actually, he was trusting God for he was depending on God to give him wisdom in handing out assignments.

In verses 24-30, Ezra distributed the items provided by Artaxerxes.

Ezra 8:24 Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them,

The word "chief" means "head" or "leader". The men Ezra chose were those who had shown spiritual leadership qualities. No doubt, these men had demonstrated their love for God by the way they had lived.

Ezra separated them for the task ahead. The word "separated" means "to divide". It has the idea of being different. The bible talks a great deal about the child of God being different than the world (Num. 16:21,26,45; Ezra 6:21; 10:11; Ps. 1:1; 2 Cor. 6:17). If we are going to serve God as we should, we will have to be separated from the world. Being different is not a bad thing. In fact, God says it is a good thing.

However, the "separated" in this instance is more than being separated from the world. These men were separated from the rest of the people of God. They were different than the average believer. Oh, how we need people who are different than the average.

It is interesting to note that there were twelve men chosen but only two were actually named. I believe there is a reason for this. The name "Sherebiah" means "Jehovah has brought heat". Perhaps this served as a reminder to the people of the seventy years of God's judgment they had endured. We should never forget the cost of disobedience. The name "Hashabiah" means "Jehovah has regarded". I believe it served as a reminder to the people that their God had remembered them in their affliction and was working to give them victory. God may whip His children when they disobey, but He certainly forgives, provides and protects them when they genuinely repent. He is willing to put the past in the past.

Then there were "ten of their brethren" who remained nameless. Certainly, this should encourage the many of God's children who never get their names mentioned to keep on serving God. Thank the Lord for those who serve God whether they get recognized or not (1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 6:9). May our Lord increase their number.

Ezra 8:25 And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered:

Ezra "weighed" the valuables to determine exactly what was there. They would weigh it again when they arrived at Jerusalem (v. 33). They were accountable for the exact amount they received.

Ezra handled these valuables very carefully. Certainly, he did so because of their monetary value. But, there was more to it than just what they cost. It was also because these items had been dedicated to the Lord's work, and therefore, were considered sacred. Anything given to the Lord becomes sacred and should be handled carefully.

Ezra 8:26-27 I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents; Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.

The total value of all the items has been estimated to be many millions of dollars.

Ezra "weighed unto their hand". He literally handed over the treasures. Once received, it became their responsibility to protect and deliver what had been entrusted to them.

Ezra 8:28 And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers.

The word, "holy" means "dedicated, hallowed, or consecrated". It speaks of something that has been given to the Lord and His work. Once given, it becomes the property of the Lord and should be used for no reason other than that for which it was given. God dealt severely with Ananias and Sapphira when they promised to give the money from the sale of their property and did not do so (Acts 5:1-11).

There were three reasons mentioned here for why the men should be very careful with the items entrusted to their care. One, the men were "holy". They had given themselves to the service of the Lord. They were to recognize this fact and act accordingly. Two, the "vessels" were holy also. They had been set apart for the Lord's service and should be treated carefully. Three, the silver and gold were a "freewill offering". Someone had willingly given it to be used for the Lord. Their sacrifice deserved the utmost care.

As mentioned, the offering was a "freewill" offering and was given "unto the LORD". We should give our offerings in the same manner. If all we see is the offering plate, the salary of the preacher, and the electric bill being paid, we are missing the significance of what we give. We are giving to the Lord when we give rightly.

Ezra 8:29 Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.

The one and only responsibility of these men was to get these items to Jerusalem safely.

The word, "*Watch*" is an interesting word. It means "to be on lookout". However, it carries with it the idea of "sleepless". It means they were to never drop their guard. Anytime we allow ourselves to be distracted, the devil will be ready to pounce in and take advantage of us.

The word, "*keep*" means, "to hedge about" or "to guard". I believe they did not even let anyone even get close to the items they were carrying.

Ezra was sure to mention to these men the fact that the items they received would be weighed again when they arrived in Jerusalem. A reminder of accountability is always a good idea. We should never forget the fact that one day we will give an account of how we lived our lives for Christ (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). We should live now as we will be glad we did when we stand before the Lord (Mt. 6:19-21).

Verses 30 and 31 summarizes their trip and their arrival in Jerusalem.

Ezra 8:30 So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God.

Receiving the valuables was not anything to be taken lightly. It became their responsibility to guard and deliver safely to Jerusalem the portion they had received. Accepting these funds took a great deal of faith for it made them a target among every thief along the road.

The word, "bring" is interesting. It reminds us that the only way the valuables could go to Jerusalem was for these men to go to Jerusalem. If they did not make it, neither would the items needed for the temple.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were to go to the house of God. The person who loves the Lord will love His house (Heb. 10:25).

Ezra summarized their journey in verses 31-32.

Ezra 8:31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way.

This verse should not be read through hurriedly. Ezra knew very well how they made it to Jerusalem safely. Once again, Ezra said, the "*hand of our God was upon us*". It certainly is a reminder of another time when God carried His people on a journey through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

This was a large group that included the very young and the very old. They were not a well trained and disciplined military unit. They were common people and were not equipped for difficult travel. Yet, they made it through the difficult travel, the danger of the thieves, and arrived safely at Jerusalem.

The word "*delivered*" means, "to deliver". But, it also means "to pluck". This seems to suggest that there were indeed those along the way that desired to attack, rob, and kill them, but God would not allow them to do so. He literally plucked His people out of the danger. God said, "You aren't getting my children".

Ezra was quick to point out that it was the hand of their God who led them on their journey and it was God Himself who delivered them safely in Jerusalem. He did not want them to forget how they had made the journey and who it was that took care of them along the way. We must never forget how our God walks with us daily and protects us along our journey.

Ezra 8:32 And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days.

They finally arrived safely at Jerusalem and took three days, probably to rest.

Ezra 8:33 Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them was Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, Levites;

On the fourth day after their arrival, they turned the treasures over to the officiating priests of the temple.

The silver and the gold was once again weighed out to make certain nothing had been lost along the way. Ezra made certain to hold them all accountable for what had been entrusted to their care. It is wise indeed to be open and accountable with God's funds. It protects the name of our God and those who handle His money.

No doubt, these men gained a good deal of respect among the people of God.

Ezra 8:34 By number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time.

The amounts were written down to make certain of its accuracy. This may have been written into a public record like the decree of Cyrus had been (Ezra 1:1).

Ezra 8:35 Also the children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats for a sin offering: all this was a burnt offering unto the LORD.

They "*offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel*". Zerubbabel offered the same types of offering upon their

arrival in Jerusalem (Ezra 6:17). These sacrifices were for the atonement of their sin. We must remember, these people were returning to Jerusalem in an attempt to become what God wanted them to be. The first step, now that they had access to the temple, was to deal with their sin.

They recognized the importance of being thoroughly right with God. We should do the same. First, we should make sure we are truly saved. Then, we should make sure there is nothing between us and our Savior.

To be able to worship in a temple had been a lifelong dream. This was a totally new experience for many of them. None of them had seen the new temple and some of them had never seen any temple.

Once again, we see how it was "twelve" bullocks that were offered (cf. 6:17). These were probably one for each tribe of Israel. As mentioned before, even though this group consisted primarily of those of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, no doubt there were individuals from all twelve tribes present. No longer would two tribes go one way and ten go the other. The division of the northern and southern kingdom was done away with. Once again, there is unity among the people of Israel. God said this would happen (Ezk. 37:22). He was doing a great work among His people and it was no small matter.

Ezra 8:36 And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

They delivered the instructions of Artaxerxes to his officials on the west side of the river. Undoubtedly, these were simply the facts about the authority the king had given to Ezra (cf. Ezra 7:25). The king's officials were to follow his instructions and assist Ezra.

Even the enemies of Ezra and the people of God assisted them. The words, "*furthered the people*" means the king's men gave support to Ezra and his people. It is amazing when God keeps even the enemies of His people under control.

True revival will not only have an effect on the church, it can spread out into the world. True revival will reach out and save the man who owns the neighborhood bar. And, guess what, he will close the bar. We hear a lot about trying to change our country. The best way to do that is to have revival in our churches. And that kind of revival must start in our own heart.

EZRA'S CONCERN 9:1-4

Chapters nine and ten are filled with heartbreak and happiness. Heartbreak because the people who should have been serving God with joy had allowed the sin of the world to infiltrate their lives. Happiness because they were willing to deal with their sin, get right with God, and obtain His favor once again.

Ezra probably came back to Jerusalem expecting to find the people earnestly serving the Lord. Sadly, as we will see, the opposite was true. God would use Ezra to convict the hearts of His worldly people. He would be the human focal point of a great spiritual awakening. In less than five months (Ezra 7:9; 10:9) God would bring about a mighty revival among His people.

Ezra 9:1 Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

The words, "*when these things were done*" take us back to the preceding verses that tell us about the people returning to the land from captivity, the vessels being returned to the temple, and sacrifices being offered (Ezra 9:36). So much seems to be going right. Then, the bible takes us abruptly from the mountaintop of worship to the valley of sin.

Ezra arrived at Jerusalem to find the temple completed and the people attending regularly. At first glance, all seemed well. But soon, Ezra was informed about a serious spiritual problem among the people of Israel.

The "*princes*" were some of the men who had returned with Zerubbabel and had established themselves as leaders among the people of Israel.

The words, "*came to me*" reveals the fact that Ezra was seen as a leader. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, by the authority given him by Artaxerxes, but especially by the will of God, Ezra was established as a leader among the Jews.

These leaders told Ezra the people of Israel had not kept themselves separate from the pagan people who lived in the land. This sin was widespread, at least some among the "*people of Israel*", the "*priests*", and the "*Levites*" were guilty. Sin always spreads like wildfire. A little leaven affects the whole (Mt. 16:6; 1 Cor. 5:6; 15:33; Gal. 5:9).

Thank the Lord, someone was concerned enough to tell Ezra about the problem. They recognized the danger of allowing sin to continue and they saw the need to deal with it. Unfortunately, the pastor is usually

the last to know about problems going on in the church. By the time he is informed, the problem is much bigger and more difficult to handle.

Ezra 9:2 For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.

They had gotten close enough to the pagan people of the land to where they had chosen wives for themselves, and their sons, from their families. These were the same people who had rejected the heathens when they first arrived in Judah (cf. Ezra 4:1-3). We are not told the exact details but somehow they had abandoned their convictions about separation. As a result, the holy had become unholy.

The danger of mingling with those who despise the things of God cannot be overstated. God had always warned His people to avoid the ungodly (Gen. 34:14; Ex. 34:11-16; Dt. 12:30-31; Mal. 2:10-12). When talking to His people about entering the land of promise, He not only told them to not mingle with the ungodly people of the land, He told them to "utterly destroy" them (Dt. 7:2-6). We cannot play in the devil's playpen without getting dirty.

God's children were called the "holy seed" for a reason. They were to be a people dedicated to God and His law, and different than the world (Gen. 17:4-14; Ex. 23:2; Dt. 7:6, 18:9-14; Josh. 23:13; Mt. 6:24; Jn. 15:19; Rom. 12:2; Gal. 1:4, 6:14; Eph. 5:11; Jam. 4:4; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). But, instead of being separated from the pagan world, they were uniting with it. The cry of the modern church is to "identify" with the world. They claim we will reach more if we show them we are like them. However, the thing that draws the world to the church is the fact that we are different.

The intermarriage had an all-encompassing effect on their lives. Its effect could be seen in their spiritual, business, and social lives. Sin always affects every part of our lives.

They were not yet guilty of idolatry, but if the problem was not dealt with, it was certain they would be. We will, sooner or later, do like those we associate with.

The word, "*chief*" means, "first". Sadly, the leaders were the first to take part in this sin. They were supposed to be spiritual examples and lead others to walk with God. Yet, they had inspired the people to compromise and do that which displeased God. They had led the people, but they had led them in the wrong direction. We all are leaders in some form or fashion. How we live will affect those around us.

God had ended the captivity of His people and taken them back into the land of promise that they might return to His law and live in a manner that would honor Him. But, they had failed in at least two ways. They allowed themselves to be influenced and they failed to be an influence. They let the world change them instead of them changing the world. God always wants His people to change the world and not the opposite. No matter where we are, God expects us to get out the gospel.

They were not only turning their backs on the direct commands of their God, but they were also forsaking their Jewish heritage. Millions of Jews had given their lives to keep the Jewish belief system alive. And now, in two generations, everything they had lived and died for, was all but forgotten. We also can leave our ancient landmarks if we are not careful. We must not forget those who have blazed the spiritual trail before us. May we do the same for those behind us.

One of the saddest things about this verse we find in the words, "*and for their sons*".

First, this tells us this sin had been going on for a long time and they had not dealt with it. Sin does not just go away. It must be dealt with severely and violently rooted out of our lives. Our flesh craves the things of this world and will not let go easily. Our old man does not want to die.

Second, this tells us about the influence of sin. The influence of one generation to another is astounding. God warned His people about their influence on the next generation. He said, "*Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me*" (Ex 20:5). This does not mean, as some have suggested, that God puts a curse on the children and grandchildren of the parents who sin. It means, the sinful actions of the parents are many times repeated by their offspring, which forces God to deal with their sin just as He had to do with their parents.

Their compromised lifestyle had become the accepted norm. This shows us the downward spiral of sin. First, sin is allowed. That which was once considered as sinful is allowed. Second, sin is accepted. That which has been allowed becomes the norm and is eventually considered as acceptable. Once this happens, those who dare to speak against it will be resisted because it has become the norm. The spiritual plight of our day is judging ourselves by how everyone else is living and not by the Word of God.

Most people are satisfied with the status quo. Average, to the average believer, is totally acceptable. But, somehow, I do not believe average is acceptable to our God (Dt. 11:13; 13:3; Josh. 22:5; 1 Sam. 12:20, 24; Jer. 29:13; Lk. 10:27).

But, Ezra was not the average believer. He had spent a great deal time in the Old Testament (Ezra 7:10)

and he knew God was grieved with the manner in which the people were living. If there is any need among the church of today, it is the need to get in the Bible, find out what it says, and start doing it.

The failure of the people was a failure of their handling of the Word of God. Ezra's devotion to the study of God's Word brought about an awakening in his heart and a true revival in his spirit.

9:3 And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.

Ezra found a place to sit near the temple (cf. Ezra 10:1, 6).

The "*garment*" was an inner garment and the "*mantle*" was an outer garment worn like a coat on the outside of the clothing.

The ripping of the garment was a sign of extreme grief or anger (Num. 14:6; Josh. 7:6; Est. 4:1; Job 1:20). The shaving, or plucking, of hair from the head or beard, was a sign of terrible grief (Job 1:20; Jer. 7:29). The pain caused by plucking the hair was a sign of the inner pain of the heart.

Ezra's response to the sin may seem to be an overreaction to some. However, sin should not be taken lightly. There are way too many who have become comfortable with the condition of the church of today.

The word, "*astonied*" means, "stunned" or "amazed". Ezra was stunned that the people who had just spent seventy years in captivity could turn back to sin so quickly. How could they be so ungrateful to the God who had been so good to them? And, how could they be so unconcerned about the judgment that was certainly going to come eventually? After such a time of chastening, you would think they would have learned their lesson. The sad truth is, most of us never learn.

The word "*astonied*" carries with it the idea of being devastated or destroyed. Ezra was not only shocked about what he saw, but it broke his heart. There may be times when people are shocked by the sin around them, but very seldom is anyone really devastated about it. Like Ezra, we should be broken over the sin of our generation.

Ezra "*sat down*". There will be times when the best thing we can do, is to do nothing. If we act too quickly, we may make matters worse. We should always, stop, pray, and then do what God says.

He was heartbroken but Ezra did not give up. He would take the necessary actions to get the people right and obtain the favor of God once again. The joy of the Lord would return to the people of God, but only after they dealt with their sin and turned back to God. In other words, before they could get back to where they used to be, they had to start doing what they used to do.

Ezra 9:4 Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

Thank the Lord, Ezra was not the only one who was grieved about the sinful condition of the people. Those who were burdened gathered with Ezra.

The word, "*trembled*" means "fearful". But, what caused this reaction? It wasn't Ezra's dramatic tearing of his clothes and ripping out his hair. It was the Spirit of God stirring their hearts and awakening them to the reality of the situation. Oh, how we need that same move of God among our churches today.

Notice, they trembled "*at the words of the God of Israel*". The Word of God spoken by the man of God touched their hearts. God uses the preaching of the Word to change lives (1 Cor. 1:21; 2 Tim. 4:17; Acts 2:37).

They had a healthy fear of God and His Word. Their respect for God's Word produced their hatred for sin (Ps. 119:11). The world tells us guilt produces unhealthy stress and should be avoided. Certainly, there is an unhealthy guilt that can be harmful, but guilt is also a vital part of the work of God. He confronts us with our failure and we recognize our guiltiness (2 Sam. 12:13; Isa. 64:6; Ps. 51; 2 Cor. 7:10;). We must not forget, the same God who shows us our guilt is the one who willingly forgives us when we confess to Him (Jn. 5:14, 8:11; Eph. 2:4-5; 1 Jn. 1:9).

The people were described as those who had "*been carried away*". They were still known as the people who had been in captivity. Our sin can be forgiven, but we will carry the taint of our past sin on our reputation for the rest of our lives.

Once again, Ezra used the word "*astonied*". His emotions were a mixture of shock, grief, and fear. Shock because he found it hard to believe these people would do such a thing. Grief because he knew their sin broke the heart of God, and fear because he knew God would not let this sin go on without punishing them.

Ezra and those who had gathered sat until the time of "*evening sacrifice*".

EZRA'S CONFESSION 9:5-15

Ezra does what the people should have already done long ago. He confessed the sin of the people. Even

though Ezra was not personally guilty, he willingly associated himself with the sin of the people.

Verses 5-15 record an intercessory prayer of Ezra.

Ezra's prayer revealed a man who knew the Lord. In his prayer, he referred to God's grace (v. 8), mercy and reviving, (v. 9) holiness (v. 13), anger (v. 14), and His righteousness (v. 15).

There was no actual request in his prayer. He simply stated the fact of their miserable condition and left it with the Lord. Of course, his desire for God's mercy was evident even though he did not state it in actual words.

He prayed aloud so the people heard what he was praying. This was not one to the "sermon" prayers we might hear from some preachers today. He was praying from his heart and was not concerned about anyone hearing him. Yet, there were some who did hear him and were touched. His prayer was pleading to God and instructing the people at the same time.

This is one of the greatest intercessory prayers in the bible (cf. Ex. 30:31-32; Dan. 9:1-20; Neh. 1:4-11; Job 42:10). Jesus spent a great deal of his very valuable time in prayer for his disciples (Lk. 22:32; Jn. 17:1-26). If a leader is to do anything for the people, he is to pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1; Eph. 6:18). He can do nothing greater for the people than to pray for them. Therefore, he can fail them no greater than to fail to pray for them (1 Sam. 12:23; Isa. 59:16).

Intercessory prayer is one of the greatest tools of the child of God. We can pray for people who are beyond our reach, who refuse our words, and who reject our God. Take it from someone who tried unsuccessfully to outrun the prayers of his mother, intercessory prayer works.

Ezra 9:5 And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God,

The "evening sacrifice" was the time when the people gathered for evening worship (Ex. 29:41). More than likely, Ezra had sat several hours in grief.

The time came when Ezra "arose". There is a time to pray and there is a time to act. We need the Spirit of God to help us to discern the difference.

He was heartbroken, but he did not give up. It would have been easy for him to simply walk away. But, he was concerned enough to do what was required to fix the problem.

Ezra fell on his knees to pray. The Bible has a great deal to say about praying on our knees (1 Kg. 8:54; Ps. 95:6; Dan. 6:10; Mt. 17:14; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; Eph. 3:14). And yet, we are not required to kneel while praying. The bible speaks of standing (2 Chr. 20:5, 13, 1 Sam. 1:26, Job 30:20; Mt. 6:5; Mk. 11:25), sitting (2 Kgs. 4:38; 2 Sam. 7:18; Ezk. 8:1; 33:31), lying down (1 Kgs. 1:47; Ps. 4:4; 63:6), and being prostrate (Num. 16:45; Josh. 7:6; 2 Sam. 14:4, 22; 18:14; 1 Kgs. 1:47; Mk. 14:35) when we pray. So we see, it is not our position that matters, it is our heart.

Ezra also "spread out" his hands while he was praying. The Old Testament saint would commonly spread their hands toward heaven while praying. This was a gesture that demonstrated their surrender. It also was a posture of a beggar depending totally on the person of whom they were requesting a gift. It was an indication of their complete dependence in the Lord.

Ezra's hands were open. That meant he was hiding nothing. He was completely open before the Lord. It also meant he was holding on to nothing. He had one hope, and only one hope, that God would have mercy and hear his request.

His grief led him to pray but his prayer led him to do something about the problem. He began his move toward God by praying. However, he did not pray only. We should always pray (Lk. 18:1) but there comes a time when we need to do more than pray (cf. Josh. 7:10). To do something without prayer is foolish but to pray, and do nothing, is useless.

Ezra 9:6 And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.

His prayer revealed his humility and contrition. His hands may have been raised, but his "face" was down. He was too "ashamed" to even lift his face toward God. He came before the Lord in complete humiliation and shame because of the condition of himself and the people. He recognized the awfulness of the sin of the people of God and his own unworthiness to enter the presence of God. We are admonished to enter boldly into the presence of God (Heb. 13:6), but when we think we are worthy to prance into His presence, we are in trouble.

Ezra said, "I am ashamed and blush". God had forgiven their sin so often and yet they had continued to break His Word. Ezra was actually ashamed to ask for mercy again. But, God's mercy is for such a person. God's mercy is for the person who can not earn it and does not deserve it.

The word, "ashamed" carries with it the idea of being "disappointed". Ezra was not only ashamed of the

actions of the people but he was disappointed in them.

The word, "*blush*" means to be embarrassed, but it also means "to wound". Ezra was not only ashamed of the sin of the people, but he was also truly hurt about it. We must remember, these were not strangers, they were his family. It changes the entire situation when it is your family who has walked away from the will of God.

Notice, Ezra said, "*our*" iniquities" and not their "*their*" iniquities. Even though he was still in Babylon when this sin was being committed and was not personally guilty, he included himself in the blame. He saw the people of Israel as one. They enjoyed God's covenants as a united people, therefore they would bear the brunt of God's wrath as one person.

God views sin as personal, but also as public. We are held accountable and suffer the consequences for the sin we commit personally. However, we will also suffer the consequences for the sin committed by the group we associate with. The consequences of sin in a church will be experienced by all the members. All the citizens of the country that sins will pay the price thereof. In my opinion, this is certainly true of the United States. At present, our country endorses homosexuality as being an acceptable lifestyle, considers abortion a compassionate form of birth control, has removed prayer from its schools, and views Christianity as a blight on society. Every citizen of such a country will suffer the consequences that will come from the wrath of a holy God. There is spiritual collateral damage. We must be careful about the groups we associate with. We must also, be careful about the influence we contribute to the group we associate with.

Ezra said their iniquities had "*increased*". Sin is never satisfied, it always worsens (Ps. 38:4).

Ezra 9:7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.

Ezra looked at the history of the people of Israel and saw the spots of sin from the "*days of our fathers*" unto "*this day*". They had learned nothing from the failure of their parents. So often, even though they see the damage done by their sin, the children repeat the failures of the parents.

Their sin had been widespread throughout the entire population. Even their kings (civil leaders), and their priests (spiritual leaders) had been guilty.

Because of their sin, God had delivered them into the hands of their enemies. He had judged them in various ways in an effort to turn them back to Him. They would repent for a short while but would always return to their sin.

The words, "*as it is this day*" mean they were, at that present time, suffering the consequences of their past sin. Even as Ezra was speaking, there were still some of the people of Israel in Babylon. The full blessing from God that could have been theirs was being withheld. So often, we associate God's judgment by the bad things that come our way. Very seldom, do we recognize the fact that His judgment also comes by us not experiences the good things He has for us.

Ezra used wisdom in placing blame. He did not blame the world for mingling with the people of Israel, he blamed the people of Israel for mingling with the world. Notice also, He did not blame God. If we are suffering the consequences of a sinful life, it is our fault, and we cannot blame God.

Ezra was speaking from the voice of experience. He had been in Babylon and in captivity himself. He knew personally what it was to suffer the consequences of sin. And, he did not want to have to experience it again.

Ezra 9:8 And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

The "*little space*" of grace refers to the limited time God was giving them to get right with Him. God will not wait forever.

Ezra recognized the fact that the people of God were in a dangerous place. God had given them a short span of grace. He drew a word picture to make his point. He talks about a remnant, a nail, a light, and a reviving.

The "*remnant*" referred to how God had touched the hearts of His people and a relatively small group had escaped Babylon, made it to the land.

The "*nail*" speaks of security and stability. Nails were driven in the ground to secure their tents. This refers to the fact that God had established them in the land of promise. It was like one tent peg being driven in the ground. It wasn't much, but it was a beginning. Ezra may have had the temple in mind when he spoke of a nail. Like a peg that secured a tent, the temple was that place where the people could find stability and security.

The "*lighten our eyes*" refers to how God had shined His light and shown them their sinful condition. It may have been a small beam of light, but it was better than no light. They had been in the darkness of sin for

years. Now, God wanted to bring them into the light.

The "little reviving" refers to the fact that God had stirred the hearts of some of the people. It may have been a little stirring, but it was better than nothing. Full revival had not yet come, but it was available and the Lord was willing and able.

The little space of grace wasn't much but it was a beginning. It certainly was more than they had before. And, the God who gave this beginning was willing to do more if they would just obey Him. During this period of grace, they had to be careful to listen intently to God and obey His voice for that which He had given them could easily be taken away.

And, so it is in our day. Every once in a while, God will open heaven and give His people a bit of revival. It may not seem like much, to begin with, but it is real and it is a promise of more to come if we will guard it. When this move of God begins, we must treat it tenderly as a newborn babe. We must nurse it and let it grow.

This verse definitely reminds us of God's grace. We all face problems that are too difficult to handle. Yet, the Lord has provided a fresh supply of grace to see us through.

Ezra 9:9 For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

Ezra was counting the blessings of God. As the songwriter said, "Count your blessings, name them one by one". He goes on to say, "And it will surprise you what the Lord has done". This is exactly what Ezra did. He remembered how they had been "bondmen" in Babylon, how God had "not forsaken" them, how God had extended "mercy" by touching the hearts of the "kings of Persia" to set them free, how God had "revived" them spiritually and given them a desire to return to Jerusalem, how God had provided the means for them to rebuild the "house of God", and how He gave them a "wall" of protection through it all. He recognized the fact that, if it had not been for God, they would have still been in bondage in Babylon.

Some believe the "wall" Ezra spoke here was referring to the wall around the city that Nehemiah would build later. However, it seems more likely Ezra was simply referring to the wall of protection God had given His people. It was not the first time God had protected His people (Ex. 14:19-20).

Ezra 9:10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,

Ezra knew there was nothing he could say in defense of the actions of God's people. They had messed up and there was no explanation for it. There are no excuses for the disobedience of a child of God because He has given us what we need to overcome.

They had forsaken the "commandments" of God. Perhaps this is the worse part of the whole situation. They did not do what they did in ignorance. They knew what they were doing was against God's Word, but they did it anyway. Certainly, the same is, for the most part, true today. We do that which we know God forbids.

Ezra 9:11 Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness.

God had warned them about the people and their evil influence.

The words "unclean" and "filthiness" are the same Hebrew word. It is used when referring to the monthly cycle of women and speaks of the most offensive of uncleanness.

The word, "filled" means "to be full". The sin, like a mighty flood, had spread throughout the land, affecting every area, from one end to the other.

Ezra 9:12 Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever.

God had warned His people years earlier about the danger of becoming connected to ungodly people (Dt. 7:1-6). He not only warned them, But He also commanded them to not mingle with the ungodly. Yet, they had totally ignored God's warning and command.

Somehow, they had convinced themselves that marrying into the pagan families would bring them "peace" and "wealth" and make the people of Judah "strong". God assured them the opposite would be true. Our enemy also tries to convince us the way to happiness is through worldly things. How foolish we are when we believe his lies. Solomon was a man of great wisdom (1 Kgs. 4:29-34), but his poor choice of women turned his heart from his God (1 Kgs. 11:4).

Ezra 9:13 And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this;

Ezra was reminded of how the people had sinned repeatedly before God sent them into captivity. God

could have left them there and allowed them to be assimilated into the pagan society. But, He brought them out and gave them their identity again.

Ezra saw God's goodness in two distinct ways. First, He had not punished them worse than He did. They deserved worse punishment than they had received. Second, God had blessed them abundantly by delivering them from their bondage. When we really see our sin as it is, we will cease our whining about how difficult our circumstances are and start rejoicing about how good God has been to us.

Ezra 9:14 Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldest not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?

The word, "affinity" means, "marriage".

Ezra feared the results of further disobedience among the people. It would do us well to have the same type of fear. Ezra concluded that God would be completely just in totally destroying the people of Israel. We know God has promised to never forsake His people, whether it be Israel (Rom. 11:25-29), the church (Mt. 16:18; Acts 5:39), or individual Christians (Jn. 10:28-29; Rom. 8:35-39).

Ezra's description of the people of Israel fits the entirety of mankind today (Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 5:19). I am so glad God does not deal with us as we deserve.

Ezra 9:15 O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

Ezra cried out to the "LORD God of Israel". This title reminds us of the God who keeps His promises. The people of Israel desperately needed a God who would keep His promises because they had failed Him so miserably. Who do you know who keeps their promises to the very people who wrong them?

As mentioned earlier, there was no actual request in this prayer. However, Ezra's desire for God's mercy was very evident throughout the prayer. He longed for God to continue the work of revival He had begun. He recognized their need for forgiveness for a further work of revival.

EZRA'S COMMITMENT 10:1-4

Chapter ten deals with the results of Ezra's confession.

Ezra 10:1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

While Ezra "prayed" and "confessed" in front of the temple, a "very great" crowd gathered. This being at the time of the evening sacrifice (9:4-5), the temple would have been crowded. Also, the word of Ezra's brokenness probably had spread throughout the city and surrounding countryside.

The word, "casting" means "to fall". We were already told he went to his knees (Ezra 9:5). It would seem that he eventually prostrated himself on the ground. This reveals his absolute anguish over the situation. Those who desire a move of God for their friends and family must first experience it for themselves.

We should remember that Ezra was not your average man on the street. He was a holy priest under the authority of God and a great ruler under the authority of King Artaxerxes. His presence demanded attention and respect. And yet, instead of a man filled with pride and demanding allegiance from the people, we find a man broken and contrite, begging His God for forgiveness for himself, and his people.

His actions had an extraordinary effect on those around him. In hearing and seeing Ezra's confession, they recognized their own need to repent. The effect of a godly example can be astounding. They "wept very sore" because they were broken over their sin. They were deeply affected at the thought of how they had broken the heart of God. No doubt, they were also fearful of what God might do if they continued in their sin.

A move of God was taking place. True brokenness over sin comes only when God breaks the heart of the guilty party. Genuine confession is the natural result of true conviction. The convicted person will have no peace until they have confessed and repented of their wrong.

The crowd that gathered consisted of "men and women and children". All of these had been affected by the actions of the people of Israel. They would also be a part of the solution to the problem.

Ezra 10:2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.

A man named, "Shechaniah" approached Ezra admitting the sin of the people. The word, "strange" means, "foreign". They had married the idol-worshiping Gentile women who lived in the land. God had warned His people about intermarriage (Ex. 34:11-16; Dt. 7:1-4; 22:10). Even the mingling of livestock (Lev. 19:19) the sowing of different seeds (Dt. 22:9-11) and the wearing of different types of fabric (Dt. 22:11) was prohibited. The New Testament also speaks against marrying outside of our faith (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14).

God has always been very protective of His children. He not only told Israel to avoid the pagans, at one point, He told them to put to death anyone trying to seduce them into idolatry (Dt. 13:6-11).

Though Shechaniah is not found in the list of the guilty (10:18-44), he recognized the severity of their sin and the seriousness of the situation. Shechaniah's father, Jehiel, his father's brothers, and five sons of his grandfather Elam were included in the list of those who were guilty (10:26). No doubt, that helped to make this a very important matter to him.

In spite of it all, Shechaniah realized there was still "*hope in Israel*". He realized the present working of the Holy Spirit and the brokenness of the people was an indication that God had not forsaken them. There was still hope. They had sinned terribly and their sin had caused a situation that would not be easily corrected. However, the good grace of God was present to forgive and restore them. God was willing to assist them in their effort to right their wrongs. It would not be easy, but it was possible.

So it is with us getting back to what we used to be. Some have strayed quite far and have allowed sin to get control of their lives. They will have to pay a great price, but God is willing and able to help anyone who will do as He says.

It was not a time to be in despair. It was a time of hope and action. It was time to do what it took to find the favor of God once again. Our God is willing to forgive those who go to the far country. The prodigal's father is waiting for his returning son (cf. Lk. 15:20-24).

Ezra 10:3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

The word, "*covenant*" means, "an agreement". Shechaniah suggested they agree to "*put away*" their wives and those "*born of them*". The words, "*put away*" mean, "to go". It means they would divorce their wives and send them and their children away. It is unlikely these wives and children were completely forsaken. More than likely, they were provided for in some manner and returned to the homes of their fathers. As we will see, it seems as though only those who refused to denounce idolatry were actually put away (10:16-19).

There are times when getting right with God is a costly affair. Sin costs, but not dealing with sin costs a lot more. If there was some way for us to gauge just how much we miss because of the sin we allow in our lives, we would be astounded.

Shechaniah realized dealing with the situation was going to take more than confession. As real and heartfelt as their confession may have been, it was not enough. Confession without repentance is incomplete. The guilty person must be willing to stop their sin. As we are about to see, it would not be easy, but it was necessary. Sin must be dealt with abruptly and completely.

Putting away the wives and children may seem harsh, but we must not miss the fact that these women were from a lifestyle of idolatry and their presence would be a constant temptation to their families. This was one of the sins that had sent the people of Judah into the Babylonian captivity in the first place (Jer. 25:6-13). And, if this problem was not dealt with it would eventually ruin the entire nation of Israel.

It may seem especially cruel to send the children away with the mothers, but we must realize, the younger children would certainly need their mothers, and the older ones would have already been indoctrinated with the idolatry of their mothers. Often, it is the children who suffer the worse when the parents sin.

This recommendation, though it was severe, was the best means whereby the influx of idolatry could be stopped. Their sin of taking the pagan wives was coming home to roost and the cost of their sin was being seen. Somehow, we think we can live as we please and escape the results of our sin. No one ever has, and no one ever will escape the price of sin. We will reap what we sow, every time (Gal. 6:7).

The putting away of the wives and children was actually a display of God's mercy. He could have demanded that the guilty be put to death (cf. Num. 25:1-9). They had willingly violated God's law by taking these wives. Whatever consequences they were forced to endure were less than they deserved. Every prodigal suffers because of the decisions he makes.

This action would not only settle the problem at hand, but it would be a deterrent to others who would be tempted to such a thing.

The word, "*lord*" refers to Ezra and not the Lord of heaven. Shechaniah's suggestion involved following the instructions of Ezra and others that feared God in how to handle the putting away of their wives.

Shechaniah recommended the problem be dealt with "*according to the law*". They had seen the results of rejecting God's law, it was time to start living as God directed.

Certainly, God is not pleased with divorce (Mal. 2:16; Mt. 5:32, 19:6) yet He had allowed it to protect the innocent partner (cf. Dt. 24:1-4). Though them divorcing their wives grieved God, it was still the best way to handle the problem. It was an extreme situation and called for extreme measures.

Ezra 10:4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

The word "arise" carries with it the idea of continuing. In other words, he was asking Ezra to arise and do whatever it took to settle the problem. He wanted Ezra to get up, and stay up until things were made right.

This "*matter belongeth unto thee*" means Shechaniah and the people were turning the situation over to Ezra and they would follow whatever instructions he gave.

The word, "we" refers to the "*very great congregation*" that had gathered, of whom Shechaniah was now the spokesman (cf. 10:1).

Shechaniah had committed himself to stand with those who would repent. It is not unreasonable to assume there were some among the people who had been grieved about this sin for a long time. Yet, for whatever reason, they had remained silent. But now, since there are some of the leaders who were speaking up, they did also. This should show us just how important it is to take a stand for godliness. When good men do nothing, evil triumphs. But, when godly men do right, others will follow.

Shechaniah encouraged Ezra to "*be of good courage*". This admonition is found quite often in the bible (Num. 13:20; Dt. 31:6,7,23; Josh. 1:6,9,18; 1 Chr. 19:13; 22:13; 28:20; Ps. 27:14; 31:24). Ezra would certainly need the courage to do what was needed to fix this horrible problem. It was a big problem that would not be fixed easily. As I have suggested in the title of this section of Scripture, it would take "commitment". Ezra would have to stand when it was not easy to stand. He would have to make difficult decisions when it would have been easier to compromise. Thank the Lord, he did. God gave him the grace he needed to do what God desired. God always gives grace to those who are willing to obey Him.

Ezra 10:5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.

Ezra called on the people to do as Shechaniah had suggested and put away their wives and children. Notice, he started with the leaders. They should have been the ones to deal with their sin, to begin with. Being a leader means being the first to do what is right. But, Ezra did not stop with the leaders, he included all the people of Israel. No one was excluded. One person resisting God can hinder His work.

Their seriousness was seen by the fact that they were willing to "swear". That means they took an oath before God. An oath bound the person to do what he promised and included punishment if he did not.

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

Ezra withdrew himself to fast and pray alone. He ate no food and drank no water. A fast from food and water was rare (cf. Ex. 34:28; Dt. 9:18; Jon. 3:7). Ezra was too heartbroken to care about his own needs or desires. The word "*mourn*" means, "to bewail or lament". It was as though he was mourning the death of a loved one. How seldom do we see such a brokenness over sin?

No doubt, Ezra was praying that the people would carry through with their decision to deal with their sin. He probably prayed also for wisdom to carry out the process of putting away the wives and children. It certainly would take a God-given wisdom to do it right.

Ezra 10:7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;

A proclamation was sent throughout Judah and Jerusalem to "*all the children of the captivity*". A proclamation was usually broadcast by a herald. They were all required to come to Jerusalem. Everyone was included.

Ezra 10:8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

The people had "*three days*" to come to Jerusalem. Three days was a short time but were enough for anyone in the land of Judah to get there. This meant, they had enough time to get there but not any time to waste. And, so it is with any work of God. God will give us some time to decide, but He will not wait forever.

Anyone who refused would be excommunicated. The word, "*separated*" means, "to sever" or "to divide". They would be forced to leave the land of Judah and would be considered as a heathen. This was no small matter. They would not only be excommunicated, but their substance would be confiscated. The word, "*forfeited*" means, "to devote to religious uses". Their belongings would be taken and placed in the temple treasury to be used for the Lord's work. Cyrus had given Ezra the legal authority to do this type of thing (Ezra 7:26). But, more importantly, God had given him the authority to do so.

These were extreme measures but failure to do so would only have made matters worse. Those refusing to come were revealing their rebellious and divisive spirit. This type of person needed to be dealt with for they would continue to spread their rebellion throughout the people. A few rebels can poison an entire church.

Unfortunately, there are times when the chaff has to be removed so that the work of God be pure. This is never easy. It hurts but it is a necessary work. Before the refreshing work of God can come, the cleansing work of God must take place.

The saddest part is not that those refusing were cast out, the saddest part is the fact that it did not have to happen. They willingly rejected the way of getting help. Many forfeit God's help because they are not willing to do it God's way. And so, they suffer the consequences.

Ezra 10:9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain.

The men met outside the temple within the three-day time limit. The area around the temple had room for thousands of people.

There were two reasons why they were "trembling". One was because of "this matter". The fear of what might be ahead had taken control of their emotions. A good case of the fear of God can cause havoc with one's emotions. They trembled also because of the "great rain". It was December, which is the rainy season and the coldest part of the year, so the rain was especially cold. The elevation of the city of Jerusalem can cause the rains to be very cold.

It may seem strange that the rain came at the time they were meeting to deal with their sin. We know God controls the weather (Gen. 7:11-12; Lev. 21:19; Dt. 11:14; Josh. 10:11; Ps. 42:7, 148:8; 1 Sam. 7:10; Nah. 1:3). We might expect God to give them nice weather since they were doing what He had required. But, we should remember, God had spoken to these people for years about their sin and they had refused to listen. I believe the rain was one more way God was trying to show them the results of their sin. They needed to know that they could not just show up, get God's blessings again, and run on their merry way. There are times when getting right with God is very difficult. But, those who are serious will be willing to do what is necessary.

Them being willing to stand in the rain was an indication that they meant business. Anyone not willing to endure some rain was not really serious about getting things right with God. Many talk about the need for us to get right with God in our day. But, very few are willing to pay the price.

Ezra 10:10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.

Ezra addressed the problem directly, named their sin specifically, and spoke of the consequences. Sin must be dealt with directly and severely.

The word "increase" means, "add". It has the thought of laying one sin upon another. Where there is no confession, there is no forgiveness, and where there is no forgiveness, there is no removal of sin. God does not just forget about sin (Gen. 4:7, 4:10, 18:20; Rev. 18:5). It remains until confession is made or the person is judged.

Ezra 10:11 Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

Ezra's words were abrupt and to the point. But, the time to coddle sin had come and gone. They had done what had pleased them for years, now it was time to do what pleased the Lord. While the Spirit of God was moving, it was time to take action and be thorough about it. A partial action would not be sufficient.

There had been a lot of talk, a lot of prayer, and a lot of fasting about this situation, now it was time for confession and repentance. It was now time to get down to business with God.

Simply praying and confessing their wrong was not good enough. They had to put away their wives and children. As mentioned before, true repentance will be proven by our actions. If our behavior is not changed, it is not true repentance. Just showing up is not enough. Making lofty speeches is not enough. Making promises is not enough. Anything short of a change in our behavior is not true repentance. Only in the "doing" is true repentance seen. And, the "doing" is not easy for it is contrary to our old nature.

Some of these couples had been married for decades and had children and grandchildren. Some of them were happily married. This shows the severity of sin. It also reveals the ugliness and the cost of sin. The innocent and well as the guilty get hurt.

Also, had they not broken these ungodly unions, there would only be more marriages of the same sort and more children as a result. Dealing with sin cost a great deal but not dealing with sin costs more.

But, we dare not forget, this all came about because they disobeyed the commands of God, to begin with. They were supposed to have shunned and avoided the pagan women of the land. Therefore, they could blame no one but themselves.

Ezra 10:12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.

The people agreed with Ezra. The fact they answered with a "loud voice" suggests their united response in this decision. They spoke as one. Also, the loud voice refers to the fact that there were many involved.

They said, so "must" we do. They finally realized this was the only way to really deal with their problem.

Though the situation was a bad one, I am glad God works with people as they are. Certainly, divorce was difficult. But, it was much better than leaving things as they were and causing the judgment of God to come upon them.

Some believe the divorce was too cruel to be the Lord's will. However, it would appear to me that this was the best option available under the circumstances. There are times when we have to choose the best of two evils. There was no quick and easy solution. Whatever their choice, someone was going to get hurt. This is a perfect example of the consequences of our sin. The fact is, sin always hurts. When we willingly disobey God and do what we want, there will be a day of reckoning. God will not overlook the disobedience of His children.

We must not miss the fact that it was through these people the Messiah would come some 400 years later. If this intermarriage had been allowed to continue it could have polluted the bloodline.

This is also a perfect picture of the cost of true revival. True revival means we are willing to confront the worse that is in us and deal with it savagely. The steps to revival are clearly seen here. First, they acknowledged and confessed their sin. Second, they repented of their sin. Third, they moved toward God and committed themselves to obey His law.

Ezra 10:13 But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed in this thing.

They asked for the time necessary to accomplish the task. There were two reasons given for requesting this amount of time. First, there were so "many" guilty it would take time to get all the details worked out. Second, there was "much rain". Standing outside in the rain would make it very difficult to do what they needed to do. They were not resisting Ezra's plan, they simply needed time to do what he had asked.

Ezra 10:14 Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us.

A group consisting of Ezra and the rulers of Israel would meet with each guilty couple along with their local elders and judges. Each case would be investigated individually to make sure justice was done. This was a wise suggestion since their local leaders would know the individuals personally. They would question the husband and wife to determine the circumstances of their marriage. This questioning would help them determine if the wife had truly rejected her old pagan beliefs and turned to the God of Israel. There would be no action taken against those who had truly turned to the Lord. Those who adhered to their pagan beliefs would be given a divorce.

The last words of this verse are truly insightful. The word, "fierce" means, "burning with anger". The word, "wrath" is from a word that means "to breath hard". This certainly does not mean God is out of control but it does remind us how God is angry about sin in our lives. He does love us, but He will not tolerate our sin.

They were committed to doing what it took to turn "the fierce wrath" of God. They were willing to do whatever it took, for however long it took, to get God's favor again. How much we need that type of attitude in our day. The cancer of sin must be removed completely for health to be restored.

Ezra 10:15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them.

The word, "employed" means, to stand". As would be expected, there were some who took a stand against the plan. Surprisingly, there were only four who opposed it. We are not told their reasons for their decision. At least one to them (Meshullam) was guilty (v. 29). Would it not be a shame to be on record as being one of the ones who resisted such a work of God? As difficult as it is to understand, there will always be some who oppose a move of God. It may be someone really close to us, or even someone from our own family.

Jonathan and Jahaziah were priests. They should have been the ones who were leading the effort to make things right, but they were the ones who were doing all they could to stop it from happening.

Ezra 10:16-17 And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.

Ezra, with the city officials, considered each case carefully. It took three months to accomplish this work.

Ezra 10:18 And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah.

Ezra concluded his account by listing the offenders by name. This is certainly a sad list because they were all guilty. Yet, this list is a blessing because it is a list of those who were willing to get right with God.

Sadly, the first ones on this list were the descendants and relatives of the High Priest (Jeshua) who first returned with Zerubbabel and led in the construction of the temple (cf. Ezra 2:2). This should remind us of the fact that anyone can fall. Unfortunately, many of those who have allowed themselves to stray away

from the will of God were those who used to be on fire for Him.

Perhaps the saddest part about this list is the fact that any of these women could have turned to the God of Israel by faith and could have avoided being excommunicated. Yet, they refused to do so.

Ezra 10:19 And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass.

They "gave their hands". This term means bound themselves to the agreement by shaking hands (cf. Pro. 6:1; Ezk. 17:18).

They offered a ram as a guilt offering according to Leviticus 5:14-15 (10:19). They were truly repentant.

Ezra 10:20-44 And of the sons of Immer; Hanani, and Zebadiah. And of the sons of Harim; Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and Uziah. And of the sons of Pashur; Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasa. Also of the Levites; Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah, (the same is Kelita,) Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. Of the singers also; Eliashib: and of the porters; Shallum, and Telem, and Uri. Moreover of Israel: of the sons of Parosh; Ramiah, and Jeziah, and Malchiah, and Miamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah. And of the sons of Elam; Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Eliah. And of the sons of Zattu; Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and Zabad, and Aziza. Of the sons also of Bebai; Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. And of the sons of Bani; Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, and Ramoth. And of the sons of Pahathmoab; Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, and Binnui, and Manasseh. And of the sons of Harim; Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchiah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. Of the sons of Hashum; Mattenai, Mattathah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. Of the sons of Bani; Maadai, Amram, and Uel, Benaiah, Bedeiah, Chelluh, Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasau. And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei, And Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah, Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, Azareel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah, Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. Of the sons of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadau, and Joel, Benaiah.

Ezra 10:44 All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

The word "some" seems to indicate there was a relatively small number of children involved. This one positive aspect of this horrible situation.

Ezra' list serves as a reminder to all who will give heed.

- This list reminds us that a few in sin can hinder the entire family of God

Though there are several on this list, the number was relatively small compared to the number of the entire people of Israel. Yet, these relatively few, had a dramatic affect on the work of God among the people. God does not ignore sin, no matter how many or few.

- This list reminds us how we cannot sin and get by

None of us will escape the consequences of our sin (Num. 32:23; Hos. 8:7; Lk. 16:25; Gal. 6:7).

- This list reminds us that sin knows no boundaries

This list contains the names of all sorts of people. There were 17 priests (vv. 18-22), 10 Levites (vv. 23-24), 3 gatekeepers (v. 23-24) and 84 others (vv. 25-43). They were all guilty of the same sin. Sin will enslave anyone and everyone. It is not just the poor and ignorant that are caught in its clutches.

- This list reminds us that sin will be exposed

This list is open to anyone and everyone. Sin will not be kept a secret (Num. 32:23). A good reputation takes years to built and seconds to destroy.

- This list reminds us that we do not have to give in to sin

Though many were guilty, many were not. God had provided grace to overcome the temptation. Not all had appropriated that grace, but it was available to all. God provides us the way to overcome temptation (Ps. 23:4; Mt. 26:41; 1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Jn. 5:4).

- This list reminds us how God will forgive sin

These people had deliberately disobeyed the Lord's command, but He was ready and willing to forgive them. The prodigal wasted all his father's inheritance in riotous living and came home with the smell of swine still on him, yet the father was waiting, ready to forgive and restore (cf. Lk. 15:20-24). We should confess and repent quickly. The longer we stay in the far country, the worse it will get.

- This list reminds us how God is willing to work among His people

This should give us hope for the spiritual needs of our day. God is still able to move in a great way. There were 3,000 saved on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and 5,000 saved later (Acts 4:4). The numbers grew so quickly they were unable to count and started saying multitudes were saved (Acts 5:14).

The book of Ezra seems to end abruptly, but we must realize, the message of this book was complete. God does not waste words. The message is clear if we will just accept it. We must acknowledge, confess, and repent of anything in our lives that our Lord is not pleased with. To do otherwise will bring His judgment

upon us.

Why does this book end so abruptly? Perhaps it is to drive home the danger of refusing to follow God's instructions. Maybe the Lord wanted to leave us with the realization of how important biblical separation is. Maybe the Lord wanted us to remember there is always hope with Him.

The message of Ezra was complete. In order to restore their fellowship with their God, they had built the temple and reestablished their worship (Ezra 1-6), and adapted their lives according to the Word of God (Ezra 7-10)

One of the saddest things about this is the fact that they slipped back into the same sin only one generation later (Neh. 13:23-28).

Ezra reappears in the book of Nehemiah (Neh. 8:1-6). He is seen there as a man who still desired the work of God and doing what he could to convince others to serve Him faithfully.

As I have mentioned several times throughout this study, we are not much different than those who lived during Ezra's day. We also, need to get back to what we used to be. We need to beg God to restore the desire we used to have and to rekindle the excitement we used to have. May we get back to godly living.

And so, we conclude our thoughts on the book of Ezra.